Faith and England's National Identities launch event, online, 4th February 2026: Keynote address by Professor Linda Woodhead, F. D. Maurice Professor, King's College London

Mainstream Churches and the rise of Christian Nationalism

In December 2025, in reaction to a Christmas carol event held by the far-right leader Tommy Robinson in central London, the Church of England launched a poster campaign.[1] One said 'Outsiders Welcome', the other 'Christ Has Always Been in Christmas', a direct reference to Robinson's 'Put the Christ Back into Christmas'.[2] Anglican bishops and an official video repeated the central message: true Christianity is inclusive.[3]

This attempt to push back against Christian ethno-nationalism is hampered by the fact that the Church of England, like many other mainstream churches, both Catholic and Protestant, has been getting into bed with an authoritarian agenda for many decades.[4] This makes it hard now to distance itself effectively, even in self-defensive reaction. It is one thing to assert that this Church speaks for true Christianity, much harder to acknowledge complicity with Christian nationalism or, more positively, to acknowledge British Muslims' contribution to English religious life and admit that the Church has something to learn.[5]

There is currently much interest in political authoritarianism, just as there was around the second world war, and for related reasons.[6] This interest can be augmented by taking seriously authoritarian tendencies in religion.[7] Doing so enables us to see how extreme forms of authoritarian religion work in alliance with mainstream forms. This is more enlightening than looking at extremes in isolation and asserting that they have nothing to do with 'real' Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or whatever. My focus today, as we celebrate the launch of the

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[1] 'CofE to Challenge Tommy Robinson's "Put Christ Back into Christmas" Message,' The Guardian, accessed April 15, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/07/church-of-england-campaign-challenging-tommy-robinson-put-christ-back-into-christmas-message.
[2] 'Tommy Robinson's London "Christmas Service" Draws about 1,000 People,' The Guardian, accessed April 15, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/dec/13/tommy-robinsons-london-christmas-service-draws-around-1000-people.
[3] 'CofE Responds to Tommy Robinson's Carols Event with "Christmas is for All" Message, The Guardian, accessed April 15, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/13/c-of-e-responds-to-tommy-robinsons-carols-event-with-christmas-is-for-all-message
[4] Andrew Brown and Linda Woodhead, *That Was the Church, That Was: How the Church of England Lost the English People* (London: Bloomsbury 2016).
[5] Hannah Strømmen and Ulrich Schmiedel discuss in detail the failure of the Church of England under Justin Welby to repudiate the Christian far right effectively in *The Claim to Christianity: Responding to the Far Right* (London: SCM, 2020), 92-118.
[6] For example, Tim Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017) and *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe and America* (London: Bodley Head, 2018); Anne Applebaum, *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World* (London: Penguin, 2024).
[7] There are many linkages, in both directions. Culture wars, for example, began within religions before spreading more widely.

'Faith and England's National Identities' within the Centre for English Identity and Politics, is on Christianity in England.

Authoritarian religion

Back in 1982, I left my rural Somerset home and state school and went to Cambridge University to read theology and religious studies. In my first week a male student from the Christian Union asked me out for a curry after Sunday service in a CofE evangelical church popular with students. I had never had a curry or been to an evangelical church and I said yes. The curry was excellent. The church service was not. I could not crawl out of there quickly enough.

I had been schooled in county council religion in the local Church of England village primary school, studied the Bible at 'A' Level, and absorbed Germaine Greer on the side. I was appalled at what I was now hearing! It seemed like a different religion from the one I knew. I was shocked by the triumphalist, narrow interpretation of the scriptures. By the anti-intellectualism. The elitism. The constant criticism of the secular world. The sexism and the willingness of women to sit there and be instructed by the men. I experienced it as a suffocating exercise in control – in being told what to think, what to feel, and what to do. Yet this was a kind of Anglicanism that was to stage something of a takeover of the Church of England in the coming decades, at the expense of the enculturated rural version I was schooled in.

What I was reacting against back then were some of the same tendencies that are labelled authoritarian in relation to politics. Now that I have encountered different forms of religion around the world, I would single out the following characteristics in combination as markers of authoritarian religion in general.

