

Hensley Henson and the Disestablishment of the Church of England, 1927–1944: Spiritual Independence in a Hostile Age

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This article considers Hensley Henson's advocacy of disestablishment following the Prayer Book defeat of 1927–8 as more than a rash reaction to events, one that he continued to work out well into the 1930s in response to domestic and international challenges to the Church, in addition to initiatives within the Church itself. Using his extensive journal and correspondence, as well as his published writings, it seeks an enhanced understanding not only of his views regarding 'spiritual independence' but of the wider debate in the Church – both among clergy and laity – and Free Churches, of which they were an integral part.

The rejection of the revised Prayer Book in the House of Commons in 1927 and again in 1928 was a defeat of the first magnitude for the Church of England. Since the Enabling Act of 1919 and the

BM = Bishops' Meeting records, Lambeth Palace Library; Henson journal = Henson Journals, ed. Julia Stapleton, at <<https://www.hensonjournals.org>>; HHH = Bishop Henson papers, Durham Cathedral Library; LPL = Lambeth Palace Library, London

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creation of the National Church Assembly, the Church had enjoyed a large measure of self-government, one that for several decades had been at the heart of its campaign for church reform. This, it had been intended, would include a long-prepared revision of the Church's worship. Under the leadership of Randall Davidson, archbishop of Canterbury, the convocations and from 1920 the assembly had worked on Prayer Book revision intermittently since 1906, in response to the report of the Royal Commission on Ecclesiastical Discipline published that year;¹ but concerted action by the House of Bishops within the assembly after 1925 hastened the conclusion of the process, culminating in an 'Alternative Order of Holy Communion' that made some concessions to Anglo-Catholics.

The reaction of Davidson and the bishops to the parliamentary defeat of all this work was defiance. First, in July 1928 they publicly declared the 'fundamental principle that the Church ... must in the last resort, ... retain its inalienable right' to determine its own forms of doctrine and worship. Second, in July 1929 they resolved to allow the use of the revised Prayer Book on the authority of each of the diocesan bishops. They then, during 1930, referred the problem of overcoming what was now, in strict terms, an illegal arrangement, to a new commission on the relations between Church and State. In 1935 this commission recommended that the Church should seek new legislation to enable it to control its worship, and in the meantime the issue of a 'synodical declaration' – a statement by the two Church convocations, with the Church Assembly's concurrence – that would set out the acceptable standards of worship. From 1936 to 1939 much effort was expended in trying to obtain agreement on such a declaration, including the convening of a 'round table conference'; discussions resumed in 1943 and the issue became central to the Church's contribution to postwar reconstruction.²

Another effect of the defeat was quite different, prompting a call for the disestablishment of the Church from one of the most outspoken and incisive bishops of the early twentieth century. This was the more striking as this bishop – Herbert Hensley Henson (1863–1947), bishop of Durham since 1920 – had been a prominent defender of the establishment and the 'comprehensive' Church with which it seemed inextricably linked throughout a very public career. As such, he had been a leading opponent of the Enabling Act, condemning it as an 'Act of disestablishment'.³ He had also been a leading critic of the report of the archbishops' committee on

¹ For the background to the Royal Commission and liturgical reform after 1927–8 see Neil Patterson, 'The origins of liturgical lawlessness', *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* xxxvii/1 (2025), 60–7.

² R. C. D. Jasper, *George Bell: bishop of Chichester*, London 1967, ch. x.

³ Hensley Henson to A. V. Dicey, 27 Dec. 1919, Glasgow University Library, GB 247 MS Gen 508/33. See also Henson journal, entry for 3 June 1917.

Church and State in 1916, which had provided the momentum for, and the first draft of the Act.⁴ Since 1920, he had questioned the representative status of the Church Assembly which approved ‘measures’ before they passed into law with only limited parliamentary checks;⁵ these included an assessment of their ‘expediency’ and impact on the constitutional rights of subjects by a parliamentary ecclesiastical committee consisting of both peers and MPs, and crucially, too, a power of veto by either or both houses of parliament.⁶ Yet after 1927 he vehemently defended the assembly against the exercise of these parliamentary checks. He also defended the Enabling Act itself, ‘premature and impolitic’ as it may have been, adding quickly that ‘there were those in 1919 who held it to be both’.⁷ As such, his new position could only be interpreted by contemporaries – in the words of his erstwhile friend and fellow liberal churchman, Ralph Inge – as ‘an apparently total *volte-face*’.⁸ Where he was not denounced – he was clearly the target of the Lord Mayor of London’s speech at a dinner for the archbishops and bishops in 1931⁹ – he was largely ignored.¹⁰ What little support he did find was expressed privately.¹¹

For their part, historians have also been critical of his change of stance. His main biographer – Owen Chadwick – emphasised the ‘rashness’ of his response, the product of a mind with an ‘extremist’ edge,¹² at odds with the

⁴ Julia Stapleton, ‘Herbert Hensley Henson, J. N. Figgis and the archbishops’ committee on Church and State, 1913–16: two competing visions of the Church of England’, this JOURNAL lxxiii/4 (2022), 814–36. For the role of the report in fuelling the Enabling Act see Philip Williamson, ‘The Church of England and constitutional reform: the Enabling Act in British politics and English religion, 1913–28’, *Journal of British Studies* lxii/2 (2023), 445–75.

⁵ See, for example, Henson, *Quo Tendimus?*, London 1924, 38; for the inconsistency here see Owen Chadwick, ‘The idea of a national Church: Gladstone and Henson’, in Marcel Simone and others (eds), *Aspects de L’Anglicanisme*, Paris 1974, 184–205 at p. 199.

⁶ Church of England Assembly (Powers) Act, 1919, § 3(3), 4.
⁷ ‘Disestablishment by consent’, *Nineteenth Century and After* cv/1 (1929), 44–58 at p. 50.

⁸ W. R. Inge, ‘Quantum Mutatus: the bishop of Durham’s volte-face’, *Church of England Newspaper*, 2 Mar. 1928, 1; and Henson’s response, ‘Is it a volte-face? A plea of not guilty’, *Church of England Newspaper*, 9 Mar. 1928, 1. For other contemporary criticisms in the same vein see S. J. D. Green, ‘Hensley Henson, the prayer book controversy and the conservative case for disestablishment’, in Tom Rodger, Philip Williamson and Matthew Grimley (eds), *The Church of England and British politics since 1900*, Woodbridge 2020, 102–19 at p. 104.

⁹ Henson to Charles Pattinson, 19 June 1931, HHH 142/21.

¹⁰ For example, by the bishop of Norwich, Bertram Pollock, *Disestablishment and the Prayer Book*, London 1929; and the future dean of Wells, Richard Malden, *This Church and realm*, London 1931.

¹¹ For example, by the Lord Chancellor, Lord Sankey, and the architect Sir Charles Peers: Henson journal, entry for 6 Feb. 1930.

¹² Chadwick, ‘The idea of a national Church’, 197, 194.

British people, who according to Chadwick were a ‘stable people’ with an abiding preference for gradual change.¹³ Moreover, Henson’s support for disestablishment was essentially a foil to ‘Labour’, a party he had long regarded with disdain (hence the quotation marks he habitually placed around its name), but especially now that it was a serious contender for power. Indeed, Chadwick cites the wish that Henson expressed in his journal just before the first submission that the Prayer Book measure would fail, thereby strengthening the case for disestablishment on another front: that of avoiding the prospect of the exercise of crown patronage concerning archbishops, bishops, deans and numerous other clergymen by a Labour prime minister.¹⁴

The issue of Labour was also pivotal for Matthew Grimley in understanding Henson’s motives.¹⁵ In explaining the commitment to establishment among Anglican writers, he emphasised the continuing appeal of a national Church in fostering unity of identity and culture in British society, and on Christian lines.¹⁶ In contrast, in his analysis of the Prayer Book debacle, John Maiden focused on the persistence of Protestant conceptions of English and British nationhood in the twentieth century; these, he maintained, determined the fate of both the Prayer Book and the Church, albeit in a changing dynamic with the greater acceptance of establishment among other Protestant Churches in Britain. In this account, Henson, as a vehement critic of the Protestant elements in British religion and culture which were responsible for the defeat, receives only passing mention.¹⁷

Yet Henson’s shifting position on the relations of Church and State merits close attention. As well as resonating with recent interest in Church establishment and disestablishment,¹⁸ it brings into relief the wider field of contestation within the Church following the Prayer Book defeat. The problems of the approaches taken by the archbishops and most bishops – centred on rebalancing the establishment in the Church’s favour through the practical measures noted above – are especially apparent in Henson’s work. In addition, his awareness of the vulnerability of Churches in modern societies, especially established Churches, extended beyond his fear of Labour governments to the vicissitudes of universal suffrage more broadly. This awareness also extended beyond the events of 1927–8. Even a

¹³ Idem, *Hensley Henson: a study in the friction between Church and State*, Oxford 1983, 206.

¹⁴ Ibid. 203–4.

¹⁵ Matthew Grimley, *Citizenship, community and the Church of England: Liberal Anglican theories of the state between the wars*, Oxford 2004, 164.

