

ON MONARCHY AND MORAL VALUES IN THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY’S THANKSGIVING SERMON

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The present paper reviews the moral content of contemporary British monarchy as discussed in the Diamond Jubilee Thanksgiving sermon. A key point in the analysis is the relationship between the idea of the successful monarch and the concept of *dedication* which the ecclesiastical interpretation insists continues to capture the essence of monarchy. In examining the royal highly moral conduct the text seeks to trace the biblical template it is modelled on and its relation to typically British values.

Key words: monarchy, thanksgiving sermon, dedication, sacrifice

The motto of the British monarch, *Dieu et mon droit*¹, might seem a curious anachronism which has survived the evolution of the UK into a parliamentary democracy. It is a reference to the theological character of absolute monarchical power, examples of which are the 16th and 17th century Stuart kings² who claimed that the right to rule over their subjects was God-given and therefore undisputed. The first English king to claim *Dieu et mon droit* as his motto was Richard I Coeur-the-Lion in the aftermath of his victory over the French at Gisors in 1198. Sir Bernard Burke in his study of royal heraldry³ defines the motto as ‘the memorial of some noble action’, which in the case of Richard I was his participation in the Crusades in his capacity of a *persona mixta*⁴: a Christian knight and a

¹ The motto is a prominent verbal feature of the monarch’s coat of arms along with the Order of the Garter motto *Honi soit qui mal y pense* (Evil be to him who evil thinks).

² In his books *Basilikon Doron* and *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* the Stuart king James I theorizes about the divine sanction of kings to rule.

³ This is a reference to Sir Bernard Burke’s book *The General Armory of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales; Comprising a Registry of Armorial Bearings From the Earliest to the Present Time* published in 1884.

⁴ For the secular construct and its ecclesiastical roots – the status of medieval bishops was also associated with mixture of secular and religious prerogatives as they served

king - the early Middle Ages template the institution of kingship was based on. In the centuries that follow the discourse exchange between state and church continues to culminate in the development of a new aspect of the office of kingship – the legal one. Ernst Kantorowicz points out that the theory of law-centred kingship was rooted in the development of legal science; he goes on to suggest that this new interpretation of royal authority was not divorced from the Christo-centric one in the sense that the king as *imago aequitatis*⁵ was modelled on the theory of Christ as the *sol iustitiae*.

The Tudor period marks an important stage in the evolution of the concept of kingship through the introduction of the doctrine of the two bodies of the king – the Body Natural and the Body Politic. Devised by Tudor jurists, it draws a distinction between the mortal body of the king and the immortal political body, the latter being a reference to the abstract construct of power whose material embodiment is the individual mortal king. It is ecclesiastical idiom of the two bodies of Christ – his material body and his spiritual body that was the Church - that underlies (and legitimizes) Tudor political discourse. The continental interpretation of the doctrine in question was Louis XIV's remark *L'Etat c'est moi* which is one way of defining absolute monarchy under which the king would wield unlimited power by divine right. Tudor monarchs' power was not unlimited: they ruled with Parliament. The 1534 Act of Supremacy under which Henry VIII adopted title of the Supreme Head of the Church of England was not the product of a sole legislator but was enacted by Parliament. Building on analysis of English absolutism done by David Starkey and Franklin Le Van Baumer, Kristin M. S. Bezio describes English absolute monarchy as 'participatory limited monarchy' (Bezio 2012: 4), which means that the monarch shared power with other institutions - 'the office of monarch itself ... required to submit to the limitations stipulated by Parliament, Council and law' (ibid: 15). A seminal document that further restricted royal prerogatives was the Bill of Rights of 1689 which recognized the supremacy of Parliament. The Bill of Rights defeated the English version of absolutism by endorsing parliamentary authorization over divine authorization by offering the Crown to 'one king whom man had made' (Bagehot 1968: 87). By virtue of being above politics and political parties in the 19c the monarchy evolved into a unifying force: the timeless and unchanging 'visible symbol of unity to

