This report is intended to be a resource to help Fundamentalist Christians in studying and evaluating religious leaders and movements. It draws primarily upon materials housed in the Fundamentalism File in the J. S. Mack Library on the campus of Bob Jones University.

Although every effort has been made to provide an impartial study of the topic, this work will naturally reflect the interpretations and viewpoint of its author. This report should not be taken as representing an official statement of the position of Bob Jones University. The University’s theological position is well expressed by its creed.

The staff of the Fundamentalism File would welcome any questions or comments concerning the content of this report.
National Protestant Churches of Europe

To Americans, with the lengthy history of the separation of church and state in the United States, the idea of an established state church is rather foreign (both literally and figuratively). Yet the state church has been the norm of church-state relations in Western history and continues to be a significant pattern even today. One need look no further than Europe to see this model in practice.

Although the Roman Catholic Church is often the officially recognized church in many lands, it is the Protestant state churches that exemplify the state-church pattern best. Rather than “state churches,” however, this study will refer to “national churches.” Not all European countries still have an established church, as will be seen. Yet although not established by law, many of the national Protestant churches have a long history and strong cultural influence that puts them in a dominant position (insofar as churches can be dominant in secularized Europe) and renders them almost “established” or “state” churches in effect, if not always by statute.

The following pages describe briefly the history and nature of the historic national Protestant churches of Europe. Even in the twenty-first century, these national Protestant churches continue to play a significant role in European life and culture even as their religious impact diminishes.

Church of England

Origins of the Church of England

Of the state Protestant churches of Europe, the most familiar to Americans is likely the Church of England, or Anglican Church. (The Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. is the American branch of the Anglican Church.) The standard gibe is that the Church of England began because the king wanted a divorce. There is some truth to this observation. King Henry VIII (reigned 1509-47) desired a male heir to perpetuate the Tudor dynasty. When his queen, Catherine of Aragon, proved unable to bear him a male heir, Henry wanted to divorce her (or, technically, to receive an annulment). The pope, for various political and theological reasons, could not readily grant the king’s request. Therefore, Henry broke with the pope, set up a separate Church of England (with himself as “supreme head”), and was granted his divorce by a compliant clergy.

If this were all there was to the story of the Anglican Church, it would indeed be a rather sordid tale. But there is far more to the story. Henry’s break with Rome took place during the Protestant Reformation. Henry himself had little use for Protestantism. Before his break, he had written a book attacking the theology of German reformer Martin Luther, a work for which the pope rewarded him with the title “Defender of the Faith” (a title still held by English monarchs—although that “faith” has changed). Nonetheless, many of the clergy under Henry, such as Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer, were strongly Protestant in sympathy and pushed for Protestant reforms.

Their task became easier under Henry’s successor Edward VI (1547-53). Since he was but a boy of nine when he came to the throne, the actual rulers were regents governing in his name. These regents allowed the Protestant reform to proceed steadily. Unfortunately, Edward died at the age of sixteen, and his older sister Mary, a staunch Roman Catholic, succeeded him on the throne. Mary (1553-59) was determined to bring England back to Rome, by whatever means necessary. She has gone down in history as “Bloody Mary” because some three hundred Protestant leaders, including Thomas Cranmer, were burned as heretics under her reign.

Elizabethan Settlement and the Puritans

After a mercifully brief reign, Mary was succeeded by her sister Elizabeth (1559-1603). The new queen was a Protestant, as were most of the English people by this time. But she also desired to broaden the reach of the Church of England to include as many people as possible. In what has been called the “Elizabethan settlement,” the Church of England stretched its doctrinal standards, worship practices, and manner of government to please as many people as possible. The queen desired a comprehensive church, that
is, a church that would “comprehend” (or include) as large a portion of the English populace as possible. Only the devoted Catholics and the strongest Protestants objected to the nature of the Elizabethan church.