¹⁶ Ibid. 141–3.

¹⁷ John Maiden, *National religion and the Prayer Book controversy, 1927–1928*, Woodbridge 2009.

¹⁸ Mark Chapman, Judith Maltby and William White (eds), *The established Church: past, present and future*, London 2011; Grace Davie, ‘Establishment’, in Mark Chapman and others (eds), *The Oxford handbook of Anglican studies*, Oxford 2016, 287–300; Jonathan Chaplin, *Beyond establishment: re-setting Church-State relations in Britain*, London 2022. For earlier arguments see notably Colin Buchanan, *Cut the connection: disestablishment and the Church of England*, London 1994.

sympathetic commentator such as Simon Green limits the focus of his analysis to the continuity between the views Henson expressed in his original shift with earlier opinions.¹⁹ The working out of his attitudes in 1927–8 well into the 1930s in response to new domestic and international challenges for the Church as well as initiatives within the Church provides fresh perspective on his thought.

This article reconsiders the Prayer Book crisis and its aftermath through the sustained case that Henson made for disestablishment, and the concerns with which it became entangled. It uses his extensive journal and unpublished correspondence, in addition to his published writings and speeches, to recover the ideas and beliefs – often rooted in wide reading – that informed his views, the arguments he used to defend them and the opposition he encountered in turn. As well as his opinions, the article also seeks to enhance understanding of the Church's pursuit of 'autonomy' from 1928 to 1945 as an alternative to the more thoroughgoing 'spiritual independence' Henson himself sought.

The article commences with an account of Henson's reaction to the first Prayer Book defeat. The second section turns to his abandonment of the cause of establishment, and the response to his call for disestablishment among both the Free Churches and other bishops and prominent lay members of the Church. The third section focuses on his increasing disillusionment with Protestantism as a major element in his change of stance, while, at the same time, his warming to the idea of the Church as a 'spiritual society', independent of what could now seem to be a secularised state. The fourth section considers his concern for the transformative effect of democratic change on the religious face of British society at both a national level and in relation to religious persecution abroad, and the implications for establishment. The fifth section turns to his opposition to attempts by his fellow bishops in the late 1930s to redefine 'lawful authority' in relation to the Church, seeking to overcome the Church's dependence on the state for its authority as a spiritual society, without sacrificing establishment. The concluding section emphasises Henson's steadfastness in upholding disestablishment, from the first Prayer Book rejection until his death two decades later, against the determination of leading figures within both Church and State to maintain the establishment, though on their own terms.

I

The shattering effect of the Prayer Book rejection on Henson was deeper and more enduring than that of any other churchman,²⁰ and this is crucial

¹⁹ Green, 'Hensley Henson, the prayer book controversy and the conservative case for disestablishment'.

²⁰ Noted in Chadwick, *Hensley Henson*, 203.

to understanding his position subsequently. Striking in this respect is the letter book into which he copied his outgoing letters between March 1927 and February 1928. He roughly tore out the pages (a total of 185) containing all the copied texts of his letters written from 8 April until 26 December 1927 – shortly after the first rejection on 15 December.²¹ The volume survived intact until 1941 when he read through it again while writing his autobiography. At first, he noted ‘the very important part in the final phases of the P. B. Revision effort’ he had played, and the ‘curiosity’ that was shown in the position he adopted when it failed.²² But after returning to it several times during the next fortnight, his mood seems to have changed: referring to ‘a hectic struggle with accumulated papers, of reckless destruction alternating with fatuous conservation’, the 1927 to 1928 letter book evidently fell victim to the destruction while the two subsequent letter books he had been reading at the same time escaped unscathed.²³

An explanation of his action lies in the original letters where these have survived in the papers of their recipients. Several touch upon the subject of Prayer Book revision, expressing confidence that the measure would pass, despite strong opposition both from within and outside of the Church, a notable change from his pessimism about its prospects the previous year.²⁴ When the pages of the letter book resume intact towards the end of December, his sombreness of mood is apparent. To one correspondent, he wrote: ‘The situation is a very grave one, and I hardly know how to express myself wisely. My forecast as to the inevitable consequence of the Enabling Act has been soon & but too fully authenticated. It means Disestablishment.’²⁵

He also referred to the Enabling Act of 1919 in other letters as the momentousness of the defeat sank in. The establishment, he wrote to a young clergyman, could not survive the legislation. From a ‘large, loose, anomalous system, Hookerian in principle, and paradoxical in practice’, the Church now emulated the autonomy of the colonial Churches, though these had never been either established, or disestablished. Even if, on a second submission of the Book, the House of Commons agreed to “eat the leek”,²⁶ the establishment was condemned by this ‘rough reminder of what it has come to mean’. He added, tellingly, ‘I am very distressed.’²⁷

²¹ See the stubs of the torn pages of HHH 107 between p. 10 and p. 195.

²² Henson journal, entry for 12 Aug. 1941.

²³ Ibid. entry for 25 Aug. 1941.

²⁴ Henson to Randall Davidson, 22 Sept. 1927, LPL, MS 1773, fos 19–23; Henson to James Marchant, 1 Nov. 1927, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Eng. Lett. c. 299; Henson to George Nimmins, 10 Apr., 27 Nov. 1927, HHH 141, 171, 176. For his gloomier view the previous year see Henson journal, entry for 26 Nov. 1926.

²⁵ Henson to W. D. Caröe (architectural advisor for Durham Cathedral), 26 Dec. 1927, HHH 107, 196–7.

²⁶ OED, ‘leek’, 4b: ‘to submit to humiliation under compulsion’.

²⁷ Henson to Ernest Henson (his second cousin), 27 Dec. 1927, HHH 107, 199–200.

In a letter to Inge – one of the last to remain intact in the damaged letter book in the months before the rejection – he had already made clear that he regarded disestablishment as a foregone conclusion, even though at the time he still expected parliament to accept the Prayer Book measure. He maintained that the revised Prayer Book would not in itself solve the problem of clerical indiscipline, the problem of ritualist priests who refused to adhere to the Book of Common Prayer. The archaic system of ecclesiastical courts under ultimate lay control prevented the Church from addressing it in any meaningful way. However, if the measure succeeded, the Church would at least emerge from the process of disestablishment without the ‘destructive disruption’ it would suffer were it to fail.²⁸

As even these modest hopes for Prayer Book reform faded rapidly, he condemned the vote in the House of Commons, not least the action of the home secretary, Sir William Joynson-Hicks, and the attorney-general, Sir Thomas Inskip, in voting against the measure; both were members of the Church Assembly which had approved the Prayer Book in July 1927, if only by a five to two majority in the House of Laity, though as he wrote in his journal at the time, ‘a considerably better majority ... than any of us had dared to hope’.²⁹ The two ministers should have been bound by ‘corporate obligation’ to uphold the assembly’s decisions, he wrote to Lord Stamfordham, the king’s private secretary, with whom he had been on friendly terms for some years. He was equally, if not more, incensed by the role they had played in ensuring that a majority of Free Church MPs also voted against the measure.³⁰

It is clear that Henson was responsible for the assertion of the ‘inherent spiritual authority of the Church’ in the statement that was issued by Davidson and Cosmo Lang – archbishop of York – immediately after the defeat, which he had assisted in drafting at Davidson’s request.³¹ He noted with evident satisfaction the *Manchester Guardian*’s perception of a ‘veiled threat’ in the assertion amid the statement’s otherwise ‘moderate and dignified aspect’, leaving the newspaper wondering whether this was ‘the language of a State Church’.³² In January 1928, he preached what Chadwick described as an ‘electrifying sermon’ in Cambridge, advocating ‘spiritual independence’ for the Church and urging resistance to the

²⁸ Henson to W. R. Inge, 1 Mar. 1927, HHH 106, 279–84 at pp. 283–4.

²⁹ Henson journal, entry for 6 July 1927.

³⁰ Henson to Lord Stamfordham, 31 Dec. 1927, The Royal Archives, Windsor, RA/PS/GV/C/O/2150/29. For his pleasure in attending an event in his diocese at which the MP for a Sunderland constituency, the Wesleyan Luke Thompson, spoke out against the rejection following the second submission see Henson journal, entry for 20 June 1928.

³¹ Henson journal, entries for 19, 20 Dec. 1927; for the full statement see ‘The Prayer Book ... statement by the archbishops’, *The Times*, 23 Dec. 1927, 10.

³² Henson journal, entry for 23 Dec. 1927.

temptation to yield to ‘the comforts and conveniences of religious compromise’.³³ Yet the loss of faith in the establishment that the sermon signalled was not a face-saving exercise following his speech to the House of Lords on the eve of the first Commons vote, as Chadwick has claimed;³⁴ on the contrary, it was driven by the conviction that the anomaly implicitly acknowledged in the Enabling Act by which what he now regarded as a de-Christianised House of Commons continued to legislate for the Church on spiritual matters had indeed become intolerable.³⁵ Nor, crucially, was it unrelated to wider shifts in his thought. This became apparent during the next few years as he reflected on the widespread opposition to disestablishment in religious circles, and with growing concern at the threats to the Church of continuing as an established Church.

