

The rise of Christian nationalism in Britain and its relationship with the far right

A new type of Christianity - more militant, more political - is on the rise. But some in the Church of England claim this is a "corruption" of their faith.

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⌚ Tuesday 11 November 2025 01:16, UK



'The far-right bishop' accused of corrupting Christianity



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Bishop Ceirion Dewar rejects the Church of England as heretics. Instead, he gathers his flock under a gloomy sky on a beach in Cornwall.

More than 20 people answered the call he made on social media - one wears a T-shirt saying Jesus is King.

Another wears a Union Jack anorak with a T-shirt emblazoned "UTK" - Unite the Kingdom - the movement organised by anti-Islam campaigner Tommy Robinson.

Wearing a white robe over a wetsuit, Dewar strides down the beach and prepares for a mass baptism.

His voice booms out: "In the name of Jesus Christ, I gladly baptise you!"

Critics call Dewar "the far-right bishop" - a label he rejects.

But he does represent a new type of Christianity - more militant, more political - and one that is on the rise.

Several of those here came because they saw Dewar preaching fire and brimstone at Robinson's Unite the Kingdom march on 13 September.

And they are ready to follow him into the cold waters of the Celtic Sea. One by one, he blesses them, then plunges them under the waves. Afterwards, they hug. Some are euphoric.



Watch the full video from Tom Cheshire as he joins Bishop Ceirion Dewar

Fergus Worrall drove from Bristol with his girlfriend Louise French; both were baptised.

"I saw Ceirion's speech at the Unite the Kingdom rally, and it was just epic," Worrall says. "I mean, I just loved it."

Worrall says he used to be "fairly lefty". After trying Buddhism and New Age practices, he came to Christianity. But Dewar's appeal is not just religious - online he decries immigration and the influence of Islam, a message that "chimed".

"We are a Christian culture, a Christian nation. And I do feel like we have lost a lot of that."

A month earlier, Dewar had addressed the 150,000-strong crowd at the Unite the Kingdom march in London, bishop's crook in hand, his voice thundering out over Westminster: "God, you have not abandoned Britain!"

When he looked out, he saw not just British and English flags, but wooden crosses and depictions of Jesus.

It was not his first appearance with Robinson. The year before, he spoke at another rally in Whitehall and said: "This nation of ours is under attack! We are at war! We are at war not just with the Muslim, not just with wokeness."



People stand with crucifixes at the Unite the Kingdom rally, in central London on 13 September

This is something new and growing - a movement that has long marched against immigration, against Islam, is now marching behind the cross.

I ask Dewar what for him, as a Christian, is the appeal of Robinson.

"It's not the appeal of Tommy Robinson, per se," he says. "It was the opportunity that he afforded to me to stand in front of that many people and to both pray for the people and this nation."



Sky's Data and Forensics correspondent Tom Cheshire interviews Bishop Ceirion Dewar on a beach in Cornwall

Dewar was marching front and centre with Robinson. He may be borrowing an audience from Robinson, but he's also effectively endorsing him, I suggest - and doing so in a bishop's garb.

"I don't think that at all. I'm very clear on what I endorse, and my political views are public and well-founded.

"My stand with Tommy is not necessarily political. It's a man that has surrendered his life to Christ, and he's on that journey of faith and trying as a good shepherd to help lead him in that and to shape that faith in a way that is beneficial to him."

I ask him whether he truly thinks we are "at war" with the Muslim.



Bishop Ceirion Dewar

"Unfortunately, what I was trying to convey, having listened to an entire day's worth of speeches, didn't come across quite the way I'd hoped to have expressed it," Dewar says.

"The problem for me is I understand we're a multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-faith Britain, but when you have so many elements that refuse to get into the great melding pot of multiculturalism, but remain outside and try and force that

culture, force that religious system, force that legal system into an existing culture, then there's always going to be problems.

"I would love to see more Christianity at the heart of our politics. I would like to see Christian principles once again driving our legal system."

Many on the hard and far right agree with him - and increasingly link an anti-Islam agenda with a Christian identity. That also adds grandeur to grassroots street politics, elevating a culture war into a clash of civilisations.

UKIP, which has become more explicitly nationalist since the departure of Nigel Farage as party leader, says in its manifesto

that it will "declare war on radical Islam and place Christianity back into the heart of government".

Online, people call for a "holy war". Katie Hopkins, the far-right commentator who also marched shoulder to shoulder with Robinson, said in a recent interview: "Certainly the time of the crusades will need to come again... We are overrun."

One group organising online, with more than 50,000 followers, uses Christian imagery as part of its pledge to "hunt down Muslims".

Dr Maria Power, author of *The Church, The Far Right, And The Claim To Christianity*, describes this as "Christian nationalism" and says it has a precedent in the UK, especially in Northern Ireland, where Britishness and Christianity were often equated.

