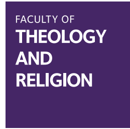

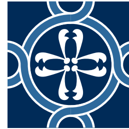

Address to the College of Bishops
23rd Jan 2025, High Leigh

What kind of thing is a nation?
And what story should we tell about this nation?

Luke Bretherton
Christ Church
University of Oxford

Let me begin with a question that is both simple and unavoidable:

What story do we tell about Great Britain as a nation?

This is not simply an academic question. It is a pastoral, political, and theological one. It shapes how we preach, pray, and exercise leadership in a time of profound uncertainty.

For a long time, the dominant public story about Britain—and indeed about the modern West more broadly—was a progressive one. In this story we moved from darkness to enlightenment, from sacred to secular, from revelation to reason, from scarcity to abundance. And this was told as a story of unfolding freedom driven by science, technology, and rational administration.

This story had its apogee in the new Labour campaign anthem "things can only get better." But as we have discovered, things can get a lot worse.

This progressive story still circulates among some technocratic elites, often as a way of justifying their dubious authority.

But the mood has shifted. We are living through what can be described as a post-progressive moment—a "vibe shift" that is most evident on the decolonial left and reactionary right. It is a shift driven by the fact that for most people the progressive story is an implausible and bankrupt one out of touch with their experience of life and the world they see around them.

But this was never a story Christians should have told in the first place.

So what story do we tell today?

To answer this question, I begin with Augustine, someone who was writing at a moment of civilizational crisis and profound uncertainty.

Augustine's *City of God* is written in the aftermath of the sack of Rome in 410. Rome's elites were telling a story of betrayal: that the empire had fallen because it had abandoned its gods, its virtues, its culture. Rather than wokesters and Muslims, for them it was Christians that had weakened Rome. They were mad about it and wanted to make Rome great again.

Augustine refuses this narrative—but he also refuses its opposite. He does not replace a story of glory brought low by foreign and malign influences with a story of shame. Instead, he offers a far more unsettling account.

Augustine insists that all political communities are contingent and fallen. None are innocent. They arise out of histories marked by domination, conquest, and bloodshed. And no earthly polity—not Babylon, not Rome, not Britain—is the City of God.

There is only one true city, the city founded on the self-giving sacrifice of Christ, which stands in contrast to all other polities, which are founded on false sacrifice—the sacrifice of others in order to secure peace, prosperity, and order for the rich and powerful of that land.

Every earthly polity secures itself by making some bear the cost of others' flourishing. In contemporary language of environmental science, we might speak of "sacrifice zones." These are the places and peoples who absorb the environmental, economic, and social costs of a way of life enjoyed elsewhere.

In the United States, toxic waste is disproportionately dumped in poor Black and Native communities—communities with little political and economic power, whose suffering remains invisible to suburban consumers who live lives of careless and concern blind to the ways in which their way of life is dependent on and produces poisonous effects for others, not like them, who live elsewhere.

Similarly, Britain's wealth and power was built on zones of false sacrifice, whether in its mines and industrial centres on shore, or the slave ships and colonial plantations offshore. The gracious world depicted in *Downton Abbey* rested on coerced labour, dispossession, and environmental extraction.

This is not a radical or novel insight. One does not need to read postcolonial theory to discover it. One can find it in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, where the luxurious (and in her view pernicious) life in the stately home is dependent on the plantation in Antigua. One can find it in Edmund Burke's critique of the East India Company, and in Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Olaudah Equiano's denunciations of the slave trade, and in a tradition of conservative moral critique of empire.

What the postcolonial left and reactionary right forget is that there is a long-standing conservative critique of empire, one concerned not with repudiating political order as such, but

with asking what it means to be a *good* political community, one ordered toward virtue rather than national self-interest or commerce.

If the progressive story now rings hollow, we are left with three possible ways of narrating Britain's past, present, and future possibilities.

The first is a story of totalizing shame. Britain appears as nothing more than a hetero-patriarchal, racist, extractive project. This is a story often told on the decolonial left. And while it contains important truths, it is not the whole truth. It risks reducing our history to a brittle moral register, collapsing complex realities into a Manichean binary of goodies and baddies, and foreclosing the possibility of gratitude, repair, and renewal.