The breadth of the Church of England, as well as its strengths and weaknesses, is evident in the church’s official confession of faith, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion. Based on a creed originally issued under Edward VI, the Thirty-nine Articles are essentially Protestant and reflect the heritage of the Protestant Reformation. At the same time, the Articles’ apparent teaching of baptismal regeneration and authorization of bishops, among other doctrines, seem to hark back to older Catholic influence.

Elizabeth’s compromise was not universally accepted. A number of strong Protestants hoped to continue the reform of the church. Because they wanted to “purify” the Church of England from Roman Catholic ceremonies and practices, these reformers were called “Puritans.” Throughout the first half of the 1600s, the Puritans sought to reform the Church of England more thoroughly. They even joined Parliament’s side in the English Civil War (1642-49) against the king. As a result, a Puritan commander, Oliver Cromwell, became ruler of England as “Protector” (1652-58) after the king was overthrown and executed.

After Cromwell’s death, England restored the monarchy, and the Church of England forced the strongest Puritans from its ranks. In 1689 Parliament granted religious toleration to non-Anglicans, meaning that (with some restrictions) those who did not wish to conform to the state church could practice their faith. Still, the Church of England was far and away the most important religious body in England.

**Evangelical Awakening**

In the 1700s the Evangelical Awakening profoundly affected the Church of England. Under the ministry of leaders such as John Wesley and George Whitefield (both of whom were Anglican ministers), revival touched large numbers of the nominal Christians in England. Eventually, many of these Christians left the Church of England. The most important body were the Wesleyan Methodists, who became a separate denomination upon Wesley’s death in 1791. Many evangelicals remained in the Anglican Church, however. John Newton (1725-1807), author of the universally beloved hymn “Amazing Grace,” was one of the major leaders of the evangelical faction.

**“Wings” of the Church of England**

The presence of these evangelicals plays a large role in identifying three parties or “wings” in the Church of England in the 1800s, parties that still influence the direction of the contemporary church. The latitudinarian wing held to the ideal of Queen Elizabeth of a comprehensive church. They wanted the Church of England to be as broad as possible, to take in as many shades of opinion as it could. Many of this “broad church” party embraced the liberal theology growing in Europe at the time. Others were more orthodox in doctrine, but they nonetheless believed in an inclusive church.

The second wing was the Anglo-Catholic party. As their name suggests, the Anglo-Catholics stressed the similarities between the Church of England and the Catholic Church. They insisted that the English pattern of worship, such as rule by bishops and wearing church vestments, was divinely ordained and necessary for the existence of a true church. Pushing the Anglo-Catholic position was the Oxford movement, an alliance of theologians, ministers, and laymen who sought a return to Catholic doctrine and practice.

The third wing, the evangelical party, found its heritage in the theology of the Puritans and the Evangelical Awakening of the 1700s. The evangelicals were strong Protestants who emphasized the authority of Scripture and the necessity of conversion and holy living. One of their most famous leaders was J. C. Ryle (1816-1900), bishop of Liverpool. Anglican evangelicals often had their closest fellowship not with Anglicans of the other wings but with conservative evangelicals of the non-Anglican free churches of Britain.

**The Contemporary Church of England**

The twentieth century saw the beginning of a precipitous decline in the fortunes of the Church of England. After World War I, church attendance began to fall in England, as it did in most European countries. Those who were only nominal Christians began to abandon the custom of attending church. Liberalism also become more
dominant in the church, especially among the leadership. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, annual attendance had fallen to under a million per year, and for the first time in history fewer than half of all Englishmen had been baptized into the church.

The Church of England has an episcopal church government, that is, it is ruled by bishops. There are two provinces ruled by archbishops, the provinces of York and Canterbury. Although these two officials are theoretically equal, the Archbishop of Canterbury is the honorary head not just of the Church of England but also of the whole Anglican Communion worldwide, including the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A.

