

MAGNA CARTA, RELIGION AND THE RULE OF LAW

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A most embarrassing revelation contained within this volume is that while on a visit to a school in the USA, British Prime Minister Cameron was asked about the *Magna Carta* and had to admit that he had never heard of the most important piece of legislation ever promulgated in the United Kingdom! My own schooling was more fortunate. This book, which is the outcome of a conference held to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the Charter, makes a substantial contribution to the disciplines of history and law by focusing on historical and contemporary narratives of faith and governance.

The particular interest of this book is in the freedom that was granted to the English church and which in this volume has been extended to include other faiths. It also compelled King John's loyalty to his own sworn oaths. Though very well known by name, the *Magna Carta's* contents are relatively unknown. The same is true of a number of subsequent related documents that were issued in 1216 and 1217. Central to the process of drafting the Charter was the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, a noted Old Testament scholar who favoured a covenanted kingship in the nation; this issue is pursued by Rabbi Lord Sachs, who develops the historical context in which the law exercised a proscriptive restraint on the king. Oh, for a return to those halcyon days, despite the advantage it granted the church! But the underlying principles are still relevant – the promotion of civil harmony, cohesion and good will in a post-Christian era.

The book is divided into four sections. Following the introduction, section two is devoted to the birth of the *Magna Carta* and the diffusion of its principles.

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Section three deals with religious approaches to the Charter's rule of law, while the final section considers the contemporary significance of the Charter. A substantial appendix contains the text of the Charters in translation. Throughout the chapters, we are introduced to the manner in which the *Magna Carta* was presented and received in the UK, Europe and even in the USA and by five faith traditions throughout the centuries and currently. The ongoing relevance of the document is considered and reaffirmed by a host of internationally renowned scholars and legal practitioners. All testify to the vital role of religion in contemporary public life. Two enduring questions relate to what the state can offer to religious bodies and institutions equal with other institutions under the law; and what faith communities and their leaders can offer to the state and to our polity generally, and particularly to our public life. This is important because we live in dynamic societies; society, religion and law continue to evolve, which means that there can be no prescriptions to map the path forward.

This book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of how society, religion and law have functioned and can still function for the good of total societies. It is to be commended as a living, rather than as a purely historical, document.