



Lindisfarne Analysis: Coronation Special

Defending faith: king, country and freedom of religion

One of the great lost stories of modern history is the role that Christianity played in the development of freedom of religion. It is often wrongly claimed human rights emerged in the era of the late eighteenth century French and American revolutions, freedom of religion had in fact been emerging for centuries beforehand, with freedom of the church being embedded in the service of Coronation for over a thousand years.

The importance of Christian kingship in the historical development of freedom of religion

Today it is easy to lose sight of the constitutional significance of the Coronation service being an act of Christian worship.

One of the key issues in the conversion of Anglo-Saxon kings to Christianity was their acceptance that they could no longer be absolute despots doing whatever they liked. Now, as Christian kings they understood that they ruled their kingdom as a subject king on behalf of God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who required them to rule with both justice and righteousness. Moreover, God - who sees all things, including even the intentions of men's hearts - would hold them to account on the day of judgement for how they had ruled their kingdoms. The implication of this was that the church had to be free to preach the Gospel throughout the king's realm, and at times even to rebuke the king for his unrighteous or unjust behaviour. It also led to the emergence of the first written English laws – based in large measure on specifically Christian principles.

That is why when King John was forced to agree the Magna Carta in 1215, its very first clause affirmed the freedom of the church promising that:

“the English church shall be free and have its rights undiminished and liberties unimpaired”.

That clause, which with the rest of Magna Carta was affirmed by subsequent sovereigns on their accession, remains one of only three parts of Magna Carta which remain part of [English law](#) today. It is based on the foundation that the king and his government rule on God's behalf and will have to give account to God.

It is this understanding of kingship and government that the Coronation symbolises. The specific affirmations of the freedom of church made when a new king or queen ascends the throne and is crowned are not incidental – they are in fact central to the whole understanding of government that the Coronation symbolises.

The Coronation Oath

The main elements of the oath sworn by the new monarch at their coronation date from the time of the Christian Anglo-Saxon kings. However, the actual [coronation oath](#) itself was set out in a law passed in 1688 when William and Mary came to the throne of England and Wales:

“...Archbishop: Will You to Your power cause Law and Justice in Mercy to be Executed in all Your Judgements?

King: I will.

“Archbishop: Will You to the utmost of Your power Maintain the Laws of God the true Profession of the Gospel and the Protestant Reformed Religion Established by Law? And will You Preserve unto the bishops and clergy of this Realm and to the Churches committed to their Charge all such rights and privileges as by Law do or shall appertain unto them or any of them.

King: All this I Promise to do.

After this the King and Queen laying His and Her Hand upon the Holy Gospels, shall say,

King and Queen: The things which I have here before promised I will perform and Keep So help me God.”

The promise to preserve the Protestant reformed religion in part reflected a fear – real, but not wholly justified - that under the previous king, James II, England could have veered in a similar direction to France, where [in 1685](#) Protestantism had been made illegal, leading to the deaths of thousands of Protestants, with large numbers of others fleeing to countries such as England.

The promise to preserve all the rights and privileges of the clergy and bishops of the Church of England reflects the separate spheres for church and state set out in England and Wales since 1559 and which are still set out in the 39 Articles of the Church of England. Broadly speaking this recognises that the king and his government is appointed by God to rule – but states that the preaching and interpretation of scripture and the sacraments are the sphere of the church in which the government may not interfere:

"Where we attribute to the King's Majesty the chief government, by which Titles we understand the minds of some slanderous folks to be offended; we give not to our Princes the ministering either of God's Word, or of the Sacraments."

The Scottish Oath

This is actually sworn as soon as the new monarch ascends the throne, rather than at the Coronation. It is legally required by the Acts of Union passed by both the Old Scottish Parliament and the Westminster Parliament in 1706/07. At his [Accession Council](#) in September King Charles [declared](#):

"I, Charles III, by the grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of my other realms and territories, King, Defender of the Faith, do faithfully promise and swear that I should inviolably maintain and preserve the settlement of the true Protestant religion as established by the laws made in Scotland in prosecution of the Claim of Right and particularly by an act intituled an act for securing the Protestant religion and Presbyterian church government and by the acts passed in the Parliament of both kingdoms for union of the two kingdoms, together with the government, worship, discipline, rights and privileges, of the Church of Scotland.

So Help me God."

