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The theology of Christian nationalism



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“Rising Christian Nationalism: a threat to us all.” So read the title of a new blog by the Humanists UK.

The same week, the Guardian published an editorial which said this: “*Christian nationalism is already a force in the United States, and has played a defining role in*

European culture wars in countries such as Poland and Hungary. At last Saturday's rally the striking proliferation of wooden crosses and flags bearing Christian slogans suggest an ominous and rising influence on the British far right. From the speakers' platform in Whitehall, crowds were led in chants of "Christ is King" and participated in public prayer recitals, while being urged to defend "God, faith, family, homeland".

The rally being referred to was the Unite the Kingdom event organised by the notorious Tommy Robinson.

A toxic fusion?

As I've reflected on the rally, I'm especially struck by the fusion of Christian slogans and values with a right-wing rally.

Over the last few years, I've watched the rise of Christian Nationalism (CN) in the US. The central aim of this movement is to make the US a Christian country again. Whilst for some time it has been confined to America, what Humanists UK and the Guardian have seen is it is making its presence felt increasingly in the UK as well.

CN is a theological movement in its own right. It has a particular understanding of the role of government and how Christians should engage in politics. This is what makes it of particular interest to me.

So what I want to do in this article is give an overview of CN as a theological movement (rather than commenting on the marches from last weekend). I want to briefly examine the good, the bad and the ugly in its theology. I hope this serves as a useful introductory primer, especially if you've never come across it before. There is no way I can say everything that needs to be said. But it is important to engage with it, both to understand its thinking and where we need to be very, very cautious.

What is Christian nationalism?

A major challenge when trying to define Christian nationalism is that it takes many different forms. Some regard it as a badge of honour. For others, it is an insult.

Its origins are difficult to pin down. According to Bryan Hart, from One Harbour Church in North Carolina, the term can be traced back to the Christian Nationalist Party in America in the 1940s. Others go back further and connect the rise of CN with the Manifest Destiny theory, which was a belief in the 19th Century in the US that American settlers were 'destined' to expand west and across North America, and which had links with imperialism, white supremacy and racism.

Possibly the most comprehensive and detailed explanation of CN today is in Stephen Wolfe's book, *The Case for Christian Nationalism*. I should say, this is not a thesis or a book I agree with. But if you want to understand what CN is, this provides one of the most comprehensive descriptions of it.

Wolfe describes CN as: “A totality of national action, consisting of civil laws and social customs, conducted by a Christian nation as a Christian nation, in order to procure for itself both earthly and heavenly good in Christ.”

Translated to our country, CN’s tagline would be *Make the UK Christian again*.

Since this slogan is really the heart of the CN movement and ambition, I want to answer the question: is the notion of a Christian country even accurate?

To do this, we’ll look at the good, the bad and ugly of CN. These are my personal reflections and I am sure they will change as I understand more of CN.

But my basic position is I do not agree with CN and I have major concerns and disagreements about particular aspects of its thinking.

The good

Before we get to the points of disagreement, it is worth explaining where I do agree.

Like many advocates of CN, and following [Jeremiah 29:7](#), I want to seek the good of the city where God has placed me.

Across the Bible, there are so many examples of godly influence on the powers of the age. For example, Queen Esther speaks truth and justice to her husband the

King and as a result, God's people are spared from being massacred. Jesus himself spoke truth to Pilate, Paul to King Agrippa.

Furthermore, I believe God's word contains the blueprint for human flourishing. This means that God's commands are good for all human beings. I want to see a society where marriage is promoted, honored, loved, supported in the tax system and where families are recognised for what they are: the most basic and important building block of society. When we respect creational facts, like there being only two biological sexes and that no-one is really born in the wrong body, we are loving our neighbour and serving our community.

I also expect to see some areas where Christian teaching is influential on our nation, even in our heavily secular age. Usually, this is where Christian beliefs are similar to those held by people of another faith or no faith. For example, in recent years, CARE has seen success in campaigning for modern slavery laws and for better protection for children online.

Whilst there is a lot more I could say here, the point is that there are some connection points with the theology of Christian nationalism, and the legitimate desire to improve our nation. Some CN advocates are pro-life, pro-marriage and pro-Christian engagement and involvement with government and politics. I share this desire. I want to see God's word influencing and impacting our society.

But what about the notion of a 'Christian nation'? This lies at the heart of CN and so I want to examine whether the whole notion of a Christian nation is right or wrong.

