

# A GOOD QUESTION

## HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM?

One question, four answers



### 1. Helen Paynter 'Be concerned, but not anxious'

In Britain, 2025 was the year when some prominent figures started identifying themselves as Christian nationalists; and the year the UK Church woke up to the issue. The term is used by different people in different ways – by some as a slogan and by some as a well-developed political idea. If we work with the broad definition of the co-mingling of 'Christianity' with nationhood (and sometimes, but not always, with Whiteness), then should the Church be concerned? And if so, how might we respond?

We should be concerned, in my view. We should be concerned to see the Christian message – of God's scandalous grace poured out through the weakness and folly of the cross – co-opted to promote a movement which can be belligerent, exclusionary, hateful, even violent. We should be concerned, secondly, because this political moment emboldens some in our society to act hatefully towards others, especially towards Muslims, immigrants, and people of colour. Thirdly, there are people in our political spaces now seeking to undermine vital democratic freedoms (e.g. freedom of religious expression, the independence of the press). Finally, we should be concerned about the longstanding faultlines which these movements expose and exploit: structural deprivation in rural and inner-city communities, the deep disenfranchisement experienced by many in the working class and underclass.

So I suggest that we should be

concerned – but not anxious. We should have confidence in the quiet work of loving our neighbours and bringing and being 'good news to the poor', as many churches already do week in, week out. Such is the yeast from which the Kingdom of God grows. We can be confident God will grow it in his way and in his time.

What more might we do? First, let's not treat love and understanding as a zero-sum game. We should love our recently-arrived neighbours and those who seek to repatriate them. Let's not respond to those spreading vitriol or shouting aggressively by mirroring their behaviour. Think twice before counter-demonstrating. Let's offer a positive vision, not fight a negative one.

Second, theological and biblical literacy are paramount. The 'thin' slogans promoted by some of these groups can seem quite appealing to the unwary. For example, why might a 'Christ is King' banner on a political platform be problematic? We need congregations that instinctively ask hard questions about the theological content of such slogans. What form

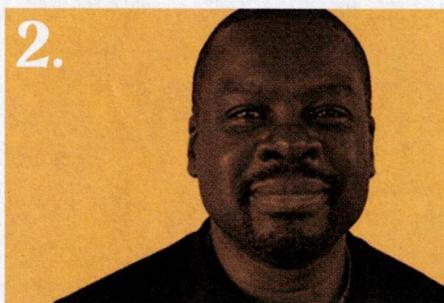
### 'Meet this challenge with faith and grace'

of kingship is being invoked? The sort that rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and wears a crown of thorns?

There are lots of practical things that we might consider doing. How can we develop our intercultural understanding and religious literacy? How can we partner with agencies addressing deep inequalities in our society? How can we exercise critical thinking and develop tools for dialogue? How can we help young people to feel welcome and included in our churches, in order to reduce their risk of being co-opted into bad-faith movements?

It's time for the British Church to rise to this challenge with faith, grace, and creativity. With concern, but not with anxiety. Christ is King, after all. ●

*Helen Paynter is the Director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence*



## Wale Hudson-Roberts 'Love is a command not an invitation'

More than 110,000 people took to the streets of London last year in protest for 'free speech' and 'real democracy'. Crowds aligned themselves with Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, aka Tommy Robinson, in one of the largest far-right demonstrations in England's history. Elon Musk appeared via video link, warning of the rapid erosion of Britain, before calling for the dissolution of Parliament.

It is not a surprise. Long before the rise of Trump, Farage, and Le Pen, immigrants were scapegoated. Across Europe and America, Muslims were framed as threats to national security. Recent xenophobia cannot be viewed in isolation from the draconian immigration policies of Theresa May. In 2012, May spoke of the Conservative Party's aim to reduce immigration 'by tens of thousands,' and create a 'really hostile environment' for illegal immigrants. The Home Office sent vans across London bearing the message 'In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest.' That hostile environment hardened into a hostile society, fertile ground for figures like Tommy Robinson, Donald Trump, and Charlie Kirk.

So, long before Trump's forceful promotion of Christian nationalism, Britain had been shifting from tolerance to intolerance, religiously and racially. Christian nationalism has weaponised that transition, globalising it and rebranding it as white supremacy. I am not surprised by the rise of Christian nationalism, but I am deeply disturbed by it

Some Churches eventually condemned far-right movements – rightly so. But why were so many slow to challenge their rhetoric of 'protecting the rights of natives' over 'non-natives'?

The parable of the Good Samaritan speaks powerfully to the relationship between 'natives' and 'foreigners'. Jesus interprets love as not *being* a neighbour but *becoming* a neighbour. The Samaritan – the foreigner – is the one who proves himself a neighbour, showing that neighbourliness must never discriminate. It transcends national boundaries and challenges us to receive love from those we might fear or despise. Every human being, created in the image of God, is a neighbour. Jesus' love extended to all, regardless of race, religion, or status. The parable challenges Christians to practise an expansive, sacrificial love – a love that *does*, not merely *describes*. It's no accident that Luke concludes with the word 'do' rather than merely 'believe'.

Luke's parable is a rebuke to those arrogant enough to love only people who look like them, and a command –

## 'Every human being is a neighbour'

not an invitation – to love all, including those who resemble the Samaritan and those who do not. Perhaps, then, the latter stand a better chance of 'inheriting eternal life'.

So no, I'm not surprised by the rise of Christian nationalism. The social and political conditions have made it almost inevitable. What does surprise me is the growing number of Christians – from both the Global South and Global North – who lend their support to its theology. Their misuse of Scripture, especially on matters of race, gender, and human rights, is alarming and dangerous.