Again, it is really important to understand the context as to why the Scottish Parliament insisted on its inclusion in the Act of Union, which united Scotland with England and Wales thereby creating Great Britain. The previous Stuart kings had sought to impose bishops and a prayer book similar to the Church of England on the Presbyterian Church in Scotland. This had led to the "Covenanter struggle" which culminated in the bloodiest period of religious persecution in British history. During the last decade of this – which is still known in Scotland today as "the killing times" – and immediately preceded the accession of William and Mary, it became an act of treason to attend any form of worship outside the official episcopal church. At least hundreds, and almost certainly thousands, were either executed, extra judicially murdered or imprisoned, sometimes simply for attending worship and preaching meetings on the hillside in the most shameful period of state persecution in British history.

These acts by the Stuart kings had been in direct violation of the Scottish [General Assembly Act 1592](#) which made a complete separation between church and state – and guaranteed that each individual *kirk* (church) "*have power and jurisdiction in their own congregation in all matters ecclesiastical*".

Freedom of religion or belief for all

The freedoms set out above were initially for the established church, but they set out a principle of the freedom of the church, and – as the coronation oath states "of the Gospel"- which was later extended more broadly. The 1688 Coronation Oaths Act was the first Act of William and Mary – however, the same year the Toleration Act 1689 was passed which allowed Protestant dissenters (today commonly called "Non-Conformists") to have their own places of worship and preach. Although this was only toleration on sufferance, as they were still subjected to various "Test Acts" which excluded them from public office and professions

such as school teaching, these were gradually repealed between 1719 and 1871. These freedoms were also [gradually extended](#) to others – with Catholics legally allowed to meet for worship in 1791. While the various Test Acts were repealed broadly in a pattern of first for Protestant dissenters, then for Catholics, then for Jews – and with the final act being the 1888 Oaths Act which allowed even Atheists to take seats in parliament.

However, all of these were the outworking over time of the principle underpinning both the coronation and Scottish oaths – that of the freedom of the church from interference by the government.

Worldwide impact

These developments had a worldwide impact, initially mainly in the English-speaking world, but later more widely. The idea of separate spheres of church and state were developed into the specific prohibition on government interference in religion set out in the 1791 [first amendment](#) of the US constitution. While section 116 of the 1901 [Australian Commonwealth Constitution](#) contains a similar clause. In New Zealand, when the Treaty of Waitangi was signed in 1840 which recognised Queen Victoria as the sovereign and guaranteed both Maori and European settlers all the rights that British citizens enjoyed, the governor added an explanatory additional clause stating that this meant that there was freedom of religion for the “*the several faiths of England, of the Wesleyans, of Rome and also Māori custom*”.

This historical development of freedom of religion played a central role in convincing a wider range of countries to agree to article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which sought to guarantee freedom of religion.

The Coronation

However, it is important to understand that freedom of religion did not emerge from secular declarations of human rights. In fact, the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* which emerged from the French Revolution makes hardly any mention of freedom of religion at all. Even what it does say is expressed in somewhat grudging terms, merely stating that no one should be molested for their opinions “not even on account of his religious opinions”.

Rather, freedom of religion emerged from Christian understanding of kingship. That is why, not only is the Coronation itself a Christian act of worship, but, what could easily seem to some modern minds anachronistic references to the church in the Coronation service, are in fact statements of the duty of the king’s government to protect the freedom of the church – and by extension the freedom of other faiths. The latter will now be emphasised for the first time in the [Coronation liturgy](#) immediately before King Charles swears the Coronation oath:

“Archbishop of Canterbury: Your Majesty, the Church established by law, whose settlement you will swear to maintain, is committed to the true profession of the Gospel, and, in so doing, will seek to foster an environment in which people of all faiths and beliefs may live freely. The Coronation Oath has stood for centuries and is enshrined in law. Are you willing to take the Oath?”

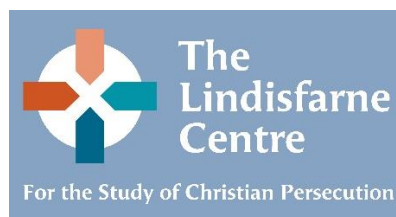
The King: I am willing.

The King places his hand on the Bible, and the Archbishop administers the Oath.”

However, it should be remembered that it is not simply the duty of the church to foster an environment where people of all faiths may live freely, it is the duty of government to ensure the freedom of the church, from which has flowed the extension of that freedom to members of other faiths.

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