

Bonner Querschnitte

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On the Coronation of Charles III as King of Great Britain and Head of the Church of England

(Bonn, 09.05.2023) The author of this article, Thomas Paul Schirrmacher, is General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, initiated by Anglicans in 1846, and Archbishop of the Anglican “Communio Messianica”. Yet the following commentary is his private opinion, not an official statement by any of those bodies.

1. The ceremony for the coronation of Charles III as King of Great Britain and Head of the Church of England is an ancient liturgy, shaped by the Old Testament idea of the investiture of King David and the kings of Israel, and therefore full of biblical language. It is historically fascinating, but theologically it conveys a rather medieval or pre-Reformation view of the king's role as the divinely instituted head of the state and of the Anglican Church. This view has, in reality, of course been outdated since the mid-19th century, as Britain has been a parliamentary monarchy granting complete religious freedom. Charles III has made some changes around the coronation ceremony, but none of them affect the core of the theology underpinned by biblical texts. The desire of some to reduce the full-bodied, somewhat over-the-top language, such as by following the coronation ceremonies of other European monarchies, will hardly be met by Charles III's changes.

2. Queen Elizabeth II's personal, strong, and convincing piety has to some extent over-shadowed the profound change in the Anglican Church since her coronation in 1953. At that time, the state religion was also the majority religion and, for England, the every-day religion. Since then, the trend of people turning away from the Anglican Church has been even faster than that from the member churches of the EKD in Germany. Compared to the 30 % in the year 2000 who counted themselves as affiliated with the Anglican Church, the percentage has been cut in half. Since 2016, more Catholics in the UK are going to church on Sundays than Anglicans. Even at Christmas, only 2.5 million Anglicans in the UK go to church, and that number is more than three times as many as on a normal Sunday.

So, in the wake of the death of Queen Elizabeth II, a discussion about the fact that the Anglican faith is now a minority in Great Britain, and also about how the church can become missionary and winning people to faith again, should be the top priority. Charles III, however, has not yet indicated that he is concerned about these developments. Neither has he indicated that the political formulation of the king's role as head of the Church of England should be adapted to the reality of minority status.

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Text & Technology:

Titus Vogt (ViSdP)
Vorderer Kamp 52a, 25479 Ellerau
Tel.: +49 / 4106 / 80 48 06
Fax: +49 / 4106 / 80 48 07
E-Mail: Titus.Vogt@bucer.de



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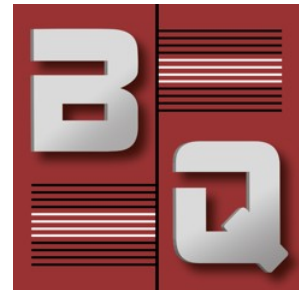
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3. The coronation comes at a time when the Anglican Church as a worldwide communion has just split, with more than three-quarters of the world's bishops declaring that the Archbishop of Canterbury is no longer their honorary head, thereby also renouncing the English king. It is certainly no coincidence that this happened only after the death of Queen Elizabeth II.

The reasons, however, are by no means only theological, even if sexual ethics was the prism that brought many other questions into focus. Another key factor is that a global church with a focus on the Global South, whose honorary head is chosen by a small circle of Englishmen and by the British Parliament and who must be English, does not have any structural way to globalize the leadership structure. In no country on earth, moreover, can the Anglican Church still do anything about the fact that, in secular England of all places, state and church remain symbolically merged.

Interestingly, Charles III has so far made no discernible effort to deal with this problem. There is no indication that he has ever perceived the Anglican Church as a global church. He is also not perceived as Anglican or Protestant in his personal piety by Anglicans of the Global South, unlike his mother. It is hard to imagine that Charles III—unlike the Archbishop of Canterbury, himself inclined toward evangelical faith—could even attempt to understand the bishops of the Global South, let alone reach out to them and seek a compromise.

4. Charles III wants to protect all religions. But he nowhere separates this self-evident task of a head of state from his task as head of the Protestant Church of England. His mother sympathetically acknowledged the growing religious freedom in Great Britain. But she did not confuse this with her task as Defender of the Faith. In taking office, Charles III already swore to “uphold the faith” not only of the Anglicans but also of the Protestants in Scotland.

5. If one were to infer Charles III's preference for a denomination from his activities, travels, and utterances over decades, one would not think of him as a Protestant, but rather as a Catholic. Only since he took office has he made a direct, if rather general, commitment to the Anglican faith. In 1985, when Pope John Paul II visited him, his mother had to forbid him to attend Catholic Mass; he did not realize how delicate the matter was.

Whereas his mother was more of the traditional evangelical wing (called “low church”) of the Church of England and had a very personal relationship with the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, Charles III is more of the Anglo-Catholic wing (known as “high church”). In 2019, he traveled to the Vatican to attend the Catholic Church's canonization of St. John Henry Newman, who had converted from the Anglican to the Catholic faith; Charles III referred to Newman as a role model.

Queen Elizabeth, especially in her Christmas addresses, verbalized her very personal faith in Jesus. Indeed, she had a special relationship with outstanding representatives of the evangelical faith, such as with John Stott for decades as court preacher, or with Billy Graham as one of her most frequent foreign guests. She also was patron of the

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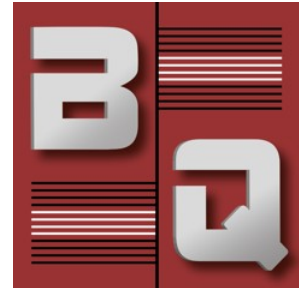
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E-Mail: Titus.Vogt@bucer.de



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Scripture Union and attended their 150th anniversary in 2017. No similar public personal confession has yet been made by Charles III.

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