Let's hope that the voices calling for justice and compassion remain steadfast and do not fade – as so many did in the months following the tragic murder of George Floyd. ●

*Wale Hudson-Roberts is Justice Enabler for the Baptist Union*



## Al Barrett 'Say a courageous no, and a confident yes'

It feels like it's everywhere we look, and it can feel overwhelming. The flags on lamp posts. Angry protests outside hotels housing people seeking asylum. Politicians with hardline rhetoric about borders and immigration and small boats. And increasingly, powerful voices from the so-called mainstream to the extreme edges, weaving together country and Christianity, with undertones of white supremacy and Islamophobia. It fills our TV screens, newspapers and social media feeds. Many of us encounter it in real life.

The re-emergence of the Far Right, often in new branding but with echoes of the rise of Nazism, is a challenge that Christians in the UK cannot ignore. It requires us to develop our confidence to say a courageous 'No' – but also to get more clear and confident about the things we're saying 'Yes' to.

Before Christmas, in the lead-up to a 'carol concert' in central London planned by Unite the Kingdom, I suggested we get better at making some careful distinctions:

1. Between 'the stage' (those with the microphones) and 'the crowd' (those who turn up to big events).

2. Between 'the message' (which may include elements of divisiveness and hostility) and 'the people' (who are complex and flawed and made in God's image, just like us).

3. Between racist behaviours (isolated words and actions of individuals) and structural racism (that is deeply embedded in many of our power structures and hierarchies,

and has a real, tangible impact on the lives of so many, every day – as well as seeping into so much of our thinking and relating).

4. Between the surface grievances (e.g. hostility to asylum-seekers) and the deeper struggles (e.g. financial insecurity, poor housing, bad experiences of over-stretched public services, etc) that call for deep listening, serious acknowledgment, and concrete actions in solidarity and for justice.

5. Between Christianity (which is all about Jesus) and Englishness (which may or may not be important to us)..The two have an entangled history in this country, but they're not inseparable, they're both contested, and they both have the potential to be narrowly exclusive or broadly inclusive.

6. Between a kind of power that is embodied in 'them-and-us' divisions, 'strong-man' might and aggressive volume, and the power of God-in-Jesus, embodied in smallness, humility and vulnerable love.

Our Roman Catholic siblings have a three-stage process: 'See – Judge – Act'. Jesus tells us to be 'wise as serpents, and innocent as doves'. We need to learn to see and judge, together, more clearly what is

## 'Our actions need to be in solidarity with those being victimised'

going on, not just on the surface, but underneath it. Where's the power, and the money? Who's really driving this? Who's really benefitting from it?

And then our actions, as followers of Jesus, needs to be always in solidarity with those being harmed and victimised, while not dismissing the perpetrators as less-than-human. If we are Christ's body, we need to speak out boldly with his courage, tell stories of prophetic possibility with his playful creativity, and live out a deep solidarity rooted in his costly, vulnerable love. ●

*Al Barrett is the Minister of Hodge Hill Church, Birmingham*



## Michael Hopkins 'If Christ is displaced, Church must resist'

In 1934, the German Evangelical Church issued the Barmen Declaration. Its central claim was devastatingly simple: Jesus Christ, as he is attested in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we must hear, trust and obey. So no other authority – no ideology, no nation, no leader – can claim that allegiance.

That claim bears the mark of Karl Barth. Barth's theology was never a retreat from the world, but a refusal to allow any worldly power to occupy the place that belongs to Christ alone. For Barth, the danger was not simply bad politics, but false confession: the attempt to speak of God where God has not spoken, and to demand obedience where Christ has not commanded it.

Barmen did not emerge from theoretical anxiety. It emerged because the Church had discovered, too late, that nationalism can cloak itself in Christian language while demanding ultimate loyalty. 'Christian Germany' was being preached from pulpits, and the Church was being asked not merely to love its country, but to sanctify it.

The Confessing Church's 1936 Memorandum to Hitler made this explicit. It accused the regime of trying to make the Church an instrument of political ideology. That memorandum did not stop the arrests. It did not prevent the camps. But it did draw a clear theological line: where Christ is displaced, the Church must resist, even when resistance is costly.

English Congregationalists understood this. Nathaniel Micklem,

Principal of Mansfield College, travelled to Germany throughout the 1930s in solidarity with the Confessing Church. In 1938 he was warned that if he returned he would be arrested. Several German ministers fled to Britain and served here. Mansfield College still honours Adam von Trott, an alumnus executed in 1944 for conspiring against Hitler. These are not marginal stories. They are our inheritance.

This history flows directly into the Basis of Union of our own church. We confess that the Church belongs to God, that its faith and obedience are shaped by the living Word of Christ, and that it must be continually reformed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That confession leaves no space for a Church that simply baptises the

## 'Patriotism must not be a rival confession'

spirit of the age, whether that spirit comes wrapped in national flags, cultural nostalgia, or appeals to 'Christian values'.

Some will be uneasy at the suggestion that nationalism comes in varieties, or that many of us, including those who instinctively dislike nationalism, nonetheless inhabit it. But refusing to name our own nationalism does not make us neutral; it merely makes us unexamined. When Churches fail to recognise how race, class, and power shape whose nationalism is invisible and whose is threatening, we repeat the Church's oldest mistake: assuming that our location is universal.

The lesson of Barmen, Bonhoeffer, and the Confessing Church is not that Christians must reject love of country. It is that the Church must never allow love of country to become a rival confession. When the nation asks for what belongs to Christ, the Church must say no. Not politely. Not eventually. But clearly, publicly, and theologically. ●

*Michael Hopkins is Moderator of Wessex Synod and Secretary of the URC History Society*