II

In correspondence with Davidson immediately after the second rejection in June 1928, Henson urged the archbishop to take a principled stand against it. He suggested the submission of a ‘petition of right’ to parliament following the precedent set in 1629; this would emphasise that ‘on no theory of the church, Catholic or Protestant, can the present House of Commons be held competent to direct the Church of England in matters spiritual’.³⁶ He also suggested the placing of a resolution at the head of the agenda of the meeting of the Church Assembly in early July, affirming its conviction that ‘spiritual independence ... is, and must ever be, the inalienable heritage of the Church Universal, and in due measure of the Church of England, as a living branch of the same, subject only to the Law of Christ’.³⁷

The absence of reference here to the national status of the Church marked a clear departure from the position that Henson had taken publicly in the years preceding and during the passage of the Enabling bill. Perhaps because of this omission he doubted that Davidson would agree, or that the assembly would pass the resolution even if he did; yet it was important, he

³³ Chadwick, *Hensley Henson*, 205; Hensley Henson, ‘Church and state in England’, in *The Book and the vote*, London 1928, 1–22 at pp. 18–19.

³⁴ Chadwick, ‘The idea of a national Church’, 197.

³⁵ Hensley Henson letter, ‘The Prayer-Book crisis’, *Manchester Guardian*, 31 May 1928, 18. See also his two letters on ‘Spiritual independence’, *The Times*, 6 July 1931, 8, and 14 July 1931, 10; the former was part of an exchange with Joynson-Hicks, the latter with the Evangelical churchman Lord Cushendun. See also ‘Spiritual independence’, *Guardian*, 31 July 1931, 528.

³⁶ Henson to Davidson, 18 June 1928, HHH 108, 144–8 at p. 148; other aspects of the letter are cited in J. D. Martell, ‘The Prayer-Book Controversy, 1927–28’, unpubl. MA diss. Durham 1974, 297–8.

³⁷ Henson to Davidson, 20 June 1928, HHH 108, 158–62 at pp. 160–1; Henson journal, entry for 20 June 1928.

maintained in a letter to Lang outlining his proposal, to make clear the principles at stake.³⁸

In the event, the bishops' meeting in late June decided against a resolution in the assembly, favouring instead a statement on their behalf by Archbishop Davidson.³⁹ During the meeting, Henson had passed a memorandum to Davidson setting out 'the four salient features of the Situation' and three requirements of the Church in response; Davidson had pencilled his agreement on the document, and asked to retain it.⁴⁰ As in the previous year following the first rejection, Henson's robust views found clear expression in the archbishop's statement delivered on the bishops' behalf. It asserted as 'a fundamental principle that the Church – that is the Bishops, together with the Clergy and the Laity – must in the last resort, when its mind has been fully ascertained, retain its inalienable right, in loyalty to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to formulate its Faith in Him and to arrange the expression of that Holy Faith in its forms of worship'.⁴¹

Yet even then, Henson suspected that Davidson would favour 'diplomatic opportunism' over decisive action in his usual way.⁴² Moreover, the effect of the unanimous support for the statement that Davidson secured, even though two bishops had voted against the revised Prayer Book in the House of Lords, was to deprive it 'of all value either as a protest or as a declaration of principle'.⁴³

This despair of the Church leadership intensified following the bishops' meeting in September 1928. Henson was quick to note in his journal the 'ambiguous and temporising' approach to Church and State relations of Davidson's successor, Lang, and William Temple, who had succeeded Lang as archbishop of York; in this, he continued, they reflected 'very obviously the sentiments of the politicians to whom they owed their preferment'.⁴⁴ At the meeting, Lang had disclosed that 'leading men' with whom he had been in conversation had urged a 'quiet interval' in which opinion might settle on a revision of the establishment. To Henson's question as to whether any 'sane man' believed that parliament would be amenable to a revision that would guarantee the Church against a repetition of its recent experience, there had apparently been no response.⁴⁵ Alongside the

³⁸ Henson to Cosmo Lang, 25 June 1928, HHH 108, 165–8 at p. 168.

³⁹ For Henson's dismay at this decision, even though he knew a resolution could be put to the vote, thereby exposing divisions in the assembly, see 'Reflections on the crisis', *The Bishoprick* 3 (Aug. 1928), 113–24 at p. 121.

⁴⁰ Henson journal, entry for 29 June 1928.

⁴¹ *Church Assembly: report of proceedings*, 2 July 1928, ix/3, 115; *The Times*, 3 July 1928, 21.

⁴² Henson journal, entry for 29 June 1928. ⁴³ Ibid. entries for 30 June, 4 July 1928.

⁴⁴ Ibid. entry for 27 Sept. 1928. See also Henson to Lord Selborne, 17 Dec. 1928, HHH 109, 32.

⁴⁵ Henson journal, entry for 27 Sept. 1928. See also Henson to Vernon Storr, 6 Aug. 1928, HHH 108, 206–9 at pp. 207–8.

launch of diocesan synods to consult their clergy, the most his fellow bishops would countenance was that during the present 'emergency' and acting in their legal and administrative capacity, they would be guided by the re-revised Prayer Book of 1928 in considering discipline cases. However, they agreed to Henson's insistence that departures from the 1662 book should require the consent of the parochial church council. Henson was part of the committee that drafted the statement to this effect as published in national newspapers at the conclusion of the meeting.⁴⁶

The hesitancy of the two new archbishops – Lang especially – in response to the defeat proved vexing in the extreme. Following a conversation with Lang on a train from London back to the north a fortnight after the bishops' meeting, he noted Lang's 'almost jubilant optimism about the situation. The Synods are proceeding excellently: and the Enabling Act will be revised without difficulty!!' He commented, 'So much for "spiritual independence"!'⁴⁷

Nevertheless, Henson persisted in his efforts to raise the debate to a higher level, both of principle and action. He seized the opportunity of an invitation by a clearly sympathetic editor to write an article on the aftermath of the rejection of the Prayer Book measure for the journal the *Nineteenth Century*.⁴⁸ Importantly, what became a plea for 'an agreed measure of disestablishment' – or 'Disestablishment by consent' – was addressed as much to Free Churchmen as to Henson's fellow churchmen.⁴⁹ He sought their assistance in securing a generous policy of disendowment, one that would spare the Church the dependence on voluntary contributions that the Free Churches themselves endured, and the surrender of sacred buildings to secular control and even use. He pointed out that disestablishment was no longer the political issue it had been in the later decades of the nineteenth century as ecclesiastical factors lost their salience in national politics; it was now a moral issue, bearing upon the Church's capacity to influence conscience if subjected to secular authority in matters of faith.⁵⁰ He invoked the 'honest goodwill' between the Church and the Free Churches that had underlain the 'copious language of spiritual brotherhood' in recent years – a reference to the 'Lambeth Appeal to all Christian People' of 1920 and the reunion talks it had accelerated, before stalling in 1924 on the critical issue of episcopal ordination.⁵¹ But he warned against the socially divisive effect over several generations of a

⁴⁶ BM 8, LPL, 25–27 Sept. 1928, 193–207 at p. 200; *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1928, 10.

⁴⁷ Henson journal, entry for 5 Nov. 1928. Henson refused to hold a synod in Durham, for fear of further stimulating an already excessive 'self-assertiveness' among the clergy: Henson to Edward Watson, 28 Oct. 1928, HHH 109, 13.

⁴⁸ Henson to Carrol Romer, 15 Nov. 1928, HHH 109, 21.

⁴⁹ Including, privately, Joynson-Hicks: Henson journal, entry for 13 Nov. 1929.

⁵⁰ 'Disestablishment by consent', 51–2; 'Reflections on the crisis', 122.

⁵¹ For Henson's support of the Free Churches in these talks see Henson to George Bell, 23 July 1924, LPL, ms Bell 199, fos 127–8 at fo. 127v.

forcible disestablishment of the Church. If and, more likely in his view, when that happened, progress towards Christian reunion would halt indefinitely.⁵²

In raising this spectre, he may have relied upon the unstinting service he had given since 1901 to the cause of 'home reunion' among the Protestant Churches in Britain, though firmly within the 'tradition and machinery' of the Church as established.⁵³ However, the good relations he had fostered with Nonconformity now seemed to count for little. Broadly, Free Church opinion had become reconciled to the establishment, and the remnants which continued to favour disestablishment in the interests of Protestant reunion regarded this as a matter for the Church alone.⁵⁴ Henson expressed his sense of frustration to Scott Lidgett – a prominent Wesleyan – at the Athenaeum concerning the 'mean behaviour' of Nonconformists towards the Church in its struggle for spiritual liberty. Certainly, Carnegie Simpson, Presbyterian leader and moderator of the Federal Council of the Free Churches, had been sharply critical of his Cambridge sermon in 1928.⁵⁵ Lidgett undertook to press Henson's case, though he feared 'the hard and uncompromising temper' of his co-religionists.⁵⁶

Henson's article in *The Nineteenth Century* elicited just one response from his fellow bishops: Albert David, bishop of Liverpool. Writing in his diocesan magazine, David proposed the 'sharing' of the Church's rights and responsibilities with 'some' of the Free Churches as an alternative to disestablishment. This would ensure that the Church's demand for 'more freedom' was 'more wisely shaped, and more securely given' than if it were made solely from within, strengthening reunion prospects at the same time.⁵⁷

Unsurprisingly, Henson found David's article neither 'strong, or wise, or even effective'.⁵⁸ He took the bishop to task in an appendix to the first part

⁵² 'Disestablishment by consent', 56–7.