"But really, I've seen it increase since we've seen the power of Christian nationalism in the States develop. You start to see inklings of it, probably about four or five years ago. Particular pastors talking this way, podcasts emerging, and content

emerging on places like YouTube. And it's very easy to fall down the rabbit hole of the algorithm, isn't it?"

Ceirion Dewar rejects the term Christian nationalism, which he sees as specific to the United States, a country that has a different tradition of public, political Christianity. And it's true that he and others have been advocating and preaching a more muscular Christianity since at least 2016 and the Brexit referendum.

One of his friends is Rikki Doolan, who belongs to the Spirit Embassy, a church in London with British-Zimbabwean origins. (A 2023 investigation by Al Jazeera accused Doolan and others in the church of being involved in money laundering, an accusation Doolan describes as "fake news and a false narrative".)

It was Doolan who "converted" Tommy Robinson to Christianity three weeks before the latter left prison earlier this year. Doolan says it is "a new journey" for Robinson.



Tommy Robinson stands at the start of the Unite The Kingdom protest in central London

Doolan was also on stage at UTK. I ask him about some of the statements made there, including by a Belgian politician, that "Islam does not belong in Europe and Islam does not belong in the UK". He says he disagrees with that "because it's not realistic". But "if we can't fix the problem, then that makes more sense. But I would like to try and fix it first".

Doolan and Dewar stand outside the established Church. But the majority of Christians in the UK still belong to the Church of England.

Dr Sam Wells is the vicar of St Martin's-in-the-Field, a Church of England church on the corner of Trafalgar Square in London. He was holding an annual service commemorating victims of suicide when Robinson's march came right up to the square, resulting in skirmishes with the police. Wells says his congregation was "hurt" by the Christian imagery on display.

"The gestures of the cross, the Christian symbols, are about love and understanding and peace and gentleness and they're being thrust in people's faces as weapons," he says. "I think that's very painful."

Wells was one of the senior clergy leaders who signed an open letter denouncing Robinson's march as a "corruption" of the

Christian faith, saying the cross was being "co-opted" by the far right. Dewar in turn wrote his own letter denouncing the Anglican hierarchy for seeking "polite applause in editorial offices and political chambers", calling on them to "repent".

Dr Wells says Dewar's letter is "very well expressed but I think it's nonsense".

"Christian values, what does that actually mean? I think it means love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness. An institution or a church or a preacher has a right to be called Christian if they look like Jesus. Those marches didn't look like Jesus to me. They looked like the kind of people who were attacking Jesus in Holy Week.

"I think they're reading a different Bible from the one I'm reading."

If the talk is of winning, well there are very different battlegrounds.

The cloisters versus a Cornish beach.

Dewar has several mass baptisms planned across the country;
so does Doolan.

This is not just about the extreme right using Christianity for their own ends; it's just as much some Christians using the far right to reach new audiences.

A new Christian politics, in all sorts of ways and all sorts of places, is on the march.



People hold crucifixes at the Unite The Kingdom rally in central London

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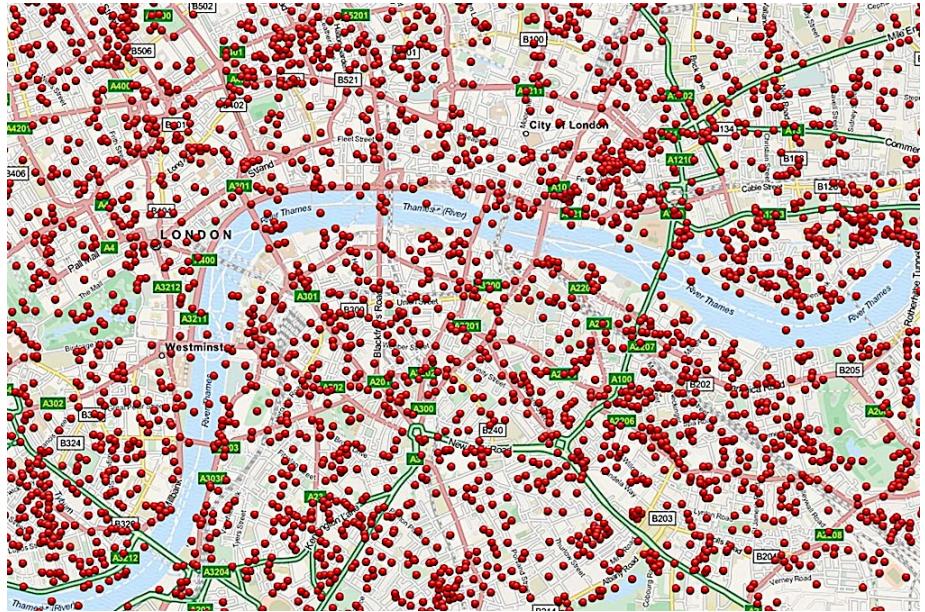
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