The monarch of England, upon the “advice” of the prime minister, appoints the archbishops and bishops. In reality, the advice of the prime minister is determinative in these matters. The bishops are in turn responsible for appointing lower clergy and governing the church. Reformers have periodically called for the disestablishment of the Church of England, but old ways die hard. Although increasingly fewer Britons swear much allegiance to the Anglican Church, they seem to regard it—as the monarchy—as an institution worth preserving for its historic place in English life.

Reformed Churches

Many of the churches in Europe are Reformed in doctrine and practice. In other words, they trace their origin back to the theology and teachings of the reformers Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and John Calvin (1509-64). (Some label these churches “Calvinistic,” but “Reformed” is the more widely accepted term.) Several national churches in Europe are Reformed in heritage, including the Church of Scotland, the Netherlands Reformed Church, the Swiss Reformed churches, and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

Church of Scotland

Although Reformed Christians look to Calvin as their fountainhead, the honor of founding the Church of Scotland belongs to John Knox (1505-72). A fiery preacher “who neither flattered nor feared any flesh,” Knox spent time living in Geneva, Switzerland, when Calvin was that city’s spiritual leader. He returned to Scotland determined to reform the nation along the lines of what he saw in Geneva. Despite the opposition of the Roman Catholic Mary Queen of Scots, Knox succeeded in laying the foundation for a Reformed Protestant state church in Scotland.

If Knox was the pioneer who first cleared the way, then his successor Andrew Melville (1545-1622) was the settler who built in the clearing. It was Melville who helped form the Church of Scotland as a presbyterian-style church. An episcopal church, like the Church of England, is ruled by bishops who exercise authority from above. A presbyterian church has levels of church government in which much of the authority derives “from below.” Each church is ruled by a group of elders, called a session. Several churches together form a presbytery, and several presbyteries form a synod. The highest judicial and legislative body in the church is the General Assembly, which meets annually, its members chosen by the presbyteries.

During the 1600s, the Scots sided with Parliament against the king in the English Civil War. One result of this alliance was a joint venture known as the Westminster Assembly (1643-52). The assembly was supposed to draw up a pattern for reforming the Church of England. Because of the fortunes of war, England never implemented the assembly’s plan. Nevertheless, the Westminster standards (which include the Westminster Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms) became the accepted doctrinal standards of Presbyterian churches worldwide. The Church of Scotland adopted the Westminster standards in 1647.

In the 1700s, when England and Scotland were joined under one monarch as the United Kingdom, the status of the Church of Scotland underwent an unusual shift. It was no longer a state church, because the Church of England was the established church. However, the English Parliament continued to oversee its affairs. This government oversight, along with the growth of “Moderatism” (rationalistic liberalism) among church leaders, provoked schisms. The most important in the eighteenth century was the Secession of 1733 that formed the Associate Presbytery. (The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States is descended from this group.) Even larger was the Disruption of 1834-43 led by Thomas Chalmers, resulting in
the formation of the Free Church of Scotland. Both of these splits (as well as others) resisted government interference with the church and, secondarily, opposed growing liberal theology. By 1929, however, most of the free church divisions had reunited with the Church of Scotland. Only a few small groups, such as a remnant Free Church of Scotland and the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, remained separate.

Despite its success in bringing the free churches back to its fold, the Church of Scotland has declined in numbers and influence throughout the twentieth century. Its hierarchy is basically liberal in theology, having long abandoned the standards of the Westminster Confession. Like the Church of England, the Church of Scotland is finding itself increasingly irrelevant to the people to whom it is supposed to minister.

**Netherlands Reformed Church**

Like the Church of Scotland, the church of the Netherlands has its roots in the Reformed branch of the Reformation. The Netherlands in the 1500s rebelled against the rule of the Catholic Hapsburgs of Spain and, after long and bloody fighting, won its independence. Although there were Lutheran and Anabaptist Protestants in the Netherlands, it was the Reformed who came to dominate and shape the Dutch church.