God but at the same time were vassals to the King – see Канторовиц, Е. *Двете тела на краля: Изследване на средновековното политическо богословие*, pp 56 – 92

⁵ Ibid., The chapter on legalistic kingship, pp 99 – 101.

those still so imperfectly educated as to need a symbol' (ibid: 90). The monarchical potential to unite the nation also lay with its styling itself 'the head of our *morality*' (ibid: 96). The divineness of Queen Victoria was deeply rooted in the values the royal family embraced – duty, morality, prudence, integrity, and industry. These moral values along with 'the ability of mental concentration, as well as the absolutely essential feeling of obligation to one's job, are here most often combined with a strict economy which calculates the possibility of high earnings, and a cool self-control and frugality' (Weber 1992: 69) form the backbone of the Protestant work ethic which paved the way to Britain becoming the first industrial nation in the world. It was the press – family magazines in particular - that was instrumental in promoting the royal family as the epitome of 'moral respectability' (Golby and Purdue 1988: 52). In the 20c the monarchy continued to go public which did not work towards downgrading the institution. It intensified reverence for it instead. Along with rituals and traditions that insist on the ancient character of monarchy and its image of 'embodiment of the nation' (ibid: 131), negative publicity such as love affairs, divorces, character flaws, etc. also sustain public worship.

With absolutism long a thing of the past the need arises to account for the motto's relevance to the 21c socio-political context. One explanation is that it is all about continuity and the respect the British have for history and tradition. Even though Diamond Jubilee polls bore testimony to this respect and the popular appeal of monarchy, the Queen has had to reaffirm her right to be an integral part of the system of government in response to public worries that the royal family 'don't lead strictly moral lives' and are a drain on the public purse (Hall 2001: 21) or to republican sentiments which address similar issues through labelling the monarchy 'a sinister wallpaper'⁶. The Observer newspaper argues that one particular aspect of *God and my right* has remained unchanged over the years as it continues to celebrate the monarch's image of the supreme moral authority, which is instrumental in handling the mild moral panic underlying the above-mentioned unflattering comments on the nature of monarchy.

The Diamond Jubilee was an opportune moment to define the monarchy and gauge public opinion. By right of tradition the institution

⁶ In the aftermath of the Diamond Jubilee celebrations an Observer newspaper article entitled *Republican versus royalists: a very civil war* summed up anti-royalist sentiments aired at a meeting hosted by the campaign group Republic. The wallpaper metaphor is a reference to the essence of monarchy being about pomp and pageantry.

which defines the role of monarchy on this festive occasion is the Church of England whose Supreme Governor is the Queen. The focus of the 2012 Thanksgiving Sermon, delivered by the Archbishop of Canterbury, was the moral content of the monarchical institution. Far from asserting the Queen's authority by referring to the theory of Divine Right of Kings and its main principles – the monarch's God-given right to reign, the indefeasibility of hereditary right, the Crown's accountability to God only, obedience to the monarch is obedience to God (Figgis 1914: 5 – 7) – the Archbishop hailed Queen Elizabeth II as the defender of core moral values. The sermon's opener is a quote from the New Testament's Epistle to the Romans verse 12 where St Paul urges Christians to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice to God. The oxymoronic formula 'living sacrifice' which in the biblical sense is a reference to Christ's sacrifice for the salvation of mankind, is translated as the Queen's dedication to her public duty.

