

House of Commons Short Debate the issue of succession and religion

22 Jan 2013 : Column 267

Sir Gerald Howarth: As an Anglican on the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England, the last thing I seek to do is to offend those in the Catholic Church, but I should tell my hon. Friend that he might at least allow us to take communion when we attend his Church. When he attends ours, he is allowed to take communion with us. Perhaps that little bit of discrimination could be ended by the Catholic Church.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I am sure the day will come when such authority is conferred by the Vatican upon my hon. Friend, such is the power of his language.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith) made the point that the two Churches are coming together, and that Christian Churches generally are doing so. That is imperative, particularly given the rise of Islamic fundamentalism not just around the world, but in our country. The issue of succession and religion—which is what clause 2 is all about—is very significant. I welcome the fact that the Minister has put it on the record that section 3 of the Act of Settlement 1700 will remain firmly part of the law of this land. While an heir to the throne may be entitled to marry a Catholic, no one who is not in communion with the Church of England shall be sovereign of this country...If the heir to the throne were to marry a Catholic, the Catholic ordinances had not changed and the children were to be brought up in the Catholic faith—the point made by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed—those children would face a decision on whether to be loyal to the Catholic faith or to renounce it, and subscribe to being in communion with the Church of England. Therefore, clause 2 does have consequences, and this is not a question of semantics between the Church of England and the Catholic Church.

22 Jan 2013 : Column 268

It is important to all Christians that the sovereign remains, as every coin of the realm testifies, the defender of the faith. I wonder how many children in our schools are taught that. If we put our hands in our pockets and look at our coins, we see the two letters “FD”, which stand for fidei defensor: defender of the faith, the Christian faith. All of us,

whether we are Catholic, Congregationalist, Church of England, Baptist or whatever, have a huge interest in ensuring that the Christian faith remains at the heart of this nation, for it is that faith that has formed this nation. It is that faith that has given birth to the enthusiasm for liberty that has attracted so many people of other faiths to come to this country. While the hon. Member for Foyle may find this difficult—I salute the spirit with which he promoted his case—I do not believe it right to be anything other than uncompromising. This House—this Parliament—is governed by the values of the Christian Church and faith. It is therefore imperative that we are crystal clear... I think the latest figures show that 60% of the country are adherents to the Christian faith. I do not know if I have a romantic view or not, but what I do know is that this nation, which has become a magnet for people from all over the world, has been forged and fashioned by the Christian faith... I will conclude on a positive note. I again thank the Minister for putting it profoundly on the record that section 3 of the Act of Settlement 1700 remains firmly and centrally part of the law of this land.

Chris Bryant: ... I want clause 2 to remain in the Bill, but it points to the issue—to which hon. Members have referred—of the bringing up of children. Baptism was referred to earlier. At what point does one decide that somebody has been in communion with or reconciled to the See or the Church of Rome? Somebody suggested the point of baptism, but I do not think that that is categorical. As I tried to suggest earlier, baptism is not Catholic or Anglican—it is Christian... That is the problem with the clause. I want the clause to go through, but I think it will provide us with long-term problems because it will change the point at which we consider someone to have become reconciled to, or to be in communion with, the Catholic Church. A Catholic can be in communion with the Church of England, as the hon. Member for Aldershot said, because we accept anyone who is in good standing with their own Church into communion with the Church of England. The same does not apply the other way round, however. This is where the issue of bringing up children comes in.