⁵³ Henson to the Unitarian leader, Joseph Lloyd Thomas, 7 June 1919, copied into his journal of that date; Henson, 'An appeal for unity' (1901), in *Godly union and concord*, London 1902, 126–43.

⁵⁴ Philip Williamson, 'What happened to political Nonconformity?', in Paul Readman and Geraint Thomas (eds), *Culture, thought and belief in British political life since 1800: essays in honour of Jonathan Parry*, Woodbridge 2024, 190–209 at p. 201. For Free Church acceptance of establishment see Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, ii, London 1970, 438.

⁵⁵ Carnegie Simpson, 'The Anglican Church and spiritual freedom', *British Weekly* (2 Feb. 1928), 437.

⁵⁶ Henson journal, entry for 23 Oct. 1929. Albert Peel, a leading Congregationalist, recalled the climate of Nonconformist opinion following the rejection in similar terms, and his disagreement with it, in a letter to Henson copied out in Henson journal, entry for 30 Dec. 1943.

⁵⁷ Albert David, 'Establishment and reunion', *Liverpool Review* iv (Feb. 1929), 41–3.

⁵⁸ Henson journal, entry for 9 Feb. 1929, and Henson reply to David, 9 Feb. 1929, HHH 109, 65–6.

of his diocesan Charge in 1929, published as *Disestablishment* later that year. After exposing the fallacies on which David's expansive model of establishment was based, including that of reunion, he reiterated his conception of disestablishment as outlined in the article as 'the substitution of one kind of establishment for another, the addition of the Church of England to the number of Established Free Churches'.⁵⁹ By this he meant that 'state recognition' – of rules, doctrine, discipline and so on – was an inescapable feature of all Churches, whether established or free.

Neither of the two new archbishops engaged with Henson on the issue of disestablishment,⁶⁰ instead quickly seeking to safeguard the establishment without addressing alternatives. What he regarded as their 'complaisance' was apparent in their joint pastoral letter of June 1929.⁶¹ In several letters to bishops at the time, Henson poured scorn on the only solution to the crisis the archbishops seemed able to advance: a plea for increased Bible-reading among congregations.⁶² As he wrote to Temple in August, he could not but feel that without a firm response to the rejection, entailing a clear assertion (once again) of the 'inherent spiritual authority of the Christian society', a 'policy of acquiescence' would prevail, which would inevitably become 'a policy of surrender'.⁶³

At the York convocation in July 1929, he had moved the two resolutions relating to a memorandum by the archbishops and bishops following consultation with the clergy and laity. They confirmed that, as an 'emergency' measure, the bishops would not take action against the use of any 'additions or deviations' from the 1662 Book consistent with the proposed Prayer Book of 1928, while ensuring that practices consistent with neither would cease.⁶⁴ In support of the proposal, he pointed out that, although without legal status, it embodied the discretion the bishops were empowered to exercise collectively, ending the long-running practice of the exercise of authority by individual bishops acting alone.⁶⁵

However, he placed the strongest emphasis on the principles informing the resolutions, warning that the 'administration' of the revised Prayer

⁵⁹ Hensley Henson, *Disestablishment*, London 1929, 195; 'Disestablishment by consent', 52–3; and also 'The need for disestablishment', *The Listener* (29 Apr. 1936), 825.

⁶⁰ E. R. Norman, *Church and Society in England, 1770–1970: a historical study*, Oxford 1976, 342–5.

⁶¹ *The Times*, 29 July 1929, 9.
⁶² Henson to the bishop of Southwark (Cyril Garbett), 26 Aug. 1929, HHH 109, 141; Henson to the bishop of Oxford (Thomas Strong), 8 Sept. 1929, HHH 109, 150; Henson to Garbett, 15 Sept. 1929, HHH 109, 155–6; Henson to the bishop of Carlisle (Henry Williams), 30 Sept. 1929, HHH 109, 172–3.

⁶³ Henson to William Temple, 26 Aug. 1929, HHH 109, 137–40 at pp. 139–40.

⁶⁴ 'Memorandum of the archbishops and bishops', 10 July 1929, *York Journal of Convocation, containing the acts and debates of the convocation of the province of York*, York 1929, 12–13; for his role in drafting the resolutions see BM 8, LPL, 12–14 June 1929, 238.

⁶⁵ 'Memorandum of the archbishops and bishops', 43.

Book without legal sanction could not continue indefinitely. Much would depend on how far the nation was prepared to suffer a situation that many professed to find intolerable; much, too, on whether the widespread practice of lawlessness in the Church continued. Yet crucial to understanding the merely interim nature of the memorandum's provisions was the 'primary duty of the Church as a spiritual society', that is, to itself, which only disestablishment with all its hardships could satisfy fully. He was persuaded that this view was widely shared following 'assurances' he had received from fellow churchmen in recent weeks.⁶⁶

It was a large claim, though perhaps calculated as such to accentuate the seriousness of the Church's predicament. He wrote in his journal that he had been at pains to convey 'both the revolutionary character of the proposals, and the slender likelihood of their working successfully'.⁶⁷ While they were passed in both convocations, albeit against substantial opposition,⁶⁸ there seemed little prospect of unity around the revised Prayer Book while the Church remained established.

As such, Henson became increasingly impatient with the delay in the appointment of the commission on Church and State relations, first announced in Davidson's statement of July 1928 on the bishops' behalf. He wrote to Lang's secretary, Mervyn Haigh, in October 1929, giving notice of his intention of tabling a motion at the bishops' meeting in November urging its appointment,⁶⁹ only to be thwarted by Lang; the issue, Lang maintained at the October meeting, would have to be postponed until the following February, as more pressing business would occupy the meeting in November. In a defiant speech, Henson questioned Lang's sense of priorities. In his journal afterwards, he wrote of the 'genuine lack of purpose in their Graces which provides a disconcerting commentary on their words'.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, he lent strong support to Temple's resolution in favour of the commission's appointment at the meeting of the Church Assembly in February 1930.⁷¹ He had signalled his intention of doing so in a long letter to *The Times* during the preceding week. It was both 'natural and reasonable', he wrote, that all measures short of disestablishment that would 'purge the Establishment of its Erastian features' should be considered.⁷²

⁶⁶ Ibid. 44–5.

⁶⁷ Henson journal, entry for 10 July 1929; this interpretation was contested by the bishop of Sheffield (Leonard Burrows), 'Memorandum of the archbishops and bishops', 47. ⁶⁸ Henson journal, entries for 10, 12 July 1929.

⁶⁹ Henson to Mervyn Haigh, 4 Oct. 1929, in Haigh papers, LPL, MS 1773, 11–13.

⁷⁰ Henson journal, entry for 23 Oct. 1929; Henson's contribution to the meeting and that of others were not included in the official record of this discussion.

⁷¹ Henson speech to the Church Assembly, 5 Feb. 1930: *Church Assembly: report of proceedings*, xi/1, 76–9 at p. 77.

⁷² Hensley Henson, 'Church and State: the parliamentary veto', *The Times*, 31 Jan. 1930, 10.

Whether he believed that a remodelled establishment could satisfy this exacting requirement is uncertain. Lang clearly thought not, for he rebuked Henson for his precipitousness in promoting disestablishment in his closing speech to the assembly. Instead, he commended the Scottish Church as an example of what might be achieved in securing both establishment status and freedom for the Church of England.⁷³

For Henson, however, the Scottish model as defined by the Articles Declaratory of the Church's Constitution made lawful by the Church of Scotland Act of 1921 was not only of little value, hanging, as it now did by the thinnest of constitutional threads – the high commissioner's presence in the General Assembly; it was also flawed. This claim was central to his review of Carnegie Simpson's book *The Church and the State* in July 1929, which celebrated the impending unification of the Church with the United Free Church of Scotland in October that year.⁷⁴ 'United' the Scottish Church may now have become, Henson wrote; but in what sense could it be considered 'national', other than in the prestige it had long enjoyed – and continued to enjoy – in Scottish society, unlike its English equivalent? The claim of a Church to be 'national' in the sense of established, was conditional upon the state's acknowledgement of Christian principles in its legislation, the *quid pro quo* for ecclesiastical control. In the past, he maintained, 'Establishment has implied also Christianisation', but this was no longer the case: 'The modern democratic State is not only secular, but everywhere tending to become secularist.'⁷⁵ He concluded that the 1921 Act amounted to an act of disestablishment without disendowment, its 'easy passage' explained more by its 'regularisation of an actual state of affairs [rather] than a great constitutional change'.⁷⁶

Others in the Church, for example the leading layman Lord Hugh Cecil, took a more sanguine view of the established Church, both in Scotland and England. Quickly making a virtue of necessity following the bishops' resolutions of 1929, Cecil dismissed the suggestion that the Church would be freer under disestablishment than it was under establishment. With reference to Henson, he maintained that the current freedom it enjoyed had much to recommend it: the freedom of 'laxity' in which variety of liturgical practice was 'canalised' within the broad limits of the revised Book, voluntary obedience providing the basis of discipline. He compared it favourably with the freedom enjoyed by disestablished Churches as in Ireland: to make rules which were rigidly enforced by the state in its duty of upholding

⁷³ President's speech, *The Chronicle of Convocation of Canterbury, being a record of the proceedings of the Convocation of Canterbury*, 5 Feb. 1930, London 1930, 101–8 at p. 105.