Perhaps the most famous event in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church was the Calvinist-Arminian controversy of the 1600s. This debate over the nature of Calvinism climaxed with the famous Synod of Dort (1618-19) in which the Calvinistic party emerged triumphant and established the so-called “five points of Calvinism” as the measure of orthodoxy against the Arminian position. In English, these five points are summarized (appropriately for the Netherlands) under the acronym TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.

The accepted creed of the Dutch Reformed Church is the Belgc Confession, originally written by Guido de Bres in 1561, who was later martyred for his faith. With some modifications, this confession remains the professed doctrinal standard of the church. Also important are the Canons and Decrees of the Synod of Dort that settled the Calvinist-Arminian controversy.

The Dutch Reformed Church was disestablished in 1798 when Napoleon extended French control over the Netherlands. Even when the Dutch regained their independence following Waterloo, they chose not to reestablish the church but to form a State Department of Religion to oversee church affairs (and often intervene in the church). Nonetheless, the Dutch Reformed Church remained the church for the majority of the Dutch well into the nineteenth century. Today, however, it is reduced to representing only about one-fifth of the population.

As with the Church of Scotland, the Netherlands Reformed Church (Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, NHK), as it is known, has suffered through several controversies and splits. The Seceder Church, a strongly orthodox and deeply pious group, broke in 1834 out of concern with liberalism and coldness of spiritual life in the national church. Even more significant was the Doleantie, a major schism led by Dutch statesman-theologian Abraham Kuyper in 1886. Kuyper’s group opposed both state interference with the church and liberal theology within its ranks. In 1892 the Seceder Church and Kuyper’s group merged into a single denomination, Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Kerden in Nederland, GKN).

Like the other national churches of Europe, the NHK has grown more liberal through the years. Near the end of the twentieth century, the NHK entered a merger agreement with the GKN and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The agreement created a temporary federation, the Uniting Protestant Churches in the Netherlands, that would give way to permanent united body. Tentatively scheduled for 2004, this merger would create a Protestant denomination of over 2.5 million members. Such a merger would be significant numerically, but its nature (especially crossing denominational lines) will likely result in reaching a “lowest common denominator” in doctrinal matters.

**Swiss Reformed Churches**

Next to Germany, no part of Europe was more influential in shaping the Protestant Reformation than Switzerland. It was in the Swiss Alps that Ulrich Zwingli, a contemporary of Luther, launched the Swiss Reformation in Zurich. Later
John Calvin refined and advanced the Reformation through his work in Geneva. However, Catholicism remained strong in some parts of the nation, and civil wars resulted, such as the one in which Zwingli died in 1531. Today Roman Catholics outnumber Protestants in Switzerland.

The most widely accepted confession of faith among the Swiss Reformed is the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, written by Heinrich Bullinger, successor to Zwingli in Zurich. As is the case across Europe, the official churches of Switzerland fell prey to rationalism. In the early 1800s, a major revival broke out in the church of Geneva. Called le réveil ("the awakening"), the revival produced many outstanding evangelical leaders, such as César Malan, J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, and Louis Gaussen. However, church authorities forced most of the evangelicals out of the state church, leading them to form their own independent churches.

Today the Swiss Protestant church is fragmented by the political structure of Switzerland. The nation of Switzerland is a federal republic, comprised of political divisions called cantons. Each canton is free to regulate church relations as it sees fit. Some cantons have an established church; some do not establish a church but make formal agreements between the churches and the canton; and some practice separation of church and state. The leading Protestant churches of the cantons belong to the Federation of Protestant Churches of Switzerland, originally founded in 1858, although each church retains great autonomy.

**Presbyterian Church in Ireland**

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland is a classic example of a national church that has never been an established state church. The province of Northern Ireland (Ulster) was settled by transplanted Scottish settlers in the 1600s to try to pacify Catholic Ireland. The result was only a fierce Protestant-Catholic conflict that continues to the present.

Because Ireland was part of Great Britain, the established church was the (Anglican) Church of Ireland, even though it was comparatively small, until it was disestablished in 1867. Among the Scots-Irish population in the north, however, the Presbyterian Church dominated religious life and had the strongest support among Irish Protestants. In the south, of course, Catholicism was overwhelmingly dominant.