1. Advocating obedience to religious authority at the expense of personal sovereignty. The two are not seen as compatible; it is a zero-sum game. The latter must decrease so that the former can increase.
2. Masculine-dominated, usually expressed as pro 'family' as that is defined by the religious leaders.
3. Exclusivist and dualistic. Strong opposition to the 'secular', to other religions, and just as fiercely, to 'liberal' versions of the same religion. Often tied to an apocalyptic sense that a final battle lies ahead in which the faithful will be vindicated.
4. Self-idealising. The chosen faith is true, good and sufficient. Goes along with resistance to criticism and any outside accountability.[8]

Clearly, this is an 'ideal type' of authoritarian religion. In practice, different manifestations of authoritarian religion combine these elements in different ways and mix them with other ingredients. The language changes over time. Since the 1980s, for example, western Christian

[8] This resistance to criticism and accountability has been particularly evident in the mainstream churches' reluctance to deal with the problem of clerical sexual abuse. For Britain, see 'Child Protection in Religious Organisations and Settings Investigation Report,' Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse, September 2021, accessed 17 April 2026, https://www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/investigation/cp-religious-organisations-settings.html.

authoritarianism has enthusiastically embraced 'post-liberal' and 'post-secular' agendas and become 'anti-woke'.

There is some overlap between the concept of authoritarian religion and that of fundamentalism (also an ideal type). I see fundamentalism as a subspecies. It is a distinctively twentieth-century kind of authoritarian religion that reacts against 'secular liberalism'. Its distinctive mark is the reduction of a religious tradition to its essential elements or 'fundamentals' based on an authoritative and sufficient text. It grew up in the age of mass advertising and broadcasting and adapted 'the' religious message to fit.[9] Typically, fundamentalism develops its own institutions to spread its message and shelter its followers. The church I was taken to in Cambridge was not fundamentalist, though it shared a good deal.

A critic might say: surely all religion is authoritarian. In Christianity, Protestants are scripturally authoritarian; Catholics and the Orthodox are sacramentally authoritarian; liberals are morally authoritarian; liberation theologians… here the case starts to break down. All the main strands of any one religious tradition or 'world religion' have more and less authoritarian manifestations – and anti-authoritarian elements, too. Religions' liberal wings are by name and nature critical of illiberal religion. Their mystical, experiential strands are a further complicating and often confounding element. That is even before we note the complexity of how things play out in real life authoritarian religion, as numerous studies have shown.[10] It is a caricature to see all religion as authoritarian.

Christian ethnonationalism

The version of Christian nationalism that has become increasingly visible in Britain is, like fundamentalism, a subspecies of authoritarian religion. Its distinctiveness lies in its defence of what it calls 'Christian culture' or 'Christian civilisation' (occasionally 'Judaeo-Christian') where these are racial and ethnic as well as a religious categories.[11] You do not need to be a devout Christian or churchgoer to be 'culturally Christian'. It is a birthright. It is the basis of all that is good in 'our' culture: our values, our way of life, democracy itself. Christian cultural values include faith, family, free speech and, for some, the free market. Immigration is a deadly threat to Christian civilization, as is 'wokeism': both must be fiercely resisted. Only a muscular reassertion of Christian culture can prevent 'civilisational collapse'. As Danny Kruger put it in a speech to an empty parliamentary chamber:

> A wind is blowing, a storm is coming, and when it hits, we are going to learn if our house is built on rock or on sand… a new restoration is needed now, revival of the faith, the recovery of Christian politics, a re-founding of this nation on the teachings that Alfred made the basis of the common law of England all those centuries ago.[12]

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[9] Timothy Gloeg, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

[10] See, for example, the classic study by Nancy Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

[11] These are identified as the two central tropes of Christian nationalism in Europe by Strømmen and Schmiedel, *The Claim to Christianity*.

[12] 'Danny Kruger (Jul 17 2025): I Gave a Speech Today in an Empty Chamber,' accessed 16 April, 2026, https://knowingthetimes.org.uk/basic-page/danny-kruger-jul-17-i-gave-speech-today-empty-chamber. This speech is also on the 'Faith and England's national identities' website and Substack.

This version of Christian ethno-nationalism relies on the notion of Christian 'culture' to drive its illiberal programme; when it takes a more extreme and potentially violent form it adds to this the idea of a 'crusade'.[13]

Francis's Davis's paper on the Centre's website and Substack, 'The Architecture of the British Christian Right', explains the underpinning infrastructure of English Christian nationalism.[14] He covers its longstanding plans to widen its sphere of influence, its national and transnational networks, its funding sources and key players. The latter include academics like the theologian and friend of J D Vance, Dr James Orr, and financiers like Paul Marshall. The Danube Institute funded by the Orban government has been a backer. Davis exposes a movement that is active at the very top of society – in the public schools, Oxbridge, London clubs, hedge funds – and in a less organised way at the bottom, most notably with the recent conversion to Christianity of Tommy Robinson. Davis distinguishes a Radical Christian Right, who have a shared agenda with Christian nationalists in the USA and want to 'Make Britain Christian Again', and a Neo-liberal Christian Right who share a core theology but have a more global aspiration to win the world for Christ, capitalism and, quite possibly, kleptocrats.