⁷⁴ Hensley Henson, 'The Church and the State', *Review of the Churches* vi/3 (1929), 372–8 at p. 375; Patrick Carnegie Simpson, *The Church and the State*, London 1929, 206, 235.

⁷⁵ Henson, 'The Church and the State', 376–7.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 377–8.

'contract' should they be transgressed. 'Outlawry', Cecil asserted in relation to the present condition of the Church, 'was not equivalent to being a "Church in chains".'⁷⁷ In addition, disestablishment of the Church of England would almost certainly entail disestablishment of the Church of Scotland, where, happily, the problem of reconciling autonomy and establishment had been solved.⁷⁸

Henson appears not to have noticed Cecil's essay. Certainly, Cecil's apparently untroubled embrace of 'outlawry' would not have recommended itself to him even if he had; he once described himself as a 'fanatically legalistic bishop',⁷⁹ and never used the Revised Prayer Book himself.⁸⁰ Cecil's approach was of the same order as the 'belittling interpretation' of the proposed commission on Church and State that Henson perceived in Lang's concluding speech to the assembly in February 1930, reinforcing his determination to adhere to his own understanding of what Temple's resolution entailed in turn.⁸¹ He declined the invitation to appear as a witness once the commission on Church and State was established, setting out his reasons in a letter that was published towards the end of its report. A major consideration, he wrote, was not wanting to lend encouragement to the assumption in the resolution that had been passed by the assembly that the establishment could be altered to serve better the Church's interests as a spiritual organisation.⁸²

On the report's publication, Henson noted its assertion that disestablishment would be preferable to the indefinite continuation of the Church's present position; but he considered both this and the commission's ambitious proposals for reform unlikely to be pressed.⁸³ While he received a standing ovation for his speech on the report at the Church Assembly in February 1936, dismissing the report as incapable of delivering the Church from its servitude to the State, once again disestablishment found no support, and was – he maintained – bitterly opposed at the Church's extremes.⁸⁴

⁷⁷ Lord Hugh Cecil, 'The Church Assembly and the relations of Church and State', in F. Partridge (ed.), *The Church Assembly and the Church: a book of essays*, London 1930, 147–65, 160–2; '...' Henson, 'Disestablishment and consent', 48.

⁷⁸ Cecil, 'The Church Assembly and the relations of Church and State', 163–4.

⁷⁹ Henson journal, entry for 22 Oct. 1933.

⁸⁰ Ibid. entries for 24 Apr. 1940 and 2 May 1943. ⁸¹ Ibid. entry for 6 Feb. 1930.

⁸² *Church and state: report of the archbishops' commission on relations between Church and state* (hereinafter cited as *Church and state report*), London 1936, ii. 315–17 at p. 316.

⁸³ Henson journal, entry for 13 Mar. 1937. See also volume lxxvi of his Journal, which he turned upside down at the back, filling several pages with his wider comments on the commission's report.

⁸⁴ *Church Assembly proceedings*, 'Church and state', xviii (5 Feb. 1936), 78–83; Henson journal, entry for 31 Dec. 1936.

However, it was not only a perceived failure of will in the Church that turned him against establishment; by the mid-1930s, he had come to regard the wider goal of Christian unity with which his defence of the establishment had been closely associated as merely a cant phrase.⁸⁵ In part, this reflected a growing sense of the futility of reunion efforts while the bishops continued to insist on episcopacy as ‘the *unam necessarium* of a Christian Church’.⁸⁶ Equally, though, it reflected his increasing disillusionment with Protestantism across the Free Church and Anglican Evangelical divide, and emphasis instead on the Church as a spiritual society distinct from both the nation and the state.

III

Famously, in his speech to the House of Lords on the eve of the first Commons vote, Henson had referred to the notorious reference he had made earlier that year to the ‘Protestant underworld’ as the chief obstacle to Prayer Book reform. By that term, he explained, he had meant the extreme ‘Evangelical party’ in the Church, in contrast to Evangelicals who abided by the conventions of controversy, as appropriate to ‘Christian men’.⁸⁷ He kept this Evangelical party firmly in his sights, condemning the disproportionate influence over clerical appointments it wielded through patronage trusts, and consequently its detachment from the Church at parish and diocesan level.⁸⁸ However, the basis of his antipathy to Protestantism widened as his disaffection with the established Church increased.

Most obviously, this was due to a perception that Protestantism had become an empty religious shell, the vehicle instead for a visceral patriotism. In his correspondence with Lord Stamfordham following the first rejection cited earlier, he emphasised the dissonance between a strongly Protestant nation and – since the Enabling Act – ‘that small part of it that constituted the Church of England’; the latter was now ‘rapidly ceasing to be Protestant in the old sense at all’.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Henson journal, entry for 13 July 1936.

⁸⁶ Henson to C. F. D’Arcy, 21 Oct. 1931, in E. F. Braley (ed.), *Letters of Herbert Hensley Henson*, London 1950, 63–4; Henson journal, entry for 20 Oct. 1931. See also David M. Thompson, ‘The unity of the Church in twentieth-century England: pleasing dream or common calling?’, in Robert Swanson (ed.), *Unity and diversity in the Church* (Studies in Church History xxxii, 1996), 507–31 at pp. 522–3.

⁸⁷ Debates of the House of Lords, 14 Dec. 1927, LXIX, cc. 924–5; see also ‘Protestant underworld’, letter, *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 2 June 1931, 7.

⁸⁸ Letter, ‘Appointment of incumbents’, *The Times*, 11 Dec. 1931, 10. See also *Sibbes and Simeon: an essay on patronage trusts*, London 1932.

⁸⁹ Henson to Lord Stamfordham, 31 Dec. 1927, The Royal Archives, RA/PS/GV/C/O/2150/29.

However, for Henson, it was less the ‘lethargic bigotry’ of the English that was responsible for the defeat than the Celtic influences that had stirred it up. Drawing a parallel with the Gordon riots of 1780, he specifically targeted Rosslyn Mitchell, one of the MPs who spoke most vehemently against the Prayer Book measure. He wrote in his journal that Mitchell ‘possessed that “perfervidum igenium Scotturum”, which, set ablaze by “religious passion”, is as irresistible as a Highland stream in spate’. He wrote bitterly, too, of the Welsh MPs, led by Lloyd George, who had also sealed the measure’s fate and for similar reasons: in conjunction with “Labour”, they ensured that ‘the disaster was engineered and achieved’.⁹⁰

Less salient but equally significant, was the repugnance he now felt for widespread perceptions of the ‘moral superiority’ of Protestantism against Roman Catholicism. Writing in his journal at Easter 1931, he recalled his own affirmation of this view forty years earlier when his interest in reunion had awakened. This had owed much to the ‘undue severity’ with which he had regarded ‘Roman devotion and discipline’. However, while his dislike of Rome remained, the modern face of Protestantism in the ‘supercilious, self-indulgent rationalism’ of the Modernists, on the one hand, and the ‘canting commercialism of the Sectaries’ – a reference to Quakerism and the Puritan sects of Protestant America – on the other, could not seem further from the Mind of Christ.⁹¹

Henson’s antipathy towards these forms of Protestantism intensified as he observed the success with which Frank Buchman’s Group movement took hold in the Church in the 1930s, extending to high-placed figures in public life such as Lord Salisbury.⁹² He expressed his concerns in the first part of his third quadrennial Charge in 1933, particularly the movement’s ‘adolescent character’.⁹³ In this light, the failure of the Prayer Book to satisfy those who craved the excitement of ‘house parties’ in enriching their spiritual life – a central pillar of Groupism – was to its credit.⁹⁴ He also emphasised the movement’s ‘indifferen[ce] to the spiritual needs of unevangelized mankind’,⁹⁵ a trait that its creed of morbid self-absorption shared with Quakerism.

Perturbed by the Groups’ popularity, he wrote an acerbic preface to Ray Strachey’s *Group movements of the past* in 1934. This was a reissue of Strachey’s edition of the notes of her grandmother, Hannah Whitall Smith, on some of the religious movements that had swept through America in the nineteenth century, and was written in reaction against her pietistic

⁹⁰ Henson journal, entry for 3 Sept. 1929.

⁹¹ Ibid. entry for 4 Apr. 1931.

⁹² Ibid. entries for 4, 18 Feb. 1936; 11 Apr. 1941.

⁹³ Hensley Henson, *The Group movement: being the first part of the charge delivered at the third quadrennial visitation of his diocese together with an introduction*, London 1933, 9.

