

A Conservative Idea of a Christian Society

“WE ARE A CHRISTIAN COUNTRY,” says the Prime Minister.* A few months after this declaration the media were informed that, after a period of consultation, the laws are to be changed so as to permit the marriage of homosexual couples. This raises a question about Mr Cameron’s understanding of a Christian country, and of his role as the prime minister of a Christian country.

Marriage customs are in anthropology one of the main differentiating features of societies and vary extremely. It could hardly be clearer, however, that throughout Christendom marriage is the state in which one man is joined to one woman to make one flesh and that, as stated in the Prayer Book, marriage was ordained “first, for the procreation of children”. By definition homosexual couples cannot procreate children. So, if this is a Christian country it has no homosexual marriage.

This obvious fact has already been pointed out by the Archbishop of York and by the Roman Catholic archbishops. The question why Mr Cameron, as a “Church of England Christian, who will stand up for the values and principles of my faith,” does not see that his policy of homosexual marriage contradicts both this declaration and the opinion that this is a Christian country, is one we have answered several times. Mr Cameron is not a clear thinker.

The more serious question is: What authority to change moral law is enjoyed by an elected assembly in a Christian country? and the answer is *none*. Mr Cameron is reported to be “passionate” about the matter.

Passion running unrefined

May ruin what the masters taught

but in any case moral law cannot be decided by the passion of a politician. The authority of the Ten Commandments does not derive from the passions of Moses. Whatever the marriage laws are they are moral laws.

Parliament has of course passed many laws about marriage, and has also granted a number of divorces by special act. This does not show that marriage has long been regulated by the decisions of a secular assembly. Christian countries have usually made a distinction between church and

state, but that is not a distinction between the religious and the secular as secularity is now understood. Traditionally the image is of the two swords, neither of them godless.

As it happens, the distinction between church and state has been less clearcut in England since the Reformation than in most Christian societies. For the supreme authority in the Church of England (though not in the Church of Scotland) has been the monarch in parliament.

When the British Parliament makes laws about marriage and divorce it does so as the body by which the Church is also established; that is, as an ecclesiastical authority. On many occasions Parliament has taken this responsibility seriously. The rejection, twice, by the Commons, of the 1928 Prayer Book, was not an example of the godless secular dictating to the sacred, but of Parliament acting in its ecclesiastical capacity.

It does not follow that either a monarch or a parliament is competent to change Christian doctrine. King Henry VIII, in both church and state a far more powerful figure than Mr Cameron, and who also had a passionate interest in the marriage laws, went to great lengths to get the Church to annul his marriage to Queen Catharine. But he did not do it by trying to procure a change in the law.

The problem is of course that Mr Cameron’s passionate proposal will be considered by assemblies that are now not as Christian as they used to be, and which, also, have no clear sense of the limits of their authority. So we are familiar with the absurdity of the state’s dictating anti-Christian moral law to the Church. This does not show that the state is better than the Church at defining moral doctrine, only that we are in a constitutional, moral and religious muddle, in which Christianity has become rather spectral but without being replaced by anything more substantial than universal human rights. Our Sunday, for instance, is a sort of ghost of the Christian holy day, half and half not the first day of the week of a Christian society. Train and bus timetables are not the same as on weekdays. Supermarkets are by law not allowed to open at the same hours as on weekdays, but professional sporting events go on as usual,

* speech 16 December 2011

and the Olympic Games are holier, so these laws are to be relaxed for the duration. (It is not immediately clear why the British Government has a dispensing power over these laws.) It's all a muddle.

But even in this religiously democratic age is anybody of the opinion that if one state of the North American Union votes in favour of "gay marriage" and another against, gay marriage is in the former right and in the latter wrong?—that what is right can be decided by majority vote?

The answer to this rhetorical question seems to be *yes*. The present British government's position is that whatever "the people" decree marriage to be, so it is. According to the "Equalities Minister", Lynne Featherstone, marriage is "owned by neither the state nor the Church . . . it is owned by the people."* The *Church Times* headline for this news item was "Government minister defends same-sex marriage" but that does not seem to have been what was going on. As reported, in fact, the Government view is utterly obscure. What could it possibly mean to *own* marriage? That "the people" can arbitrarily decide what marriage is? That if a majority decided (in a referendum?) that marriage could be between humans and dogs, then that is what marriage could be? This *reductio ad absurdum* is one example of the nemesis of democracy.

So when the authority does not come from ethics committees, and if passion is ruled out, the most likely channel for the authority of "the people" is public opinion as formed by "the media". After pointing out rightly that a government

should enact "civilising measures because they are the right thing to do" a writer in the *Sunday Telegraph* concluded that "If marriage is indeed the cornerstone of a stable society, then its extension to same-sex couples will be a stabilising force."† But will it still be marriage—for those married according to the usual understanding, as well as for the homosexual newlyweds? If this is a Christian country, the *Telegraph* is not competent to decide what is marriage, nor are "the people", nor is Her Majesty's Government.

A *Times* writer (with an establishment name but writing in the contemporary manner) told us that there aren't any reasons against gay marriage except "God and the 'eeeuw' factor".* To the assumed *Times* readership this is no doubt persuasive (*Times* readers are more likely to understand the second term than the first) but if Mr Cameron is right and this is a Christian country God is not mocked. In a Christian society the body to be consulted is the Church. The British constitution makes some recognition of this with the bishops' seats in the House of Lords.

Whether in this instance the establishment's civilising mission will prove stronger than God will tell us much about whether and how far England is a Christian nation.

Our question has been less about whether Mr Cameron is right than about his authority. It may be that there is *de facto* no moral authority in our country. But if so there is no genuine marriage.

Meanwhile . . . Marriage is by some considered to be a tradition worthy to be maintained. For what party should a conservative vote?

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* *Daily Telegraph* article as reported in *The Church Times*, 2 March 2012, p. 6 † As reported in *The Week*, 17 March 2012