

Our Queen – Supreme Governor of the Church of England

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I have been invited to write about the role of the Queen as Supreme Governor of the Church of England, what it meant in history, and what it means today.

Henry VIII asserted that he, not the Pope, was in charge of the Church in England, by passing the 1534 Supremacy of the Crown Act, which stated that the sovereign is “the only supreme head on earth of the Church of England”.

The situation was reversed during the reign of Mary I, a Roman Catholic, but swung back again when Elizabeth I, a protestant, came to the throne and the 1558 Act of Supremacy was passed. This stated the sovereign is, “the Supreme Governor of the Realm in all spiritual and ecclesiastical causes as well as temporal”.

Both those Acts, in their original form, have since been repealed, but we do have a modern statement in the laws of the Church of England. Canon A7 states:

We acknowledge the Queen’s excellent Majesty, acting according to the laws of the realm, is the highest power under God in his kingdom, and has supreme authority over all persons in all causes, as well ecclesiastical as civil.

So, the Queen, under God, has authority over both church (ecclesiastical) and state (civil).

Another statement that is still current can be found in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. If you turn to the back of that book you will often find printed the 39 Articles of Religion. Article 37 states that the monarch is not a minister of God’s Word, or of the Sacraments, but only has the authority “given always to all godly Princes in holy Scriptures by God himself”.

In other words, the Queen is not a priest or bishop, (sometimes people say, ‘the Queen is the head of the Church, this proves that the Church should have women bishops’, but that argument is a red herring because the Queen is a lay woman, she is not ordained). The authority that the Queen does have over the Church of England is the same authority that the Bible says that governing authorities have over Christians. The reference comes from Romans chapter 13 verse 1 where St Paul writes, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”

Today we tend to separate out matters of religion and government. But, consider the Lord’s Prayer, “...Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, in earth, as it is in heaven”. God’s kingdom is to be established on earth as well as in heaven. We are made up of souls and bodies, so we should not only be in the business of saving souls, but also of feeding the hungry and working for peace.

The Queen’s role today is very different from the time of Henry VIII. *Halsbury’s Laws of England, Volume 34*, explains that although the Queen is Supreme Governor of the Church of England, she does not initiate Church legislation, nor does she make decisions on her own, but only within Parliament:

...much ecclesiastical legislation is today effected by Measures of the General Synod of the Church of England, these Measures do not become law until they have been presented by Parliament to the Queen and have received the royal assent.

I have the privilege to be an elected member of the General Synod (the Church of England's governing body). Every five years when a new Synod is elected, the Queen inaugurates the new Synod. She has been doing this every five years since the General Synod began in 1970, and with its predecessor body the General Assembly. She is longer serving than any General Synod member and has given an important sense of stability.

The Queen continues to have a role in the Church of England, but it is often more symbolic than active. For example, *Halsbury's Laws* states that the Queen "has very extensive church patronage, including the appointment of bishops". However, what happens in reality is that bishops are selected by a Church committee, called the Crown Nominations Commission. They offer a recommendation to the Prime Minister, who forwards it on to the Queen who approves it. Prime Ministers and monarchs have meddled with these appointments in the past, but they don't tend to today.

Where I think the Queen has the most real effect on the Church of England today, is in the witness she has shown the Church and the nation, over the last 60 years, of fulfilling her duty steadfastly and sharing her personal faith with us. I am proud that she is part of the Church that I belong to.

In February, the Queen attended a multi-faith reception at Lambeth Palace. In his speech, the Archbishop of Canterbury said:

...her personal commitment to her office as a call from God is at the heart of her understanding of her role, and she has not hesitated to be explicit about the Christian grounds of that commitment. But she has exemplified very clearly something that continues to be essential to the thinking of the Church of England, of which she is Supreme Governor. A clear and explicit commitment to Christian doctrine does not mean an anxious or arrogant spirit that seeks to exclude the commitments of others. Instead it is a reason to be generous, to seek to exercise responsibility for the good of an entire national community, made up of very diverse parts. Our Christian faith tells us that no-one flourishes unless all flourish; and this ought to turn us away from any attitude of superiority or partisanship as Christians. Strong Christian faith should be a guarantee for the well-being of all.
... and our celebration of this Jubilee year is a way of acknowledging gratefully the part played in this by the faith and dedication of our Queen.

Adrian Vincent