appg christians in parliament

Understanding Christian Nationalism: **Is Britain a Christian Nation?**

Christian Nationalism has become a significant and controversial presence in political life in recent decades. It has, of course, been particularly visible in the USA as a key element of support for President Donald Trump,[1] yet has also been noticeable in the rise of right-wing parties in nations such as Brazil, Hungary, Poland and Russia.

The 'Unite the Kingdom' rally on 13th September 2025, which saw over 100,000 people converge on central London was particularly notable in the recent history of right-wing demonstrations of such kind, in part because of the numbers – far larger than other similar events in the past - but also by the visibility of Christian symbolism and representation.

Christian Nationalism refers to a close and intimate bond between a particular nation and the Christian faith.[2] It suggests that a particular nation has a profoundly Christian character, which is somehow essential to that nation's identity. It contains within it the fear that if that Christian character is lost then something essential from the identity of the nation will be lost as well. Some forms of Christian Nationalism would argue for the explicit adoption of Christian-influenced legislation. In the USA, for example, some Christian Nationalists promote the 'Seven Mountain Mandate', calling Christians to 'take dominion' over seven distinct spheres of influence in society: family, religion, education, media, arts and entertainment, business, and government. Other forms eschew such political ends and seek merely to preserve the Christian history and character of the nation in a more general sense, perceiving this to be under threat, either from 'woke secularism' or (mainly Muslim) immigration, or both.

Is Britain a 'Christian Nation'?

Central to the notion of Christian Nationalism in Britain is the idea that it is a 'Christian Nation'. This is a more complex question than might first appear, because there are different senses in which we might - or might not - speak of Britain as 'Christian'. For example:

1. CULTURAL

Even avowed atheists can identify as 'cultural Christians', enjoying Christmas Carols, Handel's Messiah and Milton's Paradise Lost. At the same time, our year revolves around Christian commemorations such as Christmas and Easter, and church buildings are present in virtually every village and town and city across the country. All this bears witness to the abiding cultural impact of Christianity on our national life. On the other hand, the increasing visibility of secular and non-Christian religious cultures in the UK questions the sense that our cultural influences are exclusively or predominantly Christian.

2. CONSTITUTIONAL

The coronation of King Charles III displayed very vividly the Christian character of British constitutional monarchy. We have bishops in the House of Lords, Anglican Chaplains in prisons by an Act of Parliament, and a Christian Chaplain to the Speaker of the

1 See Whitehead, A. L. and S. Perry, L. (2022). Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States. New York, OUP., for one of the most authoritative accounts of CN in the US context.

2 The idea of the nation has a complex history. The modern nation state can be identified as emerging during the religious wars of the C17th and C18th, consciously as an alternative to the dominance of the church. However, in other senses, nations can claim to have how much longer history. The New Testament talks of the 'nations' *(ethnoi)* of the world and many would identify Bede's "Ecclesiastical History of the English People", written in the C8th, as the beginnings of a recognition of the English as a distinct people or nation.

House of Commons. All of this might suggest that our national (unwritten) constitution is basically Christian. However, some would claim that more general principles such as the rule of law, human rights legislation and parliamentary sovereignty are not uniquely or explicitly Christian in origin, and the observance of international law enshrined in such bodies as the UN Charter or the ECHR suggests that not all of our constitutional life is overtly Christian.

3. SOCIAL

Tom Holland[3] and others have argued for the profound Christian influence on much of our social framework, (we are all, he argues, whether Christian, agnostic or atheist, "fish swimming in Christian seas"). However, explicit evidence of Christian teaching influencing current social attitudes might seem to be dwindling. Issues like the Assisted Dying debate have revealed a resistance to explicitly Christian motivation for legislation and it seems clear that argumentation for such positions cannot be put forward in current moral discourse on purely Christian grounds.

4. NUMERICAL

This aspect refers to the number of people identifying as Christian, or attending church. In the 2021 census, 46.3% of people in the UK identified as Christian. Despite headlines focusing on the fall from the 2011 figure of 59.3%, this remains the largest grouping in the religious composition of England and Wales, the next largest group being 'No religion' which was at 37.2% in 2021. Of course, when it comes to regular church attendance the figure is much less - around 5%.

So there are many ways in which we might – or might not – describe Britain as 'Christian'. Moreover, there are different forms of Christian Nationalism at play, some of which could be argued to be healthy and conducive to national harmony, and others less so.

For example, the Church of England could itself be described as a form of Christian Nationalism, in that, as the established church, the Church of England is intimately connected to the English nation in multiple ways. With every square inch of the country being located in a particular parish, with the spiritual 'cure of souls' of each person in those parishes being entrusted to an incumbent or priest-in-charge who takes oaths of allegiance not just to their bishop but to the Sovereign, and with the Church's Canon Law forming part of the law of the land, it is clear that the Anglican church represents the very close association between the Christian faith and the nation. Many would consider this to be a relatively benign form of Christian nationalism, where the Church of England sees its task as providing opportunity for Christian worship for all who wish to participate, to share the faith with those who wish to discover it, and to 'hold' the space of the spiritual dimension of life on behalf of other denominations and indeed other faiths.[4]

However, there are other forms which seem less benign. When Christian faith is used as a cultural label to validate aggression against immigrant communities, when the cross is co-opted as a symbol of subjugation in national life for those who are not Christian, we are touching on a perversion rather than a version of Christian faith.

Church and Nation

Much of the problem here comes from a misunderstanding of the nature of the relationship between the Church and the nation.