The Archbishop's is a diachronic study of the concept of dedication: he begins with the Coronation pledge of dedication to people's well-being made in the context of loss and suffering. Much in the way the young Queen's Coronation Day speech, delivered on 2nd June 1953, the sermon denies the definition of monarchy has anything to do with splendour and drama, though these are the staple diet of the tabloid press which caters to needs far from spiritual. Dedication in the words of the sermon walks the thin line between the extremes of ambition and audacity and masochistic self-denial in the sense that being *you* is all about being *with* and *for* others, which is the underlying message of the Coronation vows: 'I have no goals that are not the goals of this community; I have no well-being, no happiness that is not the well-being of the community' (Williams 2012).⁷

The royal act of dedication transcends the boundaries of the nation and the Commonwealth – the monarch's commitment is to the human family. This pledge is far from unique as it follows the biblical template of life in the Body of Christ. In the New Testament Book of Ephesians the content of this concept is given a straightforward definition: 'Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour' (Ephesians 5: 23). Living in Christ's body is essentially about sacrifice and giving oneself up for others for it is through sacrifice that salvation is made possible. Failure to do so is equal to a life of sin which is the result of imitating the wrong role model, Adam.

⁷ The particular line does not feature in the Queen's Coronation Day speech. In the words of the Right Reverend Albert Bogle it is the Archbishop's interpretation of the Queen's Coronation vows.

Life in the Body of Christ is also about competition – ‘outdo one another by showing honour’ (Williams 2012). This particular exhortation is a curious blend of the collectivist and the individualistic: *outdoing* is about competition and being better than the rest, but its individualistic content is tempered by collective reciprocation of honour which should read *respect* in the verse in question. In the secular world these two concepts are class-related: they are the staple values taught at public schools – the aristocratic and the bourgeois values. What the elite held in high regard was the sense of superiority and responsibility towards others, godliness and manliness, while the middle class cherished the values of competitiveness and rivalry. These values informed imperial ideology: expanding the empire was a matter of destiny for the British, their noble burden to bring civilization to the rest of the world. The success of the British imperial project depended on the harmony between the secular and the religious context which was celebrated by the 1851 Great Exhibition slogans ‘With Steam and the Bible the English traverse the globe’⁸ where *steam* is a potent symbol of the Industrial Age, competition, and capitalism in general, while the Bible is a reference to the importance of religion and the solid moral foundation – hard work, prudence, honesty, fairness, godliness – which helped bring industrial and imperial plans to fruition. It is not by chance that the Great Exhibition organizing committee decided to summarize their moral ambitions by placing a statue of Richard Coeur-de-Lion at the entrance of the Crystal Palace. The perfect Christian knight with his nobility and chivalry was to convey the message that moral values would make sure that man ‘was capable of mastering matter without falling into materialism’ (Bedarida 1979: 7).

It would be naïve to assume that the sermon’s references to the international community and commonwealth are hints at Britain’s imperial past, at least not in the context of prime ministers apologizing for British colonial past. Prime Minister David Cameron when asked what Britain might be able to do to settle the conflict over Kashmir, replied: ‘I don’t want to try to insert Britain in some leading role where, as with so many of the world’s problems, we are responsible for the issue in the first place.’ The Archbishop of Canterbury, though, puts the Queen in a leading role insisting that hers is a dedication to both a national and an international community, which resurrects imperial ideology and the noble obligation to serve as an example to the rest of the world. The mention of the international community and commonwealth in the sermon has to do with

⁸ Quoted in Francois Bedarida’s *A Social History of England 1851 – 1990*, pp 8 – 9.

the Archbishop's enthusiasm to illustrate the staggering proportions the monarch's dedication has assumed. She is a successful impersonator of God in the sense of 'showing honour to countless local communities and individuals of every background and class and race' (Williams 2012). This section of the sermon praises British monarchy for its regard for classlessness, neutrality and multiculturalism. It also bears testimony to the Queen's consistency in her following biblical templates outlined in the Book of Romans verse 2:11 which says that God does not show favouritism. The rhetoric of the sermon is built on a series of fine manoeuvres between the religious and secular context; the final result of such rhetorical gymnastics is the sanctification of secular power and the politicization of religion. The text of the sermon attempts to secularize religious concepts through speaking their content by means of popular culture.

