THAT the Church of England represents the major religious affiliation of the people of England today appears at first sight undeniable. But how major is this majority? What degree and kind of majority does the Church of England possess in relation to all other religious bodies or communities now present in this country? These are important questions which receive too little attention in contemporary discussions on such matters as religion and the state, religious education in state schools and so on. A little thought, plus a little historical research, soon reveals the fact that to be established as ‘top religion’ requires more than numerical superiority. It is essential also to be the major body in terms of power, political, social and economic – as well as in terms of numbers of adherents – and on this count the Church of England certainly has a clear lead over all other recognised kinds of religious affiliation in England. Its lead in terms of numbers is not nearly so overwhelming, however, in spite of the common assumption that the Church of England is the form of religion of the English people, and that therefore on that score it has a right to some sort of presidential position in religious affairs. Its lead, and its presiding role, is in terms of its power. The reasons for this lie in the political history of modern England, and need to be clearly understood if any attempt is to be made to look objectively at the situation of religious pluralism which obtains in this country today.

(i) Citizens and Anglicans – facts and fictions

It is little more than 300 years since the attempt was made in this country to bring the entire population within one comprehensive religious-political institution, the Anglican Church. The Act of Uniformity of 1662 was the giving of legal status to the notion that the terms ‘citizen’ and ‘Anglican’ were synonymous. Even though ‘citizen’ and ‘churchman’ may have been synonymous in the medieval period, they were not in the seventeenth century. Yet the idea was given a currency which still persists in certain quarters. The phrase ‘religious minority’ is often assumed to mean, if not actually ‘non-Anglican’, at least in these days when Nonconformists are conforming more and more, then a ‘non-British Council of Churches type of religious body’.

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This is at a time when all religious bodies, Anglican included, are in fact minorities within a predominantly non-church English society, even if one uses such favourable criteria of real membership (in the Anglican situation) as the numbers attending Easter communion. The largest single component in the religiously pluralistic situation in England today, as in many other Western countries, is the unaffiliated, non-ecclesiastical majority. This majority is not necessarily religionless, as Luckman and others have pointed out.\(^1\) Moreover such a majority, managing to live independently of active membership of any ecclesiastical body, has existed in England for some centuries. It seems fairly certain that it existed in the seventeenth century, and that the Act of Uniformity gave official standing to a fiction that has been maintained by upholders of the Anglican establishment ever since. In the seventeenth century the form of it was that - apart from those small minorities, both Protestant and Catholic, which refused to conform - there existed a religious solidarity within English life and that its name was the Church of England.

Certainly in 1662 it was illegal to be absent from Anglican worship. Non-attendance 'could entail the forfeiture of two-thirds of a man's estate'.\(^2\) Those most likely to suffer such loss of property were the Catholic landed gentry. 'But Protestants who would not go to church might forfeit all their goods and be required on pain of death to promise, under oath, to leave the realm for ever.'\(^3\) These penalties were not widely enforced after 1660, however; the main intention from that time was to exclude non-Anglicans from positions of influence in the state. This was in order to neutralise what was felt to be the continuing political danger to the state represented by the presence of Puritans and Papists, and in order to establish strong government with the aid of a politically reliable church. For it was still possible for religious beliefs and organisations to be used to justify revolt. Penalties on non-conformist religious belief and affiliation were therefore proportionate to the political danger they represented. Thus the idea was allowed to gain currency that, in England, all those who are not actively Nonconformist are de jure 'Church of England', whether or not they actually fulfil their ritual obligations.

(ii) Early ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical systems

In the seventeenth century, however, the fact was that England was a religiously plural society. It is outside the purpose of this chapter to seek evidence of religious pluralism in England in earlier centuries, although, in