

The Spiritual Reality Behind The King's Speech

In the last week of 2010 my wife and I went to see the film *The King's Speech*, the Oscar-nominated movie that tells the story of the struggle of Britain's King George VI with a speech impediment and of his therapist, Australian Lionel Logue.



I was so inspired by much of the movie that I searched among my books for one I've owned for a few years but had never read. *The Reluctant King*, by Sarah Bradford (1989), tells the fascinating story of this remarkable monarch, a man who was decidedly not born to be king and who very reluctantly ascended the throne in December 1936 following the abdication of his elder brother.

George VI was born in 1895, when his great-grandmother Queen Victoria was still very much alive. He lived through the reigns of his grandfather Edward VII (1901-1910), his father George V (1910-1936) and his brother Edward VIII (1936).

He lived during a very interesting time, when Great Britain was the world's preeminent power. Since the king presided over the British Empire, with a quarter of the world's people as his subjects, his office was then the most important in the world. The abdication of his brother on Dec. 11, 1936, was a major constitutional crisis affecting governments around the world, as all the dominions of the British Empire had to agree on the change.

Although traumatic at the time, in hindsight we should all be thankful that Edward VIII abdicated in favor of his brother. Edward had gotten himself involved with a twice-divorced woman from Baltimore who was still married to her second husband.

In 1936 this was totally unacceptable, and not just to the British people. The Australian prime minister, a devout Catholic, made it absolutely clear that the king's mistress would never be acceptable to the Australian people. Similar protests came from Canada and South Africa.

Religion played a major role in the Empire

In reading *The Reluctant King*, I was struck by how much more religious Britain was at the time than it is now. When, as the young Prince Albert, he was sent for naval training at Osborne on the Isle of Wight, he found that "discipline was strict, but not, according to former cadets, unkindly [so], although the life was Spartan, beginning at 6 a.m. in summer and 6.30 in winter, when the boys, woken by a bugler playing reveille, were expected to leap out of bed at the first stroke of the cadet captain's gong, kneel down and say their prayers" (p. 43).

Everything was done in a hurry, "at the double ... although extra time was allowed for prayers" (ibid.) For "talking before grace," the future king was later punished (p. 52). Religion was clearly taken seriously in the Royal Navy at that time.

In contrast to a century ago, today religious belief is far rarer among members of the British military. I asked my nephew, who serves with the Royal Air Force, how many men in his unit hold any religious beliefs. His reply? "Absolutely no one"!

A man of faith leading a religious nation

The British people became truly thankful for their new King George VI when he led them through the dark and threatening days of World War II.

Whereas his elder brother, who had abdicated, was seemingly sympathetic to Hitler and even met the dictator on one occasion, King George would not allow himself to be intimidated by Nazi threats. In spite of the danger, he and his wife and two daughters remained in London throughout the war when most other European leaders had fled their own countries. One reason for this was the king's faith.

As *The Reluctant King* explains: "The Coronation is the single most significant ceremony of a sovereign's life, transforming him or her from an ordinary mortal to a powerful symbol, half-man, half-priest, in a solemn ritual whose history goes back over a thousand years and whose significance is far older.

"Cosmo Lang [Archbishop of Canterbury], an intrusive presence throughout, who saw this as an occasion for asserting the cause of Religion over the Worldliness represented by the late King [Edward VIII], held a private meeting with them at Buckingham Palace on the evening of the Sunday before Coronation Day, at which they all knelt in prayer.

"[Lang wrote:] 'I prayed for them and for their realm and Empire, and I gave them my personal blessing. I was much moved and so were they. Indeed there were tears in their eyes when we rose from our knees. From that moment I knew what would be in their minds and hearts when they came to their anointing and crowning.'

"During the ceremony itself, a kind of religious exaltation came upon the King, he later privately told Lang, as the Archbishop noted in an unpublished passage, 'that he felt throughout that Some One Else was with him'" (p. 212)

Harold Nicolson, a then-well-known diplomat and politician, wrote at the time of the king's coronation in May 1937, "There is no doubt that the King and Queen have entered on this task with a real religious sense" (p. 205).

Bound by "the cause of Christian civilization"

Early in World War II, in a speech to the peoples of the British Empire, the king told "I believe from my heart that the cause which binds together my peoples and our gallant and faithful Allies is the cause of Christian civilization" (p. 309).

In another memorable speech he proclaimed, "Let us then put our trust, as I do, in God and in the unconquerable spirit of the British people" (p. 325).

During a time of numerous military setbacks for the Allies in 1942, the king called for a national day of prayer (p. 342). The following year, as the Allies started to see the war turning in their favor, the actor Leslie Howard, who starred in the enormously popular film *Gone With the Wind*, stood on the steps of London's St. Paul's Cathedral and repeated Nelson's prayer on the eve of the Battle of Trafalgar. Prayer was very much a part of life in the Royal Navy during the time of Britain's naval supremacy.

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