

“Defender of Faith”: Christian Monarchy and Religious Pluralism

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A principal reason why the monarchy so well consecrates our whole state is to be sought in the peculiarity many Americans and many utilitarians smile at. They laugh at this “extra,” as the Yankee called it, at the solitary transcendent element. . . . The nation is divided into parties, but the Crown is of no party. Its apparent separation from business is that which removes it both from enmities and from desecration, which preserves its mystery, which enables it to combine the affection of conflicting parties, to be a visible symbol of unity to those still so imperfectly educated as to need a symbol.

—Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*¹

Establish a national church led by your head of state and call this individual “Defender of the Faith”: to some contemporary ears this might sound like a recipe for a coercive, far-right form of Christian nationalism. When King Charles III was crowned in Westminster Abbey on May 6, 2023, in the first explicitly Christian coronation held anywhere in the world in seven decades, he was hailed as Supreme Governor of the Church of England and Defender of the Faith—the latter being the English translation of the centuries-old Latin formulation *Fidei Defensor*. Some observers worried that, amid rising authoritarianism around the world today, the ritual anointing of a hereditary monarch was a reactionary bit of ecclesiastical theater that would provide a boost to illiberal regimes.



Such fears were misguided. The United Kingdom—and King Charles’s realms collectively—enjoy greater religious diversity and freedom than almost any society in history. Britain played a central role in the emergence of constitutional government and the philosophy of liberalism. Today, in global comparative studies of political institutions, countries under the Windsor monarchy shine as beacons of enlightened governance. Look no further than the

The newly crowned Charles III is escorted to his throne by bishops.

¹ Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1867), 69–70.

The inlaid *omphalion* in Hagia Sophia, with its variegated interlacing circles, marks the site where Byzantine emperors were crowned.



Economist's Democracy Index, which rates countries on religious freedom and other criteria. On this metric, the UK, Canada, and Australia (whose populations together account for 85% of Charles III's subjects) regularly receive some of the highest marks. They easily outrank the United States, which the index deems a "flawed democracy."² Based on these ratings, the Westminster system of government is one of the world's most stable and sustainable frameworks for securing personal liberties.

The irony that a society so accommodating of pluralism should necessarily be headed by a ruler from a specific religious confession is a product of long-standing tensions in the idea of sacred kingship, tensions that first emerged in the Byzantine concept of Christian monarchy. As vestiges of this model have found their place in the liberal order, they have given rise to the curious practice of anointing a Christian sovereign with a more or less explicit mission to defend religious freedom.

This dichotomy between state Christianity and religious autonomy extends back to the fourth century, when Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity for the Roman Empire. It was also Constantine, of course, who moved the capital east to Byzantium, and the enduring paradoxes of Christian kingship still have special resonance for the Eastern Church,

even though there are no Orthodox monarchies left in the world. Father Alexander Schmemmann argued that the Byzantine conception of the Church and its relation to the state is "for the Orthodox Church the central 'fact' of its past, which still dominates its destiny."³

If Schmemmann is correct, then contemporary Orthodox Christians should pay close attention to the monarchy in the UK and its peculiar link with the Church of England, where many aspects of the Byzantine legacy are discernible—in greatly altered form, to be sure—more vividly than anywhere else in the world. This legacy is evident not only in the liturgical form and glittering vestments of the British coronation service, whose inheritance from the Christian East is readily apparent, but also in the monarch's special role of mediating the delicate and ever-evolving relationship between Church, government, and civil society.

Byzantine sovereignty was not a true "caesaropapist" arrangement—one where civil authorities control religion directly—like the former pagan system, in which the Roman emperors served as high priests of the official state cult. To be sure, the Christian emperors worked in tandem with the patriarchs, but they also slowly accorded the Church increasing independence. Schmemmann regards the history of Byzantine Christianity as one in which the Orthodox hierarchy won progressively greater autonomy from the state, reflecting an acknowledgement that Christ's kingdom is fundamentally not of this world (John 18:36).

Gradually a formalized coronation rite took shape, in which the Patriarch of Constantinople placed the crown on the ruler's head, symbolically showing that worldly power comes from God. Western Europeans soon

² *Democracy Index 2022: Frontline Democracy and the Battle for Ukraine* (London: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022), 5.

³ Alexander Schmemmann, "Byzantine Theocracy and the Orthodox Church," *St Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 1.2 (Winter 1953): 5.