The second is a story of unadulterated glory. Britain becomes the hero of world history—the nation that brought law, liberty, and civilization to others, now fallen from greatness through weakness, betrayal, or the malign impact of polluting foreigners. This is the familiar "Make Britain Great Again" narrative. It is idolatrous. It makes the nation a messianic figure that must be redeemed if we are to be saved. As already noted, this was the story Rome was telling about itself after it was sacked—and Augustine saw it for what it was, a false Gospel. With the loss of our empire, from Enoch Powell onwards, this is the story we are constantly tempted to tell about Britain.

Christians can tell neither of these stories.

For Christians, the Gospel of Jesus Christ alone is the greatest story ever told and all other stories must be heard in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And only the kingdom of God instituted by Christ is the truly messianic kingdom. To tell a story of Britain as an uncomplicated one of glory without shame is not true. Or at least not the whole truth as there are things to value, honour, and cherish. But there is also much to be penitent for.

The story yet to be told is a Christian story, a story shaped by a theological narrative arc, a story of creation, fall, and redemptive possibilities.

A story in which God's providence is at work *through* a nation's history, even as that history is shot through with domination, conquest, blood, and tears.

In this telling, Britain is neither innocent nor uniquely evil. It is a fallen political community in which God has nonetheless been at work—sometimes in spite of the nation's actions, sometimes through them, often in judgment as well as mercy.

The task of the Church is to tell this story truthfully: to name what is worthy of honour and gratitude, and to identify what requires repentance and repair.

And that is your challenge. How do you tell a story of grace *and* disgrace in your diocese, in your province, for the nation as a whole.

But to tell a more textured, ironic, and ambiguous story, one full of both scenes of wonder and still open wounds, will cut against the shibboleths of both left and right and subject you to attack from all corners. But that is what faithful witness demands. That is your task—as bishops, as teachers of the faith, and as stewards of the Church's public witness.

A crucial element of an Augustinian account of our moment is recognising that Britain is, despite everything, an arena of peace.

It is an arena of law and order albeit one secured through zones of false sacrifice. But any such peace is not a trivial thing. Peace is a fragile and morally ambiguous good—but it is nevertheless a real good to be honoured.

The existence of law, order, and shared institutions is not nothing. It is something to be conserved and cherished even as, *like the church itself*, it is in constant need of reformation.

So even as we must recognise its contingent and fallen roots, we have to honour and cherish this form of political order as a realm of peace and understand that we owe it a certain loyalty.

Here the ancient civic virtue of *pietas* is instructive. To exercise *pietas* is to recognise we owe a debt of gratitude and a duty of care to that which made our life possible: we did not create the roads, the language, the laws, the institutions through which we live and move and which enable our life. And so there is a loyalty owed to this political community against other political communities.

So how are this peace and order generated and regenerated?

It is through politics.

By politics I do not mean ideology, party competition, or statecraft. I mean something more fundamental: the art of forming a common life.

Politics is the answer to that most basic of human questions, which is what do I do when I meet a stranger, someone I don't like, find threatening, or whose way of life is different, even scandalous to me?

There are only four possible answers.

- I can kill them.
- I can dominate them.
- I can make life so unbearable that they flee.
- Or I can do politics.

That is to say, I can form, norm, and sustain some kind of common life—amid asymmetries of power, competing visions of what it means to be human, and my own feelings of fear or aversion—without killing, coercing, or causing them to flee. These really are the only options.

Human history—and our present moment—is saturated with examples of the first three responses. Faithful Christians should be invested in the fourth, for both theological and practical reasons.

Scripture gives us a name for the basis of any genuine political community, one forged through politics: covenant.

Communal identity and purpose are not founded in ethnicity (blood), territory (soil), or economic exchange (money). All of these may contribute to peoplehood, but none are foundational.

Biblical Israel constantly forgets this. It seeks to secure itself through kings, armies, alliances, and idols. But its renewal only comes through returning to covenantal faithfulness.

Covenant is the scriptural term for the quality and character of relationship that should be the basis of any form of common life through which people realize their humanity.