In terms of reception, Davis notes that there is also a myopic Christian middle in Britain, which welcomes the Christian right out of a misplaced sense of solidarity against secular society. He concludes his paper like this: 'When Tommy Robinson goes to church, he may just find a good deal of it that he likes: nice people who do not know who he or the rest of the Radical Right are or what they represent. Good folk frustrated by a 'secular' society they cannot trust. Kind people shorn of political sensibilities. Worthy people thinking they are free of party bias while actually today being immersed in the new politics that is replacing it.'

I am making the same point by focusing on the authoritarian tendencies shared by mainstream churches and Christian nationalism. These things are not the same, but they have much in common. They both idealise Christianity, reject secular and spiritual liberalism *tout court*, embrace a muscular masculinity, and have a dualistic and apocalyptic sensibility. They converge over culture-war talking points and anti-wokeism. They have overlapping social networks, personnel and financial backers. But how exactly does the connection play out, and should concern about extreme religious authoritarianism lead to greater caution about more mainstream forms?

Reasons for tolerating authoritarian religion

Despite the dangers, liberal democracies are right to extend generous toleration to authoritarian forms of religion in general. They are right not just because of their commitment to human rights and freedom of religion, they because of the nature of religion.

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[13] This is not to suggest that there is a conveyor belt from authoritarian religion to violent extremism. An understanding of culture as a toolkit helps explain why: obsession with machismo, a martial aesthetic and way of dressing, online violence and other aspects of culture can be combined with some religious messaging to produce violent extremism. A deepening of faith can be a way out as much as a way in.

[14] 'The Architecture of the British Christian Right: A Case Study in Political Capture,' Francis Davis, University of Southampton Centre for English Identity and Politics, accessed 17 April 2026, https://www.southampton.ac.uk/~assets/doc/fss-international/British%20Christian%20Right%209.10.pdf

Religions in Britain are voluntary organisations. If you do not like one you can walk out, as I did in Cambridge. Granted, that is more difficult if you are immersed in a tight-knit group that shuns apostates, like *haredi* Judaism or the Jehovah's Witnesses, but it is still formally true that you have exit rights. There is more freedom in relation to religion than citizenship – which makes political authoritarianism more dangerous than religious authoritarianism, except when they go hand in hand.

With religion, you can also defect in place.[15] I have learned from interviewing hundreds of religious people that it is quite possible to participate in authoritarian forms of religion and ignore a great deal of it. Back in the 1990s, for example, I attended a charismatic-evangelical group in the northwest of England that was part of a wider American network of conservative Christians – the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International. We would gather for a formal meal in a hotel and listen to locals or visiting firebrands offering personal testimonies and miraculous demonstrations, including the Toronto Blessing. On talking to participants, I was surprised to find that a lot of this washed over them. Many said that it was the cheap and tasty meal and the fellowship that attracted them.

I was reminded of this more recently when we interviewed students belonging to religious groups in California. As a Roman Catholic Mexican American said, there are 'many different ideas and beliefs that I don't follow', or as a Jewish student put it, 'I think most religions now are kind of outdated in their strict views, but if you're willing to be more loose with them… and have friends and a support system from the community then that would be – that's what I am – and I would call that religious.'[16]

The fact that many religious people, even in authoritarian groups, do not swallow it whole, points to a wider reason for toleration. Religions are not cultural monoliths into which you are socialised or converted and which lay down all the cultural paths you must follow in life. Ironically, such homogeneity is a myth shared by religious authoritarians and their critics alike.