King Charles sits in the 13th-century Coronation Chair, positioned on Westminster Abbey's so-called Cosmati Pavement.

copied this ceremony. In the year 800, Charlemagne arranged for Pope Leo III to crown him Holy Roman Emperor, explicitly imitating the Byzantine service. The eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon King Edward (canonized as Edward the Confessor) adopted the Eastern title *Basileus* and introduced a Byzantine-style crown.⁴ When the present Westminster Abbey was built in the thirteenth century, colourful stone discs were inlaid in the floor in an abstract diagram of the cosmos, evoking a similar arrangement of marble roundels in the floor of Hagia Sophia—the *omphalion* or “navel” marking the place where Byzantine emperors were crowned.⁵

Eastern Christianity cast a long shadow over the English Reformation. After the Ottomans defeated the Byzantine Empire in 1453, a multitude of literate Greeks migrated to Western Europe, bringing a renewed appreciation for Eastern writings. These textual sources helped the English reformers make their case for rejecting the authority of the Pope and founding a national church. The apologists for King Henry VIII's split with Rome compared this rupture to the Eastern patriarchs' earlier repudiation of papal interference. In explaining how the king could claim to be the head of the English Church, Henry's defenders likened

him to Emperor Justinian.⁶ To this day, the ecclesiology of the global Anglican Communion follows the Orthodox pattern of self-governing local churches, an affinity that has figured prominently in Anglican-Orthodox ecumenical dialogue.⁷

England's challenge to papal authority is reflected in the surprising history of the title “Defender of the Faith.” In 1521, Pope Leo X authorized Henry VIII to style himself *Fidei Defensor* after the king publicly stood up for Catholic doctrine in the face of Martin Luther's radical reforms. Less than a decade later, however, Henry surprised the pope by making his own break with the Vatican. Parliament subsequently reauthorized him to use the same title, its meaning now completely transformed by the new historical circumstances: instead of defending Catholicism, the king now defended the English people from Catholicism.

Rejecting Rome did not immediately bring on an age of toleration, to say the least. Henry's split from the Pope was accompanied by significant violence. Churches were plundered and monasteries dissolved. Early modern England, like Byzantium centuries earlier, regularly persecuted religious minorities—mostly Jews and non-conforming Christians. The Tudor

⁴ Roy Strong, *Coronation: A History of Kingship and the British Monarchy* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 54.

⁵ Steven H. Wander, “The Westminster Abbey Sanctuary Pavement,” *Traditio* 34 (1978): 137–56; Paul Ashdown, “Little Spheres of Prophecy: Glastonbury, Flooring, and the Reign of Henry III,” *Glastonbury Review* 121 (January 2012), <https://britishorthodox.org/glastonburyreview/issue-121-little-spheres-of-prophecy-glastonbury-flooring-and-the-reign-of-henry-iii/>.

⁶ Anastasia Stylianou, “Textual Representations of Greek Christianity during the English Reformations,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 53.1 (January 2023): 28–30.

⁷ *Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue: The Dublin Agreed Statement 1984* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1985), 18.

monarchs were less interested in doctrinal conformity (“I have no desire to make windows into men’s souls,” Queen Elizabeth I reputedly said) than in promoting unity by insisting everyone pledge formal allegiance to a single national church. Yet this ideal of a unified community of faith proved wholly untenable. Centuries of religious strife led gradually to a policy of pragmatic toleration, with Britain’s increasing acceptance of religious pluralism paralleling its progressive recognition of constitutional limits on monarchical power.

Today the sovereign of the UK is the titular head of both the government and the Church of England but exercises almost no direct power over either. The church effectively governs itself, with its “supreme governor” stepping in only to validate the legitimacy of synodal decisions (thus avoiding the ecclesiastical paralysis of contemporary Orthodox Church, which, without an emperor, seems incapable of even convening a church-wide council). At the same time, with regular churchgoing Christians now a minority in England and Wales, it would be absurd to say that Charles’s subjects as such bear any special allegiance to the national church he heads. Ironically, if contemporary British and Commonwealth citizens *can* be said to profess fealty to a shared set of religious values, it is to an overriding respect for toleration and diversity in matters of faith.



After anointing and crowning King Charles, the Most Rev. Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, does homage to the new king on behalf of the Church of England.

If this history is framed as a dichotomous struggle between Christianity and religious freedom, Christianity would have to be counted on the losing side. Over the past few centuries at least, the evolution of religious toleration in the West has been bound up with the curtailment of Christianity’s formal influence in government and of its official status in the public square. Toleration is not a zero-sum game, however. Christian anthropology regards religious conscience as integral to personhood (Rom. 2:13–16, 14:1–15; 1 Cor. 8:7–13, 10:23–31). Increasingly, Christians have discerned the mission of beckoning the world to Christ to be incompatible with any form of coerced belief. This principle has important consequences for government. “If God is calling for a free response to God’s initiating love, then the state must maximize the conditions for such a free response, even if such a response is ‘no,’” argues Aristotle Papanikolaou, making a Christian case for a liberal regime of religious toleration.⁸