Covenant names how human beings are constituted as persons through mutually responsible, cooperative fellowship with others, and how, if this fellowship is to enable human flourishing, it must be ordered in relationship to God. To fail to live in covenantal relation is, biblically speaking, to fail to be fully human. Love of God and love of neighbour are not private virtues; they are the ground of political life.

Contrary to modern origin myths of humans as lone individuals who contract together to form polities, the account of politics given here assumes that no one is or can be an island. Human animals are interdependent creatures, enmeshed in forms of shared life. We cannot survive let alone thrive without others. All forms of domination and exploitation are parasitic on the created sociality of human existence. As Augustine frames it, they are a privation and depravation of creaturely goodness, a falling away from how things are created to be in God's divine economy as well as a turning away from how things will be in the new creation.

Christians are to work with others through politics to remake the world as it should be and bear witness to how it will be in Christ. In other words, Christians are to be salt and light. Being salt means identifying and conserving what is good in our society that we receive from those who came before us, tending and cultivating it so that it can be handed on to the next generation. Christians are also to be light which exposes the deeds of darkness and brings understanding. Being light means identifying what needs changing if we are to move from the world as it is to a more just and generous one.

A covenantal vision stands in sharp contrast to four dominant modern accounts of the nation:

1. **First, nation as ethnos** – this is the idea that nationhood is founded on some pre-political social form such as ethnicity, shared ancestry, or a single apolitical and unchanging culture and set of values. To understand a nation as an ethnos demands either integration into that imagined mono-culture or excludes those who cannot conform because they lack the right skin colour, culture, or ancestry. Conceiving the nation as an ethnos does not allow for the participation in, contribution to, and negotiation by different forms of association and different ways of life. Nor can it deal with the reality that each human is made up of competing loyalties, commitments, and loves. We need a politics that is porous enough to recognize these realities and that politics at its heart is not about uniformity but enabling difference in constructive relation.

2. **Second, nation as procedural republic:** in this the nation is reduced to a collection of rights-bearing individuals governed by neutral rules, abstracted from social practice and the lives and loves of the peoples who live in that place. Entirely absent is the need to cultivate either the moral meaning and purpose of the nation, or the character and quality of relations that enable us to fulfil those meanings and purposes. In place of these stand supposedly neutral and rational procedures for adjudicating rival claims. In this vision the individual stands in direct and unmediated relation to the state and politics as the negotiation of a common life is suppressed by procedure and statecraft.

3. **Third, nation as site of recognition**: in this account the nation is understood as a platform for any and every culture to demand recognition for "their" way of life (as if a culture was a possession) regardless of the consequences for everyone else. This is the framework of bad forms of multiculturalism understood as the quest for the expression of an essentialised, "authentic," collective identity that must be validated, no questions asked, and without any expectation of contribution or loyalty to the wider political community and its commonwealth.

4. **Lastly, there is nation as marketplace:** in this libertarian vision, the nation is reduced to the competition of ideas and interests governed by a minimal state, its common life determined not by moral commitments and participation in transcendent goods but by the aggregation of individual consumer choices.

Against all of these, Britain is best understood as a **demos**: a people assembled in this land from many places, crafting through politics a shared arena of just and generous common life through which can be realised moral goods.[*]

---

[*] **Side note**: In contrast to an *ethnos* as a people defined by a common culture and ancestry but not a self-consciously political community, a *demos* is a political community comprised of citizens defined in relation to each other through shared political practices situated within and loyal to a particular place (a deme or district). A *laos* is a people/nation defined by their relationship to a leader (e.g., a warrior king). In NT terms, there is only one Christian *laos*/people/nation, the church. The church as a communion of saints is a people/body politic/kingdom defined by its relationship to its head and leader, Christ. Any *laos*/people other than the church

Those who fail to contribute to and care for this common life, who operate out of a place of aggrieved entitlement, whether rich or poor; white, black, or brown; Christian or of some other creed need calling out. Those who do contribute and care, who seek the welfare of this earthly city, whatever their station or origin or situation or ideological or religious commitment need respecting.