In fact, religion, like culture, is more like a toolkit or a vast reservoir of resources on which individuals draw eclectically in different settings and situations. The religious purist would like to engineer a situation in which everything the religious believer does is governed by religion – so that you eat Islamic food, wear Islamic dress, eat sleep and pray in an Islamic way, and so on – but this rarely happens. Most people draw on different parts of their religious tradition in combination with elements from other traditions and other cultural resources. This is true of everything from language, to how we behave at the doctor's surgery, or when celebrating a birth. Some elements of religion are so blended with culture that it is hard to pull them apart. For most people it is the wider culture that supplies most of the strategies for living, with religion offering additional ones. It is this blending, incidentally, that is the common meaning of 'cultural religion', something rather different from the

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[15] For a recent example, in a haredi setting, see Yehudis Fletcher, *Chutzpah: A Memoir of Faith, Sexuality and Daring to Stay* (London: Penguin, 2025).
[16] Roberta Katz, Sarah Ogilvie, Jane Shaw and Linda Woodhead, *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 148-149.

meaning given to ‘cultural Christianity’ by Christian nationalists who understand that as a coherent civilizational whole.

A final reason for toleration of authoritarian religion is that there is usually contestation and subversion going on inside them. Although I did not hang around to find out, there may well have been individuals in the church in Cambridge who were fighting for various changes. Studies of authoritarian religious groups show how groups within them find ways to subvert, twist, and contest what is on offer.

Reasons for being more critical of mainstream authoritarian religion

The toleration of mainstream authoritarian religion should not, however, mask its dangers. The one I am addressing here is the way it can aid and abet the rise of more extreme forms of illiberal authoritarian religion, in this case Christian ethnonationalism of the kind we currently see across Europe and north America. Mainstream Christian authoritarianism aids Christian nationalism in at least three ways.

First, mainstream authoritarian Christianity gives a penumbra of plausibility to more extreme forms of Christianity. In England, for example, Holy Trinity Brompton or ‘HTB’, a charismatic evangelical Christian network centred on the Brompton church in central London, shelters within the Church of England. It is attractive to English elites, to bankers and businessmen. The HTB network shaped and backed Justin Welby who, when he became Archbishop of Canterbury, promoted HTB and its variety of Christian evangelicalism, drawing on the Church of England’s historic wealth to do so. HTB threatens to withdraw its financial contributions from the Church of England should it become more liberal on issues like homosexuality.[17]

There is nothing more respectable than the Church of England, with its ties to monarch, parliament and Oxbridge. For a religious network like HTB that is interested in political influence, but wants to exercise it quietly – chiefly by getting their men into positions of power in society – it is an excellent base. It lends plausibility to conservative causes. Prominent Christian nationalists like Danny Kruger worship at HTB. The hedge-fund co-owner Paul Marshall, who helps to finance GB News and owns UnHerd and the Spectator, attends HTB and has given financial support to its clergy training course, St Mellitus.[18] His friend, Bishop Graham Tomlin, former Dean of St Mellitus and editor of *Seen and Unseen*, had an office in Lambeth Palace when Welby was Archbishop. He spoke recently at the Christian nationalist conference in Oxford funded by the Danube Foundation, where he commented that ‘this sort of general cultural Christianity, where you like Christian carols and going to Handel’s ‘Messiah’ at Christmas, and get your kids baptised in the church, and that’s basically as far as it goes, and it’s got nothing to offer a secularising or paganising or

[17] There are no major studies of HTB because it does not give access and is litigious.
[18] Andrew Graystone, ‘The Marshall Plan’, Prospect 27 March 2024, accessed 17 April 2026, https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/ideas/media/65415/the-marshall-plan-paul-marshall-gb-news

Islamising society.'[19] Thus the link the mainstream authoritarianism and Christian nationalism boosts the latter, lending it greater reach and credibility.

A second reason for concern about mainstream forms of authoritarian religion is that they help to drive out non-authoritarian alternatives. This is part of the thesis of Charles Liebman's essay 'Extremism as a Religious Norm', published in 1983, and focusing on religion in Israel. It has been borne out by subsequent events. Liebman argues that religion unchecked does not move towards liberalism but extremism. One of the mechanisms is power grabs in religion led by those who claim to purify and reform the faith. This produces a ratchet effect as each leader becomes more extreme than the last. States that remain at arm's length from religion, and sometimes offer direct or indirect funding to religion, inadvertently accelerate the process. So does wider secularisation. The more authoritarian forms of religion take advantage, attacking and squeezing out liberal forms. As the authoritarian religious power grows, governments may become more dependent on their support, leading to further growth.

Liebman's thesis helps to make sense of what has happened to religion in England since the 1980s. Spokesmen for authoritarian religion have long waged a war of offence on liberal Christians; social media platforms gave them a powerful new means to do so. Parliament has become increasingly distant from religious matters, even concerning the established church. Theology has shrunk as an academic discipline, and departments studying religion have closed. The media have given more airtime to authoritarian voices in