This imperative need not lead Western societies to relativize Christianity, offering it as just one more option on the supermarket shelf of religious “brands.” On the contrary, even ardent champions of secular liberalism such as Jürgen Habermas see the modern values of toleration, human rights, and freedom of conscience as uniquely rooted in Christian ethics:

Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than a mere precursor or a catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights

and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it.⁹

Habermas acknowledges that social norms now considered universal have been substantially shaped by Christianity. The liberal principle of religious toleration thus appears to be founded on a fundamental paradox: the normative basis for a *universalist* policy of religious toleration is grounded in a *particular* religious tradition. Rather than try to eliminate this contradiction, Habermas simply hopes that, in this “post-secular” age, Christianity will be a partner in advancing a freer, more tolerant, and more egalitarian society.

At the crux of this fragile alliance between Christianity and social modernity sits the British monarch. According to Francis Fukuyama, classical liberalism is an exceedingly “thin” structure, designed to mediate differences in a pluralistic society but with only the barest sense of common values.¹⁰ The Westminster system does not represent pure liberalism in this sense. Yet as Ross Douthat puts it, in practice, a liberal society “depends on constant infusions from other sources, preliberal or nonliberal, to generate meaning and energy and purpose.”¹¹

The UK’s Christian monarchy is just such a vestige of a premodern order whose uncanny cultural power actually helps sustain the modern Westminster system of government by connecting its values back to their origins in the distant past. To quote the liberal Victorian journalist Walter Bagehot, whose extensive writings on government shaped modern British

perceptions of the Crown: “The mystic reverence, the religious allegiance, which are essential to a true monarchy, are imaginative sentiments that no legislature can manufacture in any people. These semi-filial feelings in government are inherited just as the true filial feelings in common life. You might as well adopt a father as make a monarchy.”¹² Indeed, the fact that a king’s legitimacy comes from his belonging to an ancient lineage (the hereditary claim so deplored by republicanism) is, in fact, monarchy’s strongest guardrail against tyranny and demagoguery.

In the case of the Westminster system, though, the preliberal legacy that is essential to the monarchy has not stopped British sovereigns from recognizing religious toleration as a core imperative. This duty is manifest from the first moments of a new monarch’s reign. Ever since the formal unification of England and Scotland in 1707, accession to the throne—and thus to governorship of the Anglican Church—has involved swearing an oath to preserve Scotland’s official Presbyterianism against Anglican encroachment. In turn, while the Church of Scotland does not hold the monarch to be its head, it does respect his or her symbolic authority and charisma. For example, a few months after King Charles was crowned, he traveled to Edinburgh’s St. Giles Cathedral for a national service of thanksgiving, in which a senior Presbyterian minister presented him with the Scottish crown jewels.

Even non-Christian subjects of the British Crown, including many indigenous peoples in Commonwealth countries, regard the monarchy with solemn respect. In Canada, for example, while indigenous communities tend to resent aspects of the country’s colonial history, they distinctly prefer

⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions*, ed. and trans. Ciaran Cronin and Max Pensky (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 150–51.

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022), 116.

¹¹ Ross Douthat, “Notes on the Condition of Liberalism,” *New York Times*, October 21, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/21/opinion/condition-of-liberalism.html>.

¹² Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1867), 4.

¹³ David E. Smith, *The Republican Option in Canada, Past and Present* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 16; also see Nathan Tidridge, “Abolishing Monarchy in Canada Will Complete Colonization of Indigenous People,” *Toronto Star*, February 12, 2020.

the monarchy to an American-style republic.¹³ The sovereign is seen as the personal counterparty to the ancient treaties that structure the country's relationship to these communities and establish their rights to cultural autonomy. As Perry Bellegarde, former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, recently wrote:

The Treaties we entered into with the Crown are sacred and enduring covenants. We entered the Treaty relationship through ceremony witnessed by Grandfather Sun and all of our Grandmother and Grandfather spirit beings. As the Treaty itself stated, the relationship of partnership, mutual respect, and reciprocity was meant to be honoured as long as the sun shines, the rivers flow and the grass grows. While the Crown in right of Canada now holds the legal responsibility for honouring, implementing and enforcing the Treaty provisions, for First Nations treaty signatories the initial Treaty relationship will always remain with the Crown in right of Great Britain. We have expectations of whoever wears the Crown. . . . It is clear to me that King Charles has genuinely listened to and learned from Indigenous Peoples. And champions the values that we share.¹⁴

These examples demonstrate that the monarch is honored as the focus of the Commonwealth Realms' civil liturgy not in spite of but *because* he or she works to safeguard religious diversity and autonomy.