To avoid possible misinterpretations and to reinforce his message the Archbishop quickly dismisses associations of the word *dedication* with popular culture products. The particular popular culture icon he draws upon is the Kinks' song *Dedicated Follower of Fashion* whose 1960s pleasure-seeking ways and fickleness⁹ are the antithesis of the concepts of sacrifice and righteousness – qualities the Queen is seen to embody. References to popular culture to translate biblical language are not isolated cases and seem to have become the norm, as a month after the Archbishop delivered the Thanksgiving Sermon, the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Right Reverend Albert Bogle, elaborated on the *basilikon doron* of dedication, this time borrowing from U2's musical legacy. Non-ecclesiastical interpretations of monarchy also make use of popular culture discourse. The 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony was particularly indebted to it, when speaking the new image of popular monarchy which abandoned its celestial sacredness in favour of *james-bonding* with its people.

The sermon is essentially an exhortation to ordinary people to be dedicated to the service of the community and thus be purged of selfish goals. The power of the exhortation does not rest with getting the text studded with imperatives and modal verbs but rather with the references to the noble example of the monarch's virtuous life. Some of the reviews the

⁹ The song sums up the 1960s' public mindset as one which is hedonism-driven and alien to constancy: 'This pleasure-seeking individual always looks his best... In matters of the cloth he is as fickle as can be, cause he's a dedicated follower of fashion.'

sermon got in the press criticized the Archbishop for ‘using the speech to talk about his pet issues of City greed and the environment.’ Pet issues or not, my opinion is that environmental recklessness and financial greed are not divorced or out of tune with the spirit of the occasion. Along with the collective fear of strangers – xenophobia, the collective contempt for the unsuccessful and marginal, lack of sympathy for the underdog, which is a typically British value – these are evidence of society’s moral props rotting away. The secular counterpart of this description is the phrase ‘Broken Britain’ first used by Tony Blair in 1995 and later recycled by Conservative politicians. If tolerance is what makes Britain Britain, then the Home Office Hate Crime statistics¹⁰ of 43,748 for 2011/2 leave one with the impression of a very un-British Britain. Race hate crimes accounted for the majority of hate crimes recorded, followed by sexual orientation hate crimes, disability, and religion hate crimes. What all of these social maladies have in common is the sin of selfishness and narrow individual fulfillment to which as early as the 19c Evangelicalism prescribed the antidotes of ‘self-sacrifice and the dutiful discharge of social obligation to inferiors and dependants; a firm belief in heaven, hell and judgement; a confidence in the powers of human effort under grace’ (Thomas 1988: 22). Those antidotes lie with everybody’s contribution to the common good which, the sermon says, has been a top priority with the current reigning monarch whose jubilee is a celebration of the core moral values of faith, patience, sacrifice and generosity which define contemporary British monarchy.

The contemporary relevance of the motto *God and my right* has nothing to do with hereditary right or might but according to the Church of England rests with the sovereign’s moral right to be the Head of State. This moral right stems from the being the role model for loyal public service, which along with dedication is shown to lie at the core of the concept of power. Instead of asserting that power is about inherited superiority, the Archbishop steadfastly argues in favour of power being merit-driven, non-elitist and the result of sacrificially hard work of one who serves. It is sacrifice that makes the Queen worthy of glory and power. By virtue of representing the monarch as the epitome of sacrificial living, the sermon joins the sustained effort to overhaul the image of monarchy if it is to continue to claim a central role in the nation’s constitutional framework and in defining national identity. In an age of immorality and cruelty the Thanksgiving sermon advises that the pillar of nationhood should be the

¹⁰ Tables for Hate Crimes, England and Wales, 2011 to 2012 were published on 13th September 2012. For further information visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hate-crimes-england-and-wales-2011-to-2012--2>

virtuous monarch whom the Archbishop elevates to the status of a national religion, which fails to come as a revelation for its indebtedness to Walter Bagehot's thesis of the Crown as a moral absolute.

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