The bad

Proponents of Christian nationalism talk a lot about reclaiming the nation for King Jesus and establishing laws that are consistent with the law of God.

Yet a careful reading of the Bible shows us that God no longer ties his name to a specific geo-political people. That was the old covenant, where the LORD entered into a covenant with the nation He chose in His grace. God was the king over Israel and he gave them his law, the promised land and promised blessings on obedience and curses for disobedience.

God chose to attach his name to Israel. But after centuries of disobedience, rebellion and idolatry, the nation was sent into exile. The old covenant was broken (repeatedly) and then the coming of Jesus led to a momentous shift. No longer would the LORD tie his name to one specific geo-political entity. Instead, he would call a people out from every tribe and tongue and language to form a new, holy nation ([1 Peter 2:9](#)).

Undergirding it would be a new, better covenant where membership would not longer be based on ethnicity, but on having a new heart and who belong to Jesus as a new creation ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)). A true Christian nation is described in [1 Peter 2:9](#) "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

So how can we ever describe the UK as a Christian country? Arguably, apart from the 'holy nation' – that is the church – there is no such thing. The only way you

could ever call the UK a Christian country is if every single citizen in it was regenerate with a new heart from God.

That is not to say there haven't been countries more influenced by Christianity and more obviously shaped by it. The West has very clearly been impacted positively in terms of its general respect for the rule of law, free speech, administration of justice and so on.

But it is to guard against loose language. When someone asks whether the UK is a Christian country, your first response can be to ask them: what do you mean? Is it due to the established church? Are you referring to the fact that churches used to be in every village and hamlet? Or is it a fear because of the rise of Islam and a sense that national identity has been lost?

You might argue back that there are Christian schools, which I have no problem with as a term (not least because I went to one!). The reason I'm happy to use that is that it is still voluntary to send your children there. A Christian nation is not voluntary. If you are a citizen, the term would mean that there would have to be a sense in which you were 'Christian'. And this is just not how the New Testament understands being a Christian at all.

It fundamentally misreads the nature of the new covenant. To belong to the true Christian nation, you must actually be a Christian, with a new heart and a living, dynamic union with Jesus by the Spirit.

The ugly

Perhaps the most concerning parts of CN are as follows:

First, I think some forms of Christian nationalism are idolatrous. Essentially, the Christian nation becomes the Messiah and is the only way to save civilization. But this is not right. The only answer to the perilous state of the UK is the gospel of Jesus. Even if the UK was more 'Christian', this would not change the fundamental problem that we are by nature totally depraved and need the radical, life-transforming grace of God to be poured out upon us.

Second, I think some of the views expressed about ethnicity at best border on being racist, and at worst actually are racist. As one troubling example, Stephen Wolfe suggests in his book that a nation should not have more than two ethnicities. How on earth can you justify that biblically? Even within Israel, foreigners could have a legal right to live in Israel, under its law, submitting to some of its cultural norms.

Even if advocates of CN are not racists, there is a danger their political theology leads them that way. It was striking that after his book was published, Stephen Wolfe made comments on Twitter about interethnic marriage. Kinism, the belief that racial segregation and ethnic homogeneity are biblically ordained, disturbingly finds a home within the broader CN movement. It is connected to white supremacy and whilst not all CN supporters agree with it, the mere fact it exists within the movement at all is deeply disturbing.

Third, I think there is also a worrying reliance on a prince-like hero figure who will rule as a sort of benign dictator (a trend which can be detected in some (not all) of the support for Donald Trump, to give one example).

In other words I think CN would happily get rid of democracy. In the Bible we are clearly commanded not to put our trust in princes. History is filled with examples of what goes wrong when power is overly concentrated in one man.

Finally, I think the tone employed by some advocates is all wrong. They are willing to make highly inflammatory statements, some of which may be true (and some of which are decidedly not). But they lack the combination of truth and grace we see exemplified perfectly in the Lord Jesus.

The key question

There is so much more than needs to be said about Christian nationalism. How much it progresses here in the UK remains to be seen. I also predict that the mainstream media will blur the lines, as so often happens, between more biblical, conservative Christians and the more hardliners within the CN movement.

I want to see our faith impacting our nation and I urge the church to do so by means of persuasion and being a faithful presence on key ethical issues. But in my heart, I want to encourage you to engage wisely and carefully. The key question is whether CN is biblical? Is it consistent with the gospel?

The Guardian is not wrong to warn against false prophets. May God grant us all wisdom in navigating these strange times as His Kingdom advances.

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