

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Church, State and Establishment

Paul Avis, SPCK 2001

A review by David Carter, October 2001

Paul Avis looks at a topic that many, until very recently, have regarded as being as dead as a dodo, but which seems to have taken on a degree of new life recently, the controverted question of 'establishment', and, in particular, the form of establishment taken by the Church of England. As with all his work, it is readable and relevant to an ecumenical question. Paul reminds us that there is a sense in which all churches in our society are 'established'. Thus, the constitutions of British Methodism and the URC are enshrined in the legislation necessary to bring them into existence in their present post-union forms. The courts could be invoked to prevent any abuse of power by their leaders and to ensure that the rules and constitutional procedures are not flouted. Paul discusses the evolution of pre- and post-Reformation thinking about Establishment and notes the changes that have occurred in it in the twentieth century. In common with most, though certainly not all, Anglicans, he favours the continuation of establishment and fears any change that might diminish the Anglican sense of mission to and responsibility for the whole nation. He is sensitive to the fact that other churches also claim to have a mission that reaches beyond their immediate congregations into the wider community and he acknowledges that the Church of England should seek to cooperate as fully as possible with its main ecumenical partners in sharing this national mission.

So far, so good. As a Methodist, I fully endorse his statement that Methodism has never, on principle, been opposed to the idea of establishment, though many, especially within the Primitive and United Methodist traditions, came to take a pretty jaundiced view of the Anglican establishment.

It is clear from another review of his book that I have read that Paul has not satisfied everyone within the Free Church tradition of his arguments. While sympathising with much that he says, I think it a little over-optimistic to say that there is 'now little or nothing in the Church of England's relation to the State to which properly informed non-conformist Christians could take exception'. I doubt whether other Christians will feel fully convinced of his argument about the continuing Prime Ministerial role in the selection of bishops. One cannot, as Paul says, preclude the possibility that Prime Ministers may, on occasion, make better choices than others, but ought it to be their job?

I have personally always felt the Church of England should aim at 'Scottish-style' establishment, where the established church continues to accept a special, and valued, role in the life of the nation, but without any direct political interference. This surely would allow the Church of England, in association with other churches, to retain a sense of national responsibility and yield all the positive effects on society that Paul Avis, quite rightly, wants to preserve.