When the south of Ireland separated from Great Britain in 1921, Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, with most of its membership in Ulster, maintained a strong position in the province. In general, the church has been more evangelical in faith and practice than many of Europe’s national churches. The Irish Presbyterian Church has known internal controversy, however. A bitter fight in the first part of the nineteenth century purged unitarians from the church and was followed by a major awakening, the '59 Revival. In the 1920s, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland underwent a Fundamentalist controversy like that in the United States. The failure of the conservatives in that conflict led to the founding of separatist groups, notably James Hunter’s Evangelical Presbyterian Church (1927) and Ian Paisley’s Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster (1951).

**Germany**

Germany was the birthplace of the Protestant Reformation. German monk Martin Luther unwittingly stirred up a storm when on October 31, 1517, he posted his Ninety-five Theses, questioning Roman Catholic dogma on issues such as purgatory and indulgences. The modern nation of Germany and its state church still bears the marks of the work of the German reformer.

Luther eventually drew on himself the wrath of not only the pope and the Roman hierarchy but also that of the Catholic Emperor Charles V. At an imperial diet held at the city of Worms in 1521, Luther publicly declared to both church and empire that he would take his stand not on the declaration of popes or church councils or on the proclamations of rulers but on the authority of the Word of God alone. “Here I stand,” he declared. “I can do no other. God help me! Amen.” The Lutheran movement grew dramatically and in 1530 Luther’s associate Philipp Melanchthon wrote the Augsburg Confession, the standard creed of Lutheranism.

Although the Holy Roman Empire, Charles’s domain, encompassed all the German territories, what is today known as Germany was actually a
federation of many smaller states. The rulers of some of these states remained Catholic, while the rulers of others (such as Luther’s home of Saxony) became Protestant. War broke out between the Catholic and Protestant princes, eventually resulting in the Peace of Augsburg (1555). This agreement allowed each prince in the German states to choose the religion of his people. They could be either Lutheran or Catholic or (after the Thirty Years’ War) Reformed. As a result, Germany became a mosaic of little state churches. The Protestants were overwhelmingly Lutheran, although some, such as in the influential state of Prussia, were Reformed.

Along with military conflict, German Lutherans suffered through a number of internal theological controversies in the 1500s, which were ultimately settled by the Formula of Concord (1577). The Formula quickly joined the Augsburg Confession as one of the definitive statements of Lutheran teaching.

After Germany united as one nation in 1871, there were thoughts of uniting the many Lutheran landeskirchen (territorial churches) into a single state reichskirche, but such discussions remained only talk. Each of the landeskirchen was in effect a mini-state church and jealously guarded its position. In the 1930s Hitler and the Nazis supported efforts to form a single reichskirche, which would likely be more efficiently controlled by the state. However, a surprising number of clergy and laymen opposed subjecting the church to Nazi ideology.

After World War II, German Protestants finally formed the Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, EKD). Actually, even this body was not a truly unified church but rather a federation of the descendants of Germany’s historic territorial churches.

The term Evangelical could mislead American Christians, who associate the word with conservative, revivalistic Protestantism. The term originated in the Reformation (derived from the Greek word for “gospel,” evangelion) and in Germany means simply “Protestant.” In Germany the evangelische Gemeinden (“evangelical churches”) refer to the Lutheran churches whereas evangelische freie Gemeinden (“evangelical free churches”) refers to non-Lutheran Protestant groups. In fact, the Germans have a different word for American-style evangelicals such as Billy Graham: Evangelikale (plural, Evangelikalen; adjective, evangelikal).

“German theology” has become almost synonymous with theological liberalism. Actually, this generalization is unfair to the heritage of orthodox theology written and taught by many German theologians. However, the churches in the EKD are generally liberal in their theological and political views. Some orthodox movements such as the “Confession Movement: ‘No Other Gospel’” resist these trends and defend orthodox Christianity, but liberals and orthodox remained joined in the state church.