⁹⁴ Henson journal, entry for 4 Oct. 1933.

⁹⁵ Henson, *The Group movement*, 26.

upbringing by the Friends. He pointed to the 'seductive appearance of humble faith' common to both Smith's early experiences and Groupism, leading to the 'morally disintegrating' effects of 'spiritual arrogance' as a result. Their shared fanaticism, Henson asserted, was rooted in the suspension of intellect.⁹⁶

He was careful to keep mainstream Free Churchmanship out of his indictment of Groupism and its Quaker forerunner, drawing a clear distinction between them on several accounts, not least, those they sought to convert: the 'spiritually neglected masses' on the one hand, and the 'leisured and well-to-do classes' on the other.⁹⁷ However, his disillusionment with older traditions of Nonconformity was coloured by deepening hostility towards Protestantism more widely and its recent 'Group' offshoot. The American face of both was one problem;⁹⁸ another was their 'sect' mentality and the human type it represented. This seemed to harden them both against the openness to all believers of the Catholic Church, as represented in the Church of England, reinforcing the 'Church' and 'Sect' distinction drawn by the German sociologist, Ernest Troeltsch.⁹⁹

In this context, Henson warmed to the spirit of Anglo-Catholicism and its Tractarian roots, if not to the illegal liturgical practices of some of its adherents. In accepting the invitation of the English Church Union (ECU) to preach to the Anglo-Catholic Congress at the Royal Albert Hall in 1930, he used freely the language of the Church as a 'spiritual society' which Anglo-Catholics had been instrumental in promoting, and which he had rejected previously in resisting the campaign for 'spiritual autonomy' in the Church leading up to the Enabling Act.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, at a centenary lecture on the Oxford Movement in Durham Cathedral three years later, also delivered at the invitation of the ECU, he maintained that the Church had always been more than the nation, even at the height of erastianism in Georgian and early-Victorian England, as the affirmation of the 'Divine Society' by Joseph Butler, one of his most illustrious predecessors, made clear.¹⁰¹ At another centenary lecture for the Movement, also delivered under the auspices of the ECU, in London three days later, he argued that 'Freedom means for us [Anglicans] in England the end of the State connexion, Disestablishment', even though since the Prayer Book rejection, 'the

⁹⁶ Henson, introduction to Ray Strachey (ed.), *Group movements of the past and experiments in guidance*, London 1934, 2, 3. ⁹⁷ Henson, *The Group movement*, 43–4.

⁹⁸ See his critical comments on Protestant Christianity in America (Strachey, *Group movements*, 7), echoing his impressions during a visit there in 1909; see also Henson journal, entry for 3 Aug. 1909. ⁹⁹ Henson journal, entry for 14 Aug. 1933.

¹⁰⁰ Henson, 'Church and State in England', in *The Bishoprick papers*, London 1946, 88–97 at p. 94; Stapleton, 'Herbert Hensley Henson, J. N. Figgis and the archbishops' committee'.

¹⁰¹ Henson, 'The Oxford Movement', in *The Bishoprick papers*, 209–13 at p. 211.

prison' in which the Church was kept 'had been made as comfortable as possible'.¹⁰²

However, he recognised the reluctance to embrace disestablishment even in ECU circles, and for less creditable reasons than has been suggested, those of tradition, sentimental attachment, and in the case of many leading Anglo-Catholic politicians, as part of their Conservative outlooks.¹⁰³ As he reflected after the lecture, while Anglo-Catholics seemed sympathetic to disestablishment, they also feared the greater threat it posed to their law-breaking practices than establishment.¹⁰⁴ He had noted several years earlier their failure to grasp the connection between assertions of the 'inherent authority' of the Church against the House of Commons, on the one hand, and against lawless clergymen, on the other.¹⁰⁵ It also worried him that their indiscipline encouraged Modernists in seeking to shape the next Prayer Book revision in their favour.¹⁰⁶ He must have felt acutely the frustration of recognising Anglo-Catholicism as the centre of vitality in the Church in the 1930s, and not – as its Protestant critics maintained – the main cause of religious decline in Britain,¹⁰⁷ while failing to harness its support for disestablishment.

Neither the ECU, nor Henson, sought further co-operation. The concerns he had expressed at its gatherings found little resonance elsewhere either, for example, among fellow members of Grillions, the elite dining club, where disestablishment provided the main subject of an after-dinner conversation in 1932. Of the nine members present, all of whom were friendly to the Church and interested in religion, only one – the Presbyterian Lord Stonehaven – 'had the faintest notion of what a spiritual society must mean'.¹⁰⁸

About the inevitability and urgency of disestablishment, though, he remained convinced. As he had told the Lambeth Conference in 1930, the contradiction between the secular state that had been 'created' by modern democracy and the claim of the Church of England to represent 'national Christianity' through the establishment was unsustainable.¹⁰⁹ His intention was to hold the English bishops to their declaration of principle the previous year in now voting upon his reformulation of a Conference resolution (probably Resolution 52)¹¹⁰ that presumed their freedom to act

¹⁰² Hensley Henson, 'The Oxford Movement an assertion of the Church's freedom', in *The centenary sermons of the Oxford Movement*, London 1933, 27–8.

¹⁰³ Grimley, *Citizenship, community, and the Church of England*, 160–1.

¹⁰⁴ Henson journal, entry for 14 July 1933.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. entry for 19 Dec. 1928.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. entry for 21 June 1938.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. entry for 18 Jan. 1937.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. entry for 16 Nov. 1932.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. entry for 4 Aug. 1930.

¹¹⁰ The Lambeth Conference Resolutions Archive, 1930, Resolution 52, The Anglican Communion – Provincial Organisation, at <<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/127734/1930>> at p. 8, accessed 3 February 2026.

independently of the state. But while he received rapturous applause, the basis of his appeal to 'spiritual liberty' was *sui generis*; as his speech suggested, it went beyond the Church's recent travails to wider areas of thought and belief with which he alone seemed to engage.

IV

Central to Henson's reassessment of establishment was a conception of modern democracy as indifferent to religion, at best, and hostile, at worst. This was mostly worked out in his journal following the advent of near-universal suffrage after the First World War. For example, in 1928, following his reading of François Aulard, first professional historian of the French Revolution, he wrote of modern democracy as having 'taken away the Christian masque [from] the pagan countenance of European society'.¹¹¹ Not long afterwards, in an incisive paper read to the Church Congress at Cheltenham, he questioned the claim that the Church represented the 'spiritual organ of the nation'. Insofar as this was true, he maintained, it was reflected more in the influence of the Church's teachings on society than in its constitutional role. But he denied that even at this level, modern civilisation – or 'Christendom' – was identical with Christianity. Christian influence within Christendom could only ever be limited, its hold fragile and precarious, even more so, he claimed, than in pagan society, which otherwise shared religion as the 'ground-stone of its thinking'.¹¹²

Here, he differed from others in the Church, including his erstwhile friend Ralph Inge, dean of St Paul's, and Sir Lewis Dibdin, the Church's leading ecclesiastical lawyer. In separate addresses in 1932, both expressed their confidence in the broad Christian faith of the English masses, thereby perpetuating what was for Henson the erroneous assumption of a 'genuinely Christian nation' that was central to the theory of the establishment.¹¹³ But as he wrote to the political theorist and layman Ernest Barker – who had remonstrated with him against disestablishment on, among other issues, the question of the Church's relation to the nation that remained once 'Los vom Staat' (freedom from the state) had been declared – the Church of England represented 'rather a picturesque memorial of the long-lost religious unity of the Nation than a recognition of the nation's religion'. He maintained that it was possible for laws to

¹¹¹ Henson journal, entry for 26 Aug. 1928. For Aulard, see also Henson journal, entries for 3 July 1926 and 26 July 1927.

¹¹² Hensley Henson, 'The Church as the spiritual organ of the nation', *The Bishoprick* iv (Nov. 1928), 4–10 at p. 9.

¹¹³ Henson journal, entries for 17, 20 May 1932; for Henson's doubts about Inge's familiarity with working people see entry for 4 January 1941.

recognise 'and even favour religious societies, as in America and the Colonies', but without perpetuating the 'territorial Christianity of the Middle Ages', of which the Church was now almost the sole survivor.¹¹⁴

Against Barker's 'idealisation' of the national Church,¹¹⁵ Henson set the view of the Russian philosopher and exile Nicolas Berdyaev: that Christianity was now returning to the position it had held before Constantine, charged with re-conquering the world.¹¹⁶ The importance of asserting the distinctiveness of the Church as a Christian society was especially urgent, as the Soviet persecution of the Russian Church – the subject of a brief but prominent protest movement in Britain in 1930¹¹⁷ – made clear. A complicating factor, however, was that the Church had become 'the obsequious tool of the Czardom, and the consistent enemy of every form of freedom'.¹¹⁸

While these insights were drawn from accounts of revolutionary forms of modern democracy, Henson regarded them as salutary for other societies, including his own.¹¹⁹ He had long been interested in the consequences of democratic change for society, religion and the Church. His understanding in this respect was shaped by leading intellectual liberals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as Lord Acton, Alexis de Tocqueville and James Bryce, of whom he had been a close friend. He quoted from their work and engaged closely with it in his journal, on themes ranging from the importance of restraining the exercise of popular power to the corruption of the democratic ethos by class, and the erosion of belief in democratic societies.¹²⁰ Reading *Democracy in America* in 1935, he confessed to being drawn 'vastly' to Tocqueville, noting, for example, his emphasis on the worldly character of American religion, and distrust of 'state religions' as 'always, sooner or later, becom[ing] fatal to the Church'.¹²¹

Henson was by no means alone among his contemporaries in his misgivings about democracy; as Stuart Middleton has argued, British intellectuals

¹¹⁴ Henson to Barker, 20 Sept. 1929, HHH 109, 158–60 at p. 158; for Barker's letter, partially copied out, see Henson journal, entry for 19 Sept. 1929.