King Charles III has taken the monarch's responsibility to protect religious liberty so far that he set off a minor controversy in 1994, when, as Prince of Wales, he speculated that

he might someday adopt the title "Defender of Faith" instead of the traditional "Defender of *the* Faith." Critics were quick to accuse the prince of moral relativism, and he quietly retreated from his suggestion. In fact, though, "Defender of Faith" is an equally valid translation of *Fidei Defensor*—and, more importantly, it is the role the British sovereign has long served in practice.¹⁵

Such a role corresponds with how Queen Elizabeth II described the vocation of the Church of England in a 2012 speech: "Our established Church . . . has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country. It certainly provides an identity and spiritual dimension for its own many adherents. But also, gently and assuredly, the Church of England has created an environment for other faith communities and indeed people of no faith to live freely."¹⁶

This way of conceiving the mission of a Christian denomination is unlikely to satisfy those with a more exclusivist orientation. Occasionally it pushes the bounds of ecumenism to a disconcerting degree. For example, at Charles's coronation, a selection from the Epistle to the Colossians about the kingship of Jesus Christ was read by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, a practicing Hindu. The Church of England explained that Sunak read "by virtue of his public office"—a polite way of saying that it deemed his personal faith irrelevant.¹⁷ Such incidents are rare, however. On the whole, the goal of "[creating] an environment for other faith communities . . . to live freely" simply parallels the monarchy's role with respect to civil society. Since the sovereign is neither elected nor appointed by an elected official, he or she can serve as a unifying symbol, transcending partisan and cultural divisions.

¹⁴ Perry Bellegarde, "King Charles III 'has genuinely listened to and learned from Indigenous Peoples,'" *Ottawa Citizen*, May 1, 2023, <https://ottawacitizen.com/opinion/bellegarde-king-charles-iii-has-genuinely-listened-to-and-learned-from-indigenous-peoples>.

¹⁵ Michael Ipgrave, "Fidei Defensor Revisited: Church and State in a Religiously Plural Society," in *The Challenge of Religious Discrimination at the Dawn of the New Millennium*, ed. Nazila Ghanea-Hercock (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004), 210.

¹⁶ Elizabeth II, speech at Lambeth Palace, published February 15, 2012, <https://www.royal.uk/queens-speech-lambeth-palace-15-february-2012>.

¹⁷ "The Authorised Liturgy for the Coronation Rite of His Majesty King Charles III" (2023), 11, commentary, https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/23-24132%20Coronation%20Liturgy%20Commentary_v4.pdf.

That role is best fulfilled not by an abstract set of principles but by a *person*. The Canadian political thinker John Farthing has explained that the Westminster system “resolves the paradox lying at the root of republican democracies, the claim that the primary consideration in government is the individual man in his liberty made in conjunction with the quite contradictory contention that the primary and supreme consideration in government is not in fact man, but law.” For Farthing, the Westminster system is one in which “person is of prior significance to law”—that is, the sacramental anointing of the monarch, who thereby enters into a personal relationship with his people, is not secondary to the political and legal system; it is the very foundation on which that system is built.¹⁸

In placing personhood at the center of the constitutional order, the modern Westminster monarchy offers a glimpse of what Orthodox kingship *might* look like in the contemporary world, if it managed to eschew certain all-too-familiar authoritarian patterns and to contribute to a pluralistic society committed to freedom of conscience. It is ironic that, in Orthodox circles today, monarchism is often pegged (by both critics and advocates) as an anti-modern, anti-liberal ideology. On the contrary, monarchy in the twenty-first century has evolved into a form of government perfectly compatible with the values of liberty and diversity—indeed, as we have seen, it

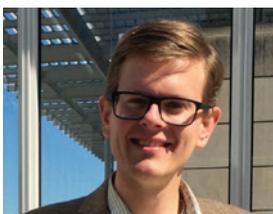


50 pence coin bearing King Charles III’s portrait and the inscription “F.D.” (*Fidei Defensor*).

often sustains them more effectively than a republic does. Christianity, and specifically Byzantine Christianity, have contributed to that evolution in crucial ways.

As for Charles III, the kingship he inherits is suffused with contradictions. It is an institution at once premodern and deeply modern, conservative and liberal, particular and universalist. In the Westminster system, the sovereign is not only restrained *by* the constitution, but is also the embodied symbol *of* the constitutional order that includes those very restraints. He is charged with defending “the Faith”—both a specific confession associated with the national English church as well as Christianity more broadly—and with defending faith itself, religious belief and practice of all stripes. The new king’s charge is not to resolve these paradoxes of the office he enters, but to hold the divergent tendencies they represent in balance. ✱

¹⁸ John Farthing, *Freedom Wears a Crown* (Bullsbrook, Australia: Veritas, 1957), 130, 126.



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