**Scandinavian Churches**

One could discuss the state churches in Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland) with Germany under the general heading “Lutheran,” for all are historically Lutheran in theology and practice. The Scandinavian churches have a distinct character separate from the Lutheran experience in Germany, however, as well as a common history and structure that make them suitable for separate consideration.

As in other nations in Europe, the coming of Protestantism is linked to the politics of the Reformation. In Scandinavia the rulers generally imposed the Protestant faith for reasons of their own, both political and spiritual. That the version of Protestantism was Lutheran is due not only to politics but also in large part to the presence of ministers and theologians who studied under Martin Luther in Wittenberg.

At the beginning of the Reformation in the early 1500s, all of Scandinavia was theoretically under the sway of the king of Denmark according to the Union of Calmar (1397). Norway was almost entirely subject to the Danes, and Sweden was in large part subordinate. Finland (a possession of Sweden) and Iceland (a possession of Norway) both followed the lead of the nations that controlled them. When King Christian III of Denmark (1534-59) embraced the Reformation, he therefore took large parts of Scandinavia with him. In his own realm of Denmark, Hans Tausen, a former student at Wittenberg undertook the doctrinal reform that the king’s political shift...
made possible. In Norway, the Danes imposed Lutheranism from above.

Sweden was a somewhat different case. Here, resentment of the Danes had created unrest before Christian III came to the throne of Denmark. As a result, the Swedes declared their independence under King Gustavus Vasa (1523-60). He embraced Lutheranism, in part because he saw the Catholic Church as an opponent to his policies and in part by his religious convictions. As in Denmark, the doctrinal reformation of Sweden was the work of students from Wittenberg, the two brothers Olaf and Lars Petersson.

Despite the changing fortunes of politics and dynasties, Scandinavia had become solidly Protestant by the 1600s. Eventually, each nation established a national Protestant church. Generally, the churches established in the region were Lutheran in doctrine and episcopal in polity, that is, ruled by bishops. In some churches, such as Norway’s, the role of the bishop was played down and they were called “superintendents.” In other countries, such as Sweden, the traditional pattern of church government from the medieval church continued with little change. In all cases, the monarch became the head of the church, much as Henry VIII had in England.

The spiritual life of the Scandinavian churches has varied through the years. Generally, the state Lutheran churches are high church in character, with a greater stress on sacraments and liturgy than on evangelical conversion and personal piety. There were some exceptions to this pattern. Hans Hauge (1771-1824) in Norway became leader of a movement stressing personal experience of the gospel and the need for preaching. Nicolai Grundtvig (1783-1872) led a somewhat more mystical reform movement in Denmark that emphasized a living faith, not rationalism or mere adherence to doctrines, and promoted hymn singing as a means of Christian growth.

The contemporary situation for each of the national churches of Scandinavia generally resembles that of the others. The Evangelical Lutheran People’s Church of Denmark, with 95 percent of the population as members, maintains close church-state ties and is ruled by the Danish parliament. Both Norway and Sweden have membership of over 90 percent of the people and a rate of attendance of less than 5 percent. Sweden may also be an indicator of the direction of current trends in church-state relations. Legislation removed the church in 2000 from official status in Sweden, although it is still dominant and possesses special privileges (e.g., operating public cemeteries). Now all churches in Sweden can have state help in collecting membership fees (no longer “church taxes”), as the national church continues to do.

Conclusion

In general, the idea of a national church remains strong in Europe, despite the increasingly secular viewpoint of that region. There does appear to be movement away from an established church, but the traditional Protestant churches still have a historic advantage over other groups. Spiritually, the national churches appear cold and their theology liberal. Although some factions within each church continue to uphold and defend the historic faith, the overall picture is that found in Christ’s words to the church at Sardis: “I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God” (Rev. 3:1-2).

For Further Reading