The New Testament seems to recognise only one 'Christian nation', and that is the church. 1 Peter 2.9 says: *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, **a holy nation**, God's own people, in order that you*

3 Holland, T. (2019). Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind. London, Little Brown.

4 See the speech by HM Queen Elizabeth at Lambeth Palace in 2012, which argued that "The Church has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country" https://www.royal.uk/queens-speech-lambeth-palace-15-february-2012 (accessed 17.11.25). See also forthcoming: Hordern, J. and G. Tomlin, Eds. (2026). A Voice in the Wilderness? Why should we listen to the Church of England? . London, SCM.

may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." The Church, as grafted onto Israel, the people of God in the Old Testament, is the true 'holy nation', in other words a nation set apart for the purposes of God from within the entire human race. No other people can claim such a place or role.

From time to time, particular nations have claimed that they are specifically chosen by God for a particular purpose. During the convulsions of the C17th, England was sometimes seen as a 'chosen nation' in this way, and some of the rhetoric around the creation of the United States used this language.[5] Willie Jennings' book *'The Christian Imagination'*[6] highlights the danger in such thinking and its complicity in the history of colonialism and racism, where nations claimed a unique commission from God, which gave them licence to dominate and impose their will upon other nations.

This, however, is to confuse the role of the church and the nation. When it comes to its core identity, the church can, and must, be exclusive, in the sense that it draws together those who are baptised into Christ and who confess Christian faith. Christ claims exclusive worship. It is, according to standard Christian orthodoxy, impossible to be a Muslim Christian or an atheist Christian. If a person has no belief in God, does not acknowledge Jesus Christ as the unique Son of God, or bears primary allegiance to the Hindu gods or the prophet Muhammad, they could not, nor presumably would want to be baptised as a Christian.

However, it is perfectly possible to be a Muslim or an atheist Briton. There is no reason at all why Muslims or atheists should not be recognised as British citizens with all the rights and responsibilities attached to that citizenship. Any nation must inevitably be open and hospitable to those who are not of the majority faith.

So when it comes to defining their core identities, the church must be exclusive and the nation inclusive. However, paradoxically when it comes to their posture towards others, there is a sense in which the roles are reversed. Although the Church is the gathering of the faithful, it can, and must, have its doors open to anyone who wishes to come to explore Christian faith, regardless of ethnicity, background or religion. On the other hand, the State, in its immigration policy, needs at times to take an exclusive approach to those who wish to come to British shores who have no particular right to do so or who might destabilise the harmony and identity of the nation.[7]

The point is that the Church and the State play different roles in our corporate life. Where the church needs to be exclusive, the state needs to be inclusive. And where the church needs to be inclusive, the state needs to be exclusive.

This distinction between church and nation might suggest that it is inappropriate to speak of Britain as a 'Christian Nation', however Christian its constitution, culture, society might be, and however many (or few) people go to church. To do so is to confuse the nation (which cannot, in its core identity, be exclusive) with the church (which must be).

It is, however, appropriate to speak of Britain as a nation profoundly shaped by Christianity, as one of, if not the most prominent cultural influences upon historic British culture and society. This is where Tom

5 For example, Essex clergyman Ralph Josselin in 1651 had anticipated that "our dear England in the farthest corner of the world" would be the new Jerusalem and the seat of the new Kingdom of Christ. Hunt, A. (2024). Republic: Britain's Revolutionary Decade 1649-1660. London, Faber. p235.

6 Jennings, W. J. (2010). The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race. New Haven, Yale University Press.

7 There is a genuine debate to be had about the extent and nature of immigration of people from other cultures into any particular nation so that the historic character of that nation might be preserved, while at the same time, remaining open and welcoming to those fleeing difficulty elsewhere in the world. Arguably, loving the neighbour who happens to live in the community of which we are apart, will also mean protecting that community from over-rapid change or the incursion of those who would ultimately undermine it. However, that debate is relevant to any nation, whether predominantly influenced by Christianity, Islam or any other faith.

Holland's point in 'Dominion', about the depth and benefits of Christian influence on western culture is well made. As he puts it:

> "That human beings have rights; that they are born equal; that they are owed sustenance and shelter, and refuge from persecution; these were never self-evident truths."[8]

Bijan Omrani has made a more detailed application of this general point to the history of England, arguing that Christianity has profoundly impacted the nation's legal system, education, architecture and landscape, its sense of time as well as its cultural and artistic history.[9] Of course, that history is not all good. The church does not have a spotless record in its influence on British life, yet it has given rise to many things we value in our society. None of this can be understood without the impact of Christianity.

Through the 1700 years of its presence on this island,[10] Christianity has had a more profound impact upon the British nation than any other faith or philosophy, much more than Islam, secularism or atheism, all of which are relatively recent arrivals on the scene. This history explains and perhaps justifies a more extensive sense in which constitutionally, culturally and socially Britain could be described as 'Christian'.

Conclusion

To condemn all forms of Christian nationalism is a mistake. There is a long history of profound reflection on the relationship between communities, nations and the Christian faith. There are healthy and unhealthy ways of construing that relationship, and this kind of discernment is vital as the debate on Christian nationalism proceeds. While it may be a category mistake to call Britain a 'Christian Nation', the unique impact and importance of Christianity to the history and character of this nation needs to be acknowledged if we are to understand its nature, and to preserve much of what we value in our national life.

Bishop Graham Tomlin
Former Bishop of Kensington,
Editor-in-Chief of SeenandUnseen.com

8 *Dominion*, p524

9 Omrani, B. (2025). God is an Englishman: Christianity and the Creation of England. London, Forum.

10 The Council of Arles in 314 mentions a number of British bishops who were present (from York, London and either Lincoln or Colchester), indicating the established presence of the church in Britain from at least early C4th, and presumably stretching back into the C3rd, given that the church was organised enough to have bishops and to send them to such a Council across the channel.

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