

Disestablishment

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The|Church of Ireland

1. What was 'Establishment'?

In the aftermath of the 16th century Reformation and the ensuing religious wars it was widely recognised that rulers would decide what the religion of their subjects should be. This principle, known as *cuius regio, eius religio*, meant that the ruler's religion was the state religion, 'established by law', to which all were required to conform if they were to be eligible for public office. Those who refused to conform (non-conformists) were barred from participation in political life and from many other social and economic benefits.

2. How did the Church of Ireland become Anglican and Established?

Ireland was a realm of the Protestant English monarchs so it was they who determined that the Church of Ireland should be established and follow the same doctrine and practice as the post-Reformation Church of England. However at no time did this win the allegiance of a majority of the population. The bishops were appointed by the Crown. They sat in the Irish Parliament and so participated in the governing of the country. The laws of the Established Church were the laws of the land and imposed by the courts. In the 17th and early 18th centuries Roman Catholics and Irish non-conformists (most of whom were Presbyterian, generally called Dissenters) were subjected to stringent Penal Laws that barred them from political life at all levels, from promotion in the military and from full membership of the trade guilds, and therefore from rising in their crafts. Nonetheless, Catholics and Dissenters were compelled to pay tithes, a tax to support the ministry of the Established Church, while at the same time having to provide for their own clergy. By the later 19th century the most oppressive of the Penal Laws had been repealed.

3. Why did Disestablishment happen when it did?

Following Catholic Emancipation it became clear that henceforth there would be a substantial number of Catholic MPs representing Ireland at Westminster, which with the Act of Union in 1801 had become the

sole parliament for Britain and Ireland. Furthermore, W.E. Gladstone, the Liberal leader who was Prime Minister for most of the latter part of the 19th century, set himself the task of ‘pacifying’ Ireland. The suppression of the Fenian rising of 1867 had by no means put an end to nationalist feeling in the country, and there was considerable rural agitation for reforms that would improve the lot of tenant farmers who in very many cases held their land under unfavourable terms from absentee landlords. Gladstone chose to tackle first the issue posed by the Church of Ireland’s position as the Established Church. The argument in favour of Disestablishment was strengthened by the census returns in 1861, which confirmed what had long been widely acknowledged, that the Established Church comprised only 12% of the population and did not constitute a majority in a single Irish county. In 1868, as leader of the Liberal opposition in the House of Commons, Gladstone put forward proposals for the Disestablishment of the Irish Church which were carried by the House. The Conservative government, which deplored the idea, some politicians fearing that the Church of England would next be attacked, called a general election which Gladstone won.

4. What happened at Disestablishment?

The Church of Ireland was disestablished by the Irish Church Act of 1869 which was largely Gladstone’s own handiwork. No longer would it be the State Church, no longer would the monarch appoint the bishops, who no longer would have seats in Parliament. Furthermore, not only was the Church disestablished, it was also disendowed of much of its property and other assets. Over the years a number of parliamentary enquiries had drawn attention to the inequitable manner in which the Church’s considerable annual income (in to-day’s money about €90million) was distributed between those serving in its ministry. To obtain a reasonable income, clergy often held several cures, a practice known as ‘pluralism.’ Sometimes these parishes were situated so far apart that they were served by poorly paid curates with little security, the rector being to all intents and purposes an absentee. At the same time many of those in high office, bishops in particular, drew huge incomes, mainly from church estates.

When the Irish Church Act became law on 26 July 1869 the property and other assets, of the Established Church were transferred to Ecclesiastical Commissioners. However, a trustee body for the Church, the 'Representative Body of the Church of Ireland' (RCB) was incorporated by Royal Charter in 1870, and in due course the Commissioners handed over all ecclesiastical buildings to the RCB.

The Irish Church Act guaranteed the incomes of all those then in receipt of emoluments from the Church: clergy, diocesan schoolmasters, sextons and parish clerks. The funds provided were only sufficient to pay those then in office. However, under the Act it was possible for the clergy to 'commute,' that is, receive a lump sum based on their life expectancy. A large majority opted to do so and, in an extraordinary act of faith and generosity had their 'commuted' sums (totalling £7,500,000) transferred to the RCB. This provided a large capital endowment that secured the stipends of their successors.

5. How did the Church prepare for self-government?

While the Irish Church Act came into force on 26 July 1869, the Disestablishment of the Church only took effect on 1 January 1871, thus giving it time to make the necessary arrangements for its future administration.

Gladstone had foreseen that the leaders of the newly disestablished Church, which had no central administration, would have a major task ahead as they prepared for self-government. The Act cleared the way for the archbishops, bishops, clergy and laity to 'elect representatives to assemblies, synods, or conventions . . . for the purpose of making rules for the well-being and ordering of the said Church'. A Constitution for the Church of Ireland was drawn up by representatives of bishops, clergy and laity which laid down a system of synodical government that included significant lay representation at both General Synod and Diocesan Synod levels.

A priority for the Church of Ireland was the revision of the Book of Common Prayer and here again there was considerable lay participation. Gladstone had realised that the disestablished Church would depend heavily on lay support, both financial and administrative, and the laity accepted the challenge and, like the clergy, showed their confidence by their ready and generous response to an appeal from the RCB for support for a Sustentation Fund for the re-endowment of the clergy (contributing on average over £2,000,000 annually in the years from 1870).

6. Why is it worth remembering all of this today?

It is worth recalling the events around 1871 not only on account of their inherent interest and the fascinating personalities involved, but also because without understanding them we cannot adequately grasp how the Church of Ireland understands itself to this day. To give but a few examples:

- The checks and balances within the governance of the church, and the rightly powerful role of the laity
- The composition, procedures and authority of the General Synod
- The trustee role of the RCB
- The continuous process of liturgical revision
- The largely successful transition of the Church of Ireland from being a privileged minority to being a confident and influential minority, striving to look beyond itself and to offer its Christian voice and service in the context of the common good.



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