Book Review


I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and warmly recommend it to anyone interested in religion, state and society relations. I learned a great deal of English, yes English not British, history through the lens of the interplay of church, monarch and wider context. Kaye has actually, for me, resurrected the term ‘Christendom’ from one that usually makes me cringe due to its association with Christian Dominionism. In his treatment Christendom becomes a very useful analytic tool for examining the intricacies and specificities of relationships among church, nation state, and the wider geo-political context. This usefulness becomes clear in this case through Kaye’s examination of key events shaping these relationships in English history.

Kaye starts with Bede who envisions a Christendom which in his time is barely a fledgling, rather more a hope and dream than reality. However, when that dream is read as foundational history later on, it helps to bring into being and legitimate the peculiar forms of relationship between church, realm and context. The history is told with economy and clarity and in ways that give honour to the range of options at play in decisive moments of the history of English Christendom.

The course of English Christendom is at each stage distinctive from forms taken in other parts of the Western Church. This point is made clearly and convincingly without being forced or needing much work to make it evident. This is testimony to the scholarship and the quality of the prose in this book. Kaye analyses clearly, and writes a fluid story that is grounded in evidence but not belaboured. The balance achieved between evidence and narrative is laudatory.

The focus in the book is on the complex web of contested, that is, lively relationships between the English people, their loyalty to the kingdom of God as present, or not, in the church and their fealty to their monarch. In this they are certainly not like Constantinian forms of Christendom, nor Carolingian, or other forms. In telling this history, Kaye makes real and
more nuanced the critical moments associated with Lanfranc, Anselm, Becket and of course Henry VIII.

Kaye is so bold as to take his history to the near present in examining two cases in the demise of English Christendom. The first is the collapse of the Church of England in the American Revolution to give rise to the Protestant Episcopal Church of the USA. This happened suddenly and tested English notions of the relationships between church and state with the emergence of a truly secular state that encouraged diversity in religious practice. The second is the case of Australia, where the facts of religious diversity from the start of European invasion made it impossible for the Church of England to become established in any meaningful way. Kaye does not explore the implications of the fact that at the same time in England the entitlements of the Church of England were being radically reduced by eliminating religious tests for office and university admission, amongst other things.

While the Church of England is still established in England, the degree that this is meaningful and the forms it is taking need to be explored using the framework Kaye establishes. English Christendom, to the extent it exists, continues to be different from many other Christendoms and from most societies that are characterised by religious diversity. The challenges posed by religious diversity to the reality and concept of Christendom have long plagued the Church of England. These are now further complicated by the internal diversity of the views of subgroups within the Church which are now being radically intensified by the Church being situated in a highly diverse socio-political context that the monarch affirms but that many in the Church do not.

Gary Bouma
Monash University