A nation understood as a civic or political realm, a *res publica*, is one based on a shared set of institutions, laws, duties, and customs and moral commitments to pursue a distinctive form of peaceable common life. A nation in this sense cannot be secured by cultural, religious, ethnic, or ideological uniformity. It is made and lost through the quality of its politics. It is constituted through a set of common goods that are hard won and must be tended and tilled in each generation.

The story of this country is a repeated one of finding political means, oftentimes after violent conflict, through which to forge a common life amid competing visions of what it means to be human and asymmetries of power without killing, coercing or causing each other to flee.

This goes to the very origins of this country. When the Venerable Bede imagined the *Angli-cuin* he looked out upon a warring group of tribes that shared neither law, religion, nor culture. But he imagined the English nation as a political community based on a particular kind of politics marked by a specific character of relations, one made possible by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Alfred the Great draws on Bede's vision to craft a shared civic realm out of different cultures and peoples, with different customary practices, laws, and religions. Christianity played a crucial role and was the sacred centre of this new political community, but it was not the only religious framework and there were real tensions and conflicts between Christians and pagans throughout his reign. Each tribe retained their mother tongue, but the nation was a shared lingua franca of civic commonality.

As it was for Alfred so for us. A condition of a nation understood as first and foremost a political and moral, rather than cultural or religious project was shared language, shared law, albeit one that incorporated bits and pieces of various legal codes, including pagan codes, and shared institutions like the army and navy. And some kind of established Christianity that provided the sacred heart, but that was also inevitably and rightly contested – in Alfred's case by paganism.

---

that calls itself Christian is intrinsically anti-Christic, it seeks to name either an ethnos or a *demos* as somehow salvific and definitional of what it means to be made in the image of God – only Christ can save and only Christ reveals the true image of God. Or it seeks to replace Christ with an alternative messianic leader (e.g. Papa Joe Stalin, Ataturk, … insert other more contemporary examples here). We can distinguish between claims to be a Christian ethnos (either a category mistake, heretical – the heresy of phyletism – or idolatrous), a claim to be a Christian influenced demos (for which Christians demonstrate patriotism – a proportional and fitting penultimate love of country as an expression of civic *pietas*), and a claim to be a Christian *laos* (which is either a synonym for the church or if some other leader is substituted for Christ is an anti-Christic claim).

It is this latter bit that cuts against the grain of the progressive story. But it needs setting out why some kind of transcendent centre is needed and how that sacred center can be prevented from becoming an idol. This is the problem with the French model of laicity. By excluding religion from the public square it ends up making an idol of the nation itself. Or as in America, where competition between different faiths and those of no faith means there is a constant instability and the nation itself fills the void and becomes the object of sacred devotion.

In Britain we live by paradox. We are four nations in one, have a democratic monarchy, a loyal opposition, and a faithful secularity born of an established church that provides the conditions for a state that recognises that the modern nation-state is not a god, a state that is open to the reality that humans do not live by bread alone: there are meanings and purposes to being human beyond economic and political demands that must be respected. That is the great gift of our kind of weak establishment. Now, of course, Baptist and atheists will vehemently object to the account I've just given. But that's not just OK. That is right and proper and part of our national story understood as a *civic not a sacred story* in which lines of difference and vehement disagreement are crosscut by circles of solidarity and situated within shared institutions.

We find the process Alfred established repeated between Normans and Saxons after 1066. Catholics and Protestants and Jews from the Reformation onwards. Monarchists and republicans from the 17th C onwards. Christians and secularists from the 18th C onwards, and running through the 19th C was the emergence of often bitterly fought class conflicts. But England avoided the totalising revolutions of France and Russia through political compromise and institutional innovation. These settlements were not equal and were certainly not a perfect union. But they were a peaceable realm worth treasuring.

Out of these struggles emerged shared national institutions: the rule of law, Parliament, guilds, trade unions, the military, schools, universities, the NHS, the BBC, scouts and guides, women's institute, professional associations, the National Trust, and yes, the Church of England itself. Importantly, most of these national institutions are federations of local and regional institutions, each deeply connected to a specific sense of place and memory. The parish and the diocese being but one articulation of this form.

While enshrined in law, none of these institutions can be sustained by law alone nor can they be secured by either the state or the market.