¹¹⁵ Henson journal, entry for 14 Jan. 1932.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. entry for 5 Sept. 1933. He had been reading the chapter on the Russian Revolution in Berdyaev's recent book *The end of our time*, London 1933.

¹¹⁷ See Philip Williamson, 'Britain and the Soviet war on religion: Labour Government, Christian protest and the Churches, 1929–31', this JOURNAL lxxvii (2026), forthcoming.

¹¹⁸ Henson journal, entry for 8 Mar. 1930.

¹¹⁹ Henson to Lord Sankey, 22 Nov. 1933, Sankey papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, ms Sankey 510, fos 122r–123v; Henson journal, entry for 11 June 1938.

¹²⁰ On Acton see Henson journal, entries for 23 June 1926, 24 Jan. 1927 and 12 May 1919; on Bryce see entries for 10 May 1921 and 10 Apr. 1928; on Bryce's sensitivity to context in assessing democracy see the magisterial study by H. S. Jones, *Liberal worlds: James Bryce and the democratic intellect*, Princeton, NJ 2026, esp. ch. vii.

¹²¹ Henson journal, entries for 26 June, 1 July 1935.

questioned its resilience, merits, and even meaning throughout the interwar period. However, most were progressives, concerned to mitigate what they believed were the adverse effects of democracy on 'modern' government.¹²² In contrast, much of Henson's concern was rooted in a keen sense of the fragility of the Christian Church in modern society under democratic rule. This went beyond mere marginalisation as the state assumed many of the Churches' social functions, a development on which he none the less commented acerbically;¹²³ in addition, as he wrote to Barker in the letter cited above:

I do not think that the actual circumstances of the Nation justify any longer the maintenance of the Establishment, nor that *the tendencies, social and political, now prevailing in the national life* will permit of its survival for any length of time. I think we are moving quickly towards an avowed, and even a violent conflict between the principles of Christianity on which the civilization which we call 'Christian' has been built, and the principles of the modern and rival civilization which may be called 'secular': and I would rather that the Church of England should confront that crisis without the embarrassments and limitations of an ancient, anomalous, and largely inoperative Establishment.¹²⁴

He became even more confirmed in this view as the events of the 1930s unfolded. Reading the Catholic historian Christopher Dawson's *Religion and the modern state* in 1938 prompted him to remark that the Liberalism of thinkers such as Barker concealed from them the 'impulse of the modern state' to 'dominate and control the whole life of society', an impulse driven by the secularisation of western culture.¹²⁵ This was despite Barker's recognition that the Prayer Book debacle was without precedent in the numerous conflicts between Church and State in the Middle Ages, the Church being one order within a wider, distinctively Christian society.¹²⁶ For Henson, however, modern society was characterised by the separation of the religious from the secular sphere; as well as the Prayer Book rejection, this was clear in the indifference of the British public to the plight of the Christian Churches in Germany, certainly before the arrest of Martin Niemöller in 1937 and his trial the following year.¹²⁷ In a letter to *The Times*

¹²² Stuart Middleton, 'The crisis of democracy in interwar Britain', *HJ* lxvi/1 (2023), 186–209.

¹²³ See, for example, Henson journal, entries for 28 Nov. 1928 and 30 Mar. 1936.

¹²⁴ Henson to Ernest Barker, 20 Sept. 1929, HHH 109, 159–60 (my italics); see also Henson to Hugh Cecil, 11 July 1931, Hatfield House archives, Hertfordshire, QUI 42, fo. 29r.

¹²⁵ Henson journal, entry for 27 Aug. 1938.
¹²⁶ Hensley Henson, 'Ought the Establishment to be maintained?', *Political Quarterly*, I/4 (1930), 457–604 at p. 507; Ernest Barker, *Church, State, and study*, London 1930, 65; Henson journal, entry for 28 Aug. 1930.

¹²⁷ Henson journal, entry for 9 Mar. 1938. For the impact in Britain of Niemöller's arrest see Owen Chadwick, 'The English bishops and the Nazis', in Friends of Lambeth Palace Library, *Annual Report* (1973), 9–28 at p. 23.

in June 1935, Henson warned against the ‘delusion’ that the persecution of Lutheran and Catholic pastors in Germany would stop short at the German Ocean; in fighting ‘our battle’ as well as their own, they were entitled to claim ‘something more than barren sympathy or blank unconcern’.¹²⁸

The letter was written to reinforce that of George Bell, bishop of Chichester, published in *The Times* the previous day. One of the few bishops actively engaged in opposing religious and racial persecution in Germany,¹²⁹ Bell had tabled a motion to this effect in the Church Assembly the previous year. His letter to *The Times* cast doubt on Hitler’s recent call for peace and friendship with Britain while Germany turned race into what he called a new religion, with grave consequences for the Churches there.¹³⁰ However, at no point did he share Henson’s fear that the Church in Britain would suffer a similar fate. In contrast, for Henson, the greater store it now seemed to set by the pursuit of political influence than safeguarding its independence was a major concern.

This is how he interpreted Lang’s statement on foreign policy in the aftermath of Hitler’s occupation of the demilitarised zone in March 1936 following a meeting at Lambeth with Anglican, Free Church and Church of Scotland leaders to discuss the international situation. ‘Christian socialists and the mixed multitudes of dissenters are vastly pleased at seeming to “call the tune” in national politics’, he remarked sarcastically, adding that they had “no use” for the Church as a spiritual society’.¹³¹ While Lang claimed to be acting merely as a medium for the gathering in a public letter addressed to the prime minister, it is clear from other correspondence that he was sympathetic to its conception of the need to ‘look forward rather than backward’ in dealing with Germany, that is, away from the Treaty of Versailles.¹³²

Henson delivered a blistering attack on Lang in the House of Lords in May 1938 in response to his support for the government’s effective acceptance of the Italian occupation of Abyssinia, reversing the archbishop’s own

¹²⁸ Henson, *The Times*, 4 June 1935, 17. For the persecution see Andrew Chandler, *British Christians and the Third Reich*, Cambridge 2022, 142–3.

¹²⁹ Chadwick, ‘The English bishops’, 10–12 at p. 11 for Henson’s distinctiveness within this group.

¹³⁰ George Bell, *The Times*, 3 June 1935, 15.

¹³¹ Henson journal, entry for 24 Mar. 1936. For a perceptive account of how the Church’s political role in Britain continued to develop in the twentieth century see Peter Itzen, ‘Recognising secularisation: the Church of England in its struggle for a political role (1960–90)’, in Todd Weir and Hugh McLeod (eds), *Defending the faith: global histories of apologetics and politics in the twentieth century*, London 2021, 272–91.

¹³² Cosmo Lang, ‘Need to rebuild peace system’, *The Times*, 24 Mar. 1936, 18. For fuller discussion see Andrew Chandler, ‘The judgement of an archbishop: Cosmo Gordon Lang and British foreign policy, 1928–39’, in Keith Robbins and John Fisher (eds), *Religion and diplomacy: religion and British foreign policy*, Dordrecht 2010, 183–223 at p. 203.

support for the League of Nations against Italy in 1935 at the same time.¹³³ He was in turn sharply criticised by the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax. While conceding the superiority of Halifax's speech, he reflected that the 'final verdict' on the debate turned on the keeping of Mussolini's promises.¹³⁴ More widely, however, Lang's agreement with the government's decision to 'abandon' Abyssinia – repeated in his speech to Convocation the following month – led Henson to question whether 'primacy [occupancy of the archbishopric of Canterbury] is congenial with moral independence'.¹³⁵ This would have further underlined the threat that establishment posed to the Church's spiritual integrity. Meanwhile, Bell – like Lang a supporter of appeasement later that year – was leading a renewed attempt to overcome the constraints of establishment in relation to the Prayer Book.

V

The roots of Bell's initiative lay in the main *interim* proposal of the report of the archbishops' commission on Church and State pending longer term changes to the Church's constitutional position in relation to the Crown. This related to the 'Declaration of Assent' at ordination and institution that since the Clerical Subscription Act of 1865 required clergy to adhere to the Book of Common Prayer of 1662, except as ordered by 'lawful authority'.¹³⁶ Neither the source nor the scope of this lawful authority had ever been defined, its main use confined to the arrangement of various forms of special worship outside of the Prayer Book for days of intercession, thanksgiving and other responses to national events.¹³⁷

Bell pressed for action on the recommendation of the archbishops' commission that the exercise of 'lawful authority' should be extended from

¹³³ For a more nuanced view of Lang's intervention see Tom Rodger, 'Bishops in parliament: the Lords Spiritual, c. 1903–1974', unpubl. PhD diss. Durham 2017, 175–6.

