



God Saves the Queen

by Jonathan Aitken

THE QUEEN—GOD BLESS HER! These traditional words of what the English call the loyal toast will reverberate in every corner of the United Kingdom and in many parts of the Queen's worldwide Commonwealth as her Diamond Jubilee is celebrated next month. The festivities will be spectacular in terms of pageantry and ceremony. But what will matter most to the Monarch herself will be the spiritual dimension at the heart of the celebrations.

Americans find it difficult to get their heads round the notion of Kingship. The idea that the British head of state should also be the head of the

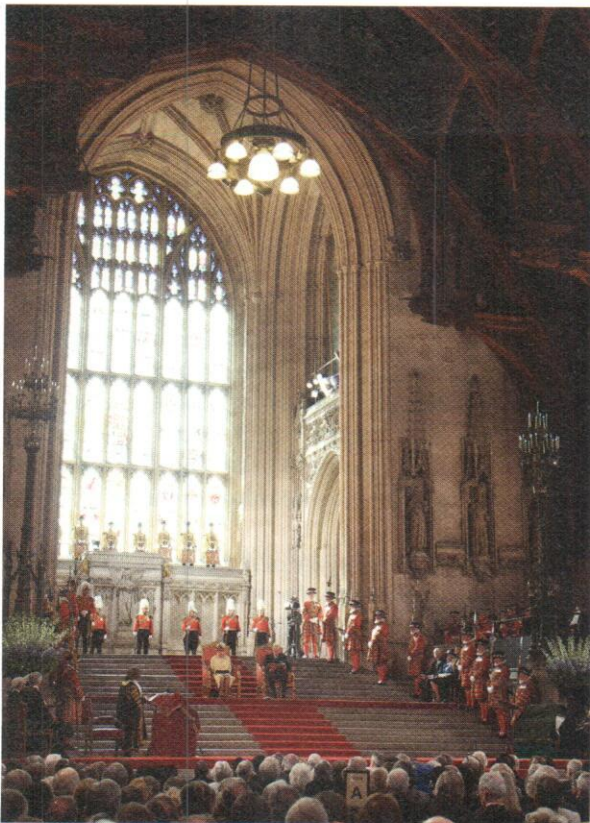
national church and "Defender of the Faith" (one of the Queen's official titles) is a step too far for most citizens of the Great Republic. Yet to understand the concept of monarchy, it is important to appreciate the spirituality at the core of the institution.

Your columnist was nine years old when Princess Elizabeth succeeded to the throne in 1952. That event, and her crowning in Westminster Abbey later that year, enthralled my childhood imagination. The most mysterious and also the most solemn moment of the coronation service came when the Queen was concealed from public view by a silken canopy. Beneath its folds the presiding Archbishop of Canterbury anointed her with holy oil. This part of the ceremony has its origins in the anointing of King Solomon as described in the Old Testament.

The link between the Kings and Queens of England and the Kings of Ancient Israel goes further. The Old Testament describes how the Israelite monarchs led their people in prayer and swore to keep a sacred covenant with God. Even in the 21st century, Queen Elizabeth II fulfills similar historic functions. She leads her people with great dignity in all the important national services of commemoration, celebration, thanksgiving, or public grief. Her spiritual commitment to these acts of worship is real. The Queen is known to be dedicated to her religion. She takes her role as Supreme Governor of the Church of England with the utmost seriousness.

It was significant that her first major public engagement marking the 60th anniversary of her accession took place at a gathering of faith leaders in Lambeth Palace. There she spoke of Christianity being woven into the fabric of society and proclaimed that the Church of England, as the established Church, has the duty to protect all faiths.

For the Queen, the climax of the Diamond Jubilee will be the service of Thanksgiving on June 5 at



St. Paul's Cathedral. To a worldwide audience of well over a billion viewers, she will repeat the oath she swore at her coronation. This is a covenant binding God, people, and Monarch together in unity. For a country that has never had a written constitution, this royal oath is the nearest definition of the covenanted values of our nation.

There is a mysticism and a romanticism about monarchy that lifts the institution to heights that soar far above the day-to-day politics of 10 Downing Street or the Oval Office.

Some of this mysticism dates back to the age when Kingship was venerated as a sacred office. Since the legendary era of King Arthur and his knights of the round table, there has been a belief that monarchs rule through the grace of God. This has endured right through the Tudor, Stuart, and even Windsor dynasties. When the present Queen came to the throne, a poll suggested that one-third of her subjects believed her to have been chosen by God. The figure may be an anachronism, but the concept has not disappeared. The reason why Brits bow or curtsy to the Monarch is not just social deference, but also homage to her spiritual antecedents. Even our coins are stamped with the initials DG and FD—*Deo Gratias* and *Fidei Defensor*.

INEVITABLY, many will say that this is all myth and mumbo jumbo, or at best a rekindling of the folk religion that was once central but is now peripheral to a modern society. Yet even to agnostics who see no connection between God and Queen, it is generally conceded that monarchy has its virtues of constitutionality, practicality, and continuity.

Most constitutions have what Walter Bagehot called their dignified and efficient sides. The role of head of state does not always harmonize easily with the functions of head of government. Some U.S. Presidents manage to combine the two sides of the job with grace—Ronald Reagan was a stellar example of this. But those who climb to the top of the greasy pole, whether by the grinding treadmill of the primaries or by the wheeler-dealings of old-style Tammany Hall machinations, are usually just politicians, period. The majority of them don't do dignity, let alone pageantry, all that well. They are also ephemeral figures serving for short periods. The length of a monarch's reign is decided by a power higher than the electorate's.

Through a mixture of history and religion, the British have found an attractive formula for dividing the power and the pageantry. The Queen has none of

the former and all of the latter. She costs her subjects approximately \$1 per head per year, which seems a good bargain considering everything she brings to the table, from constitutional stability to tourist revenue.

Her continuity of service is important too. The Queen is now on her 12th prime minister, from Winston Churchill to David Cameron. She never seems

Retirement for the Queen is not an option. British monarchs have no divine rights in the 21st century, but they still have to abide by the divine rules that demand a lifetime of obedience and service to God's calling.

to put a foot wrong in her endless round of public duties. After 60 years of them, she is universally respected and often revered.

Retirement for the Queen is not an option. This is where spirituality re-enters the equation. British monarchs have no divine rights in the 21st century, but they still have to abide by the divine rules that demand a lifetime of obedience and service to God's calling. The Queen will die on the throne as a reigning sovereign. She will not contemplate abdication, which was a horror story for the Windsors when it happened in 1936 and is never likely to be repeated.

So the Diamond Jubilee that is about to be celebrated will, by the very longevity of the Queen's reign, highlight the sacredness of monarchy. The fact that the institution now has no temporal power emphasizes its invisible connection to spiritual power. This is the power to lead, unite, and inspire a nation by Godly example. The Queen's impeccable character and her six decades of service are reminders of the religious idealism that still surrounds the Crown. When the British sing their national anthem, "God Save the Queen," they will do so this summer with a special and spiritual fervor of thanksgiving to the God who has done just that for the past 60 years. ❧

Jonathan Aitken, *The American Spectator's High Spirits Columnist*, is most recently author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace (Crossway Books)*. His biographies include *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (Doubleday)* and *Nixon: A Life, now available in a paperback edition (Regnery)*.