They depend on trust, custom, contribution, and care —on what we might call the moral and spiritual ecology of a political community. Bishops spend their day tending this ecology.

Our national life is more than just the sum of individual choices or the outcome of conflicting group interests: it is a common life built on the pursuit of shared goods and constituted by multiple forms of overlapping association and their respective visions of what it means to be human. And today that includes not just atheists and Baptists but also Muslims, Sikh's, neo-

pagans, and many others besides. The interaction of these peoples, and the common objects of love they discover together, generates the shared life of the nation. It has always been thus.

The role of the state is to uphold a rule-bound, accountable, and equitable arena of penultimate peace that enables the negotiation of a just and merciful common life between diverse communities. The primary good the state itself seeks is the good of political association and the structures and programs that uphold this good (for example, welfare, healthcare, and education).

Pursuing the good of association – not cohesion – sustains the concrete conditions of freedom, as freedom is in great measure dependent on participation in both proximate and broader forms of association. Without being embedded in some form of group or institution, the individual citizen is naked before the power of either the market or the state and lacks a vital means for his or her own self-cultivation.

For freedom to be possible (including religious freedom) and an associational life to flourish, a plural and "complex" political space, one with myriad institutional configurations is needed.

Part of the story that needs to be told is the historic role of the Church of England in maintaining this complex political space so our national common life is dominated neither by the state nor the market (whether big tech or otherwise).

Here we must tread carefully. Christians owe loyalty to the political community that made our lives possible.

Yet when a polity denies the full humanity of others as those made in the image of God and for whom Christ died—whether slaves, colonised peoples, or migrants—it must be challenged. As Wilberforce, Equiano, and Hannah More show us, radical dissent, democratic agitation, and calls for abolition in the name of upholding the shared humanity of all those made in the image of God can be an act of profound patriotism. And this is, of course, to follow Jesus who was called a traitor to his people even as he fulfilled and upheld its deepest spiritual and moral yearnings.

The way forward in modern struggles to uphold the image of God in all, no matter their station or situation, whether in the abolitionist or Labour movement, never comes from some boutique ideology or virtue signalling slogan. It emerges out of building broad based coalitions, and grounded and realistic forms of democratic agitation that require prudential judgment—saying yes to what should be conserved, and no to what must be changed. Being salt and light.

The challenge before *us* is this:

How do we honour Britain while refusing its injustices?
How do we practise loyalty without idolatry?

This brings us to the difficult question of borders and migration.

In debates about immigration we cannot speak through sound bites and reductive generalizations, whether of the left or the right. Rather than working off ideological checklists we need prudential judgment based on practical reason born of close attention to realities on the ground.

Alongside this we must recognise that we cannot tell the story of Britain and immigration without deciding whether the nation-state is a legitimate—if fallen—form of political order. I believe there is a moral case for a bounded polity under the rule of law. Open borders represent a different moral but mostly economic vision, and one with which I disagree.

To affirm the legitimacy of borders is not to sanctify them. It is to recognise that any form of political order in a fallen world requires limits, and that we owe specific obligations to our particular polity.[†]

This is the contested territory of the *ordo amoris*—the order of love.[‡]

As bishops, your task is not to provide simple answers, but to cultivate the conditions for truthful, charitable, and prudent deliberation on this issue.

Let me conclude.

This Church is called to tell a better story specifically about England—neither a story of despair nor one of glory, but a penultimate story of grace and disgrace.

A story that honours what is good, names what is sinful, and refuses all claims to ultimacy except that of Christ.

A story that understands politics as the art of association, covenant as the basis of common life, peace as a moral if ambiguous good, and prudence as the virtue required of leaders in a fallen world.

That is the story entrusted to you—in your dioceses, in the public square, and in the life of this nation.

And finally, I would urge this: do not speak of either “national identity” or “English values.” Speak instead of duties of care and shared goods. England is a civic not a cultural or religious project, one to which all may contribute, and for which all bear responsibility.