¹³⁴ Henson journal, entry for 22 May 1938.

¹³⁵ Ibid. entry for 2 June 1938. For the fullest account of Lang's changing positions in foreign policy debates in the Lords up to Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 see Chandler, 'The judgement of an archbishop'.

¹³⁶ The best source for understanding this term in relation to the Prayer Book is H. Vaisey, 'Lawful authority: a memorandum', *The canon of the Church of England: report of the archbishops' commission on canon law*, London 1947, appendix at pp. 215–23.

¹³⁷ For the historical development of the term 'lawful authority' in relation to prayers for special occasions see Philip Williamson, Stephen Taylor, Alasdair Raffe and Natalie Mears (eds), *National prayers: special worship since the Reformation*, III, *Worship for national and royal occasions in the United Kingdom, 1871–2016*, Woodbridge 2020, pp. lxii–lxxiii.

special forms of worship to wider departures from the Prayer Book.¹³⁸ As convenor of the joint committee of the convocation of Canterbury appointed in the wake of the commission's report and author of that committee's own report, as well as a memorandum that was placed before the Bishops' meeting in October 1937, he sought to build upon what he claimed was the ambiguity of the term. His starting point was the failure of the bishops' resolutions of July 1929 to stem the tide of ill-discipline in the Church; indeed, he pointed out, this had only increased due to the lack of a 'common policy' among the bishops.¹³⁹ Consequently, as he wrote in the report, it reaffirmed the commission's view that "lawful authority" (assuming its seat to be defined in a manner sufficient for practical purposes) should boldly claim the right not merely to "permit" "additional" services of an informal and *extra-liturgical* kind, but also to sanction customary variations in the text and rubrics of the liturgy itself.¹⁴⁰

Defining the term 'lawful authority' for this purpose could, he maintained, remove much of the uncertainty that had led to the breakdown of discipline in the Church. He echoed the recommendation of the archbishops' commission that a council comprising the two convocations should be established; in consultation with the Church Assembly, it would provide 'authoritative guidance' to bishops on the limits within which departures from ecclesiastical law might be tolerated. As such no recourse to parliament was required.¹⁴¹ He also endorsed the commission's proposal of a 'synodical declaration' as a 'transitional measure', envisaging a round table conference that would issue a schedule of deviations from, and additions to the 1662 Prayer Book based on existing practice. While he discounted the 'deliberate invention' of tradition for this purpose, the bishops rejected his proposal for a schedule.¹⁴² Nevertheless, they voted overwhelmingly in favour of a synodical declaration on the subject of lawful authority, together with 'consultations or conferences' to secure agreement on the proposed declaration and related matters.¹⁴³ The decision was applauded by the *Church Times* when the resolution was approved by the convocations in January 1938, suggesting wider support in the Church.¹⁴⁴

There was, however, one dissentient, who could only have been Henson. In a short speech at what was to prove his final bishops' meeting before retirement, he had characterised Bell's proposal as 'an unjustifiable attempt to revise an Act of Parliament and to tear up the Book of Common Prayer'. It was, he continued, 'not calculated to ease the conscience' and

¹³⁸ Jasper, *George Bell*, 184–90.

¹³⁹ BM 10, LPL, 20–21 Oct. 1937, 295.

¹⁴⁰ Convocation of Canterbury, Joint Committee, 'Church and state report: interim proposals' (1937), LPL, MS 3589, 10. ¹⁴¹ Ibid. p. 29; *Church and state report*, i. 87–8.

¹⁴² Convocation of Canterbury, Joint Committee, 'Church and state report: interim proposals', 10; BM 10, 20–21 Oct. 1937, 300. ¹⁴³ BM 10, 20–21 Oct. 1937, 300–1.

¹⁴⁴ 'Lawful authority', *Church Times*, 28 Jan. 1938, 88–9.

was, on the contrary, an ‘invitation to a defiance of the law’. If the bishops found themselves unable to accept the conditions of establishment, he urged, they should renounce the privileges they enjoyed as an established Church.¹⁴⁵

On this point, he agreed with Bertram Pollock – the bishop of Norwich and author of one of several minority reports issued by the joint committee – who had abstained in the vote out of concern for the integrity of the establishment. The two had exchanged notes at the meeting. In response to a letter from Pollock afterwards, Henson reiterated his view ‘that the proposal (under the cloak of an entirely fictional perplexity) to agree upon a definition of “ordered by lawful authority” which, in fact, merely substitutes another authority, not lawful, is “only one more illustration of the low cunning of panic-stricken Hierarchs”’.¹⁴⁶ His harsh words were particularly directed at Bell. He did not doubt that once such a definition was framed through a “Synodical Declaration”, the Prayer Book ‘could be revised or abolished without reference to Parliament’. If the nation was content that the anarchy of doctrine and discipline in the Church should continue, then there was no reason why the ‘paralysed Establishment’ of the present should not remain. But, he concluded, it would be more ‘honest and honourable’ if the bishops ‘made an end of it’.¹⁴⁷

Henson felt keenly his isolation in this matter: he wrote in his journal after the meeting that ‘I never felt more remote from the policy and temper of the bishops.’¹⁴⁸ Yet far from being out on a limb in the late 1930s, he remained a staunch defender of the Catholic tradition of the Church of England – with all its ‘doctrinal incoherence’. A wise tolerance would better secure this tradition than coercion and control exercised by ‘official authority’.¹⁴⁹ The distinction implicitly marked the difference between disestablishment and establishment, whatever the success of the Church in manipulating the latter for its own ends. He had expressed much the same concern for the constraints of Subscription and the distrust of the clergy within an establishment context in his second centenary lecture for the Oxford Movement. On re-reading it nine years later, he remarked, ‘So I spoke in 1933; so I think in 1942.’¹⁵⁰

This article has explored the range of beliefs and concerns that informed Henson’s advocacy of disestablishment in the aftermath of the Prayer Book

¹⁴⁵ BM, 10, 20–21 Oct. 1937, 296.

¹⁴⁶ Henson to Pollock, 6 Feb. 1938, LPL, MS 2888, fos 32–5 at fos 32v–33r; Henson’s emphasis; ‘...’ probably a quotation from the note he passed to Pollock across the table.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. fo. 34r.

¹⁴⁸ Henson journal, entry for 21 Oct. 1937.

¹⁴⁹ Hensley Henson, *The Church of England*, Cambridge 1939, 108–10, cited in Neil Patterson, *Ecclesiastical law, clergy and laity: a history of legal discipline and the Anglican Church*, London 2019, 110.

¹⁵⁰ Henson journal, entry for 8 Jan. 1942.

rejection, and the opposition he encountered in both religious and lay circles. It has emphasised that his response as it developed after the immediate crisis had passed reflected much troubled reflection on world and domestic events, deepened especially by his fear of the combined forces of secularism and modern democracy. However, central to the determined stance he took on this issue was a conviction that – as he wrote with some bitterness in 1944 in an article commissioned by the editor of the *Congregational Quarterly* to mark the centenary of the Liberation Society which sought the separation of Church and State – ‘the Erastian aggression has been acquiesced in’.¹⁵¹ Almost two decades later, the Church’s ‘complaisance’ appeared sealed by the readiness of its two most recent primates ‘to accept from the State the unprecedented compliment of a peerage’.¹⁵² The raising of Lang to the peerage on his retirement in 1942 when the breach between Church and State brought about by the revised Prayer Book remained ‘unbridged’ was particularly vexing.¹⁵³ Against the initial mood of shock, disbelief and defiance in the Church in response to parliament’s action in 1927–8, he commented: ‘It is difficult to understand, impossible to respect, so amazing a revolution of opinion in so short a time.’¹⁵⁴ For once, it seems, consistency was on his side.

¹⁵¹ Hensley Henson, ‘Disestablishment’, *Congregational Quarterly* xxii/2 (1944), 113–22 at p. 120; for the letter from the editor see n. 56 above.

¹⁵² Henson, ‘Disestablishment’, *Congregational Quarterly*, 120; on the peerages see also Henson to Bell, 6 May 1942, LPL, MS Bell 209, 261r–262v at fo. 262r.

¹⁵³ Henson to W. R. Matthews (dean of St Paul’s Cathedral), 22 July 1942, in Henson journal, entry for 22 July 1942; and see entry for 19 Mar. 1942, and even more insistently on the issue of establishment, entry for 22 Mar. 1942. For his letter to Lang, offering him his congratulations but expressing regret at the appointment in compromising the independence of the Church see entry for 5 Apr. 1942; and see Lang to Henson, 7 Apr. 1942, and Henson’s response, *ibid.* entry for 9 Apr. 1942.

¹⁵⁴ Henson, ‘Disestablishment’, *Congregational Quarterly*, 120.