[†] For a theological account of the morality or otherwise of borders and how this relates to debates about immigration see Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), Ch. 3.
[‡] For a helpful overview of the *ordo amoris* as understood by Augustine and Aquinas see Steven Pope, 2026. “Revisiting the *Ordo Amoris*: A Contemporary Interpretation of a Classic Christian Theme.” *Journal of Moral Theology* 15 (1): 33–59. Available to download: https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.155052

That is the story the Church is called to tell—truthfully, penitentially, hopefully, and lovingly—in the light of Christ.

Further resources:

- "Democracy", St Andrew's Encyclopaedia of Theology: https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Democracy

- 'Christian Humanism: An Invitation to a Better Story," Interview with David Brooks (New York Times) on different stories told about the relationship between the West and Christianity and articulates a case for why and how we need to recover Christian humanism as a point of reference: https://comment.org/christian-humanism/

- Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Eerdmans, 2019). See especially the chapter on Anglican political theology. The book is an overview of debates in political theology, it also makes a theological case for why Christians have been and should be committed to forms of democratic common life for creedal reasons.

- For what the church can learn from community organising for engaging local communities listen to the podcast "Listen, Organize, Act!" – available from all platforms. https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/listen-organize-act-organizing-democratic-politics/id1553824477

- Do sign up to the mailing list of the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life which is running a major project on Christianity and democracy: https://mcdonaldcentre.web.ox.ac.uk/home

Appendix: On why *NOT* to use the term Christian nationalism

The term Christian nationalism is **not** a theological one. I strongly counsel never using it if you are teaching the faithful or talking on behalf of the Church in the context of public witness. It carries no theological significance whatsoever. When used as Christian talk to describe complex phenomena it is functioning ideologically rather than theologically, and so will misinform and mis-form the faithful.

There is a recent sociological literature, emerging from around 2010 onwards, that has taken up the term Christian nationalism. Strikingly absent from this body of work, however, is any sustained engagement with the extensive and long-standing scholarly literature on ethnoreligious nationalism and its many variants—Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, and others. Equally absent is engagement with the well-established debate concerning the ways in which political movements can function *as* religions, including the question of whether

phenomena such as fascism should be understood as forms of "political religion." As an academic field of inquiry, these debates extend back to, and were significantly shaped by, attempts before and after the Second World War to make sense of communism, fascism, and mass politics more broadly.

Alongside this sits another large and wide-ranging literature on populism and its relationship to religion. This literature is indispensable for understanding contemporary political dynamics, yet it is conspicuously absent from much of the recent work that deploys the category of Christian nationalism. (For a theological analysis of populism and its implications for the relationship between the church and populist politics, see my chapter on this topic in *Christ and the Common Life*.) The exclusion of these highly relevant bodies of scholarship raises serious questions about the analytical depth and academic adequacy of much of the contemporary literature on Christian nationalism, and prompts the further question of what, precisely, this literature is doing.

The writing that has generated the current media and popular usage of the term Christian nationalism is overwhelmingly focused on the North American context. It is also largely race-reductionist, in the sense that it reduces a complex and multi-causal set of political phenomena to a single explanatory variable—racism—while offering little or no engagement with questions of class, political economy, or material conditions. Moreover, it tends to assume, rather than argue, that any attempt to articulate or embed Christian moral commitments within public policy is intrinsically illegitimate. This assumption rests upon an unexamined inheritance from a progressive secularisation narrative, according to which secularisation is normatively desirable and something labelled "Christian nationalism" represents its improper obstruction. Closely related is the presupposition that a strict and absolute separation between church and state is both universally required and normatively self-evident, such that any deviation constitutes a grave political error.

This North American conceptual framework is unhelpful when imported into the British context. It is also simply false to suggest that participation in the Church of England—or the existence of an established church—renders one a Christian nationalist. Such claims collapse important historical, theological, and constitutional distinctions and obscure rather than illuminate the realities at stake.

In my judgement, Christian nationalism functions less as a robust analytical category than as a misdiagnosis and a profoundly counterproductive rhetorical frame. Even at a sociological level, it misreads and misdirects attention away from what is actually taking place. I say this having observed at close range the emergence and popularisation of the term in the United States, where I have taught and worked with churches for the past thirteen years. The contemporary prominence of the term is closely associated with the sociological work of figures such as Robert Jones, Samuel Perry, and Andrew Whitehead. Rather than offering a thick, historically grounded account of political and religious change, the term quickly came to function primarily as a mode of labelling and stigmatisation. It offered little by way of constructive alternative and amounted largely to a form of censorious scolding.

Unsurprisingly, the term was rapidly adopted as a badge of honour by those it was intended to condemn (as in, for example, Stephen Wolfe's *The Case for Christian Nationalism*). Indeed, alongside other identitarian frames of reference, it appears to have functioned as an effective recruiting tool for the MAGA movement, thereby becoming complicit in the very dynamics it purported to critique. In this way, Christian nationalism has come to operate as an empty or floating signifier, into which are projected a wide range of anxieties and objections that progressives have long held, irrespective of current realities.

Even within the US context, the Christian nationalism frame struggles to account for significant counter-examples. It cannot readily explain, for instance, why Pastor Lorenzo Sewell—a Black, non-denominational prosperity and Pentecostal pastor from Detroit—would lead prayers at Donald Trump's second inauguration, or why Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams, one of the most influential Pentecostal leaders in Ghana with a vast global following, would lead a prayer service with and for Trump at his first inauguration. These cases expose the limits of a framework that flattens complex transnational religious and political dynamics into a single explanatory label.

If the aim is to tell a reassuring moralistic story in which we secure ourselves as virtuous and those we find disturbing as wholly malign—thereby reproducing the same friend–enemy logics found in outlets such as GB News or the *Morning Star*, and amplifying the anger and catastrophising sense of crisis on which they thrive—then the continued use of the term Christian nationalism may serve that purpose well. If, however, the aim is to bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ, and as part of that witness to re-weave social trust, reconcile those set against one another, and love enemies as Christ commands, then the use of this term actively undermines that vocation.

What demands sustained interrogation are anti-democratic, anti-pluralistic, and authoritarian styles of anti-politics (i.e., that refuse to negotiate a common life, but turn to killing, coercion, and causing to flee instead) and that fetishise violence and strength, often coded in hyper-masculinist terms. These political forms seek to erode the rule of law, weaken structures of accountability and transparency, undermine civil society, and hollow out the distribution of power, replacing them with the concentration of authority in a single ruler or a narrow plutocratic elite acting in the name of an abstracted "people." This imagined people is then mobilised against a series of constructed enemies—religious and other minorities, experts, "mainstream media", or "corrupt elites." And all this is done to entrench and secure a narrow range of economic and material interests who already monopolise large swathes of economic and political power.

Such projects are typically justified through the manufacture of a heightened sense of emergency or national or civilizational crisis—what the Nazi jurist, Carl Schmitt, famously described as "emergency politics"—in which ordinary democratic processes are declared inadequate to the moment, thereby legitimising exceptional measures. This is a well-worn playbook. Variants of this manoeuvre can be observed in India as well as the United States,

Nigeria as well as the United Kingdom, Israel as well as Germany, Indonesia as well as Austria, Brazil as well as the Netherlands. Some of these authoritarian movements draw upon Christian imaginaries; others draw upon Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, or Buddhism.

Authoritarian anti-politics can be identified by its systematic rejection of the foundational premises of democratic life: respect for the equal dignity of persons, no matter their station or situation; the centrality of dialogue and deliberation as means of resolving conflict rather than coercion or violence; and the conviction that people ought to have both a voice in decisions that affect them and genuine agency to shape the material and social conditions of their lives. Democracy also presupposes social and institutional environments in which shared worlds of meaning and action can be sustained over time.

By contrast, the proactive—rather than defensive—use of physical violence by state and non-state actors to achieve policy ends represents the destruction of the institutions, practices, and habits through which communication and reciprocal recognition between friends, strangers, and enemies alike are made possible. It is precisely this form of anti-politics that the church should be actively resisting and naming.

The urgent question in the British context, therefore, is not whether Christian nationalism exists as a catch-all category, but who is advocating for authoritarian anti-politics—whether implicitly or explicitly—and why? And who benefits economically from the consequences of anti-democratic measures? Equally pressing is the question of which parts of the church are drawn toward authoritarian solutions to real and pressing problems, and what theological, social, and material conditions make such solutions appear attractive. And thence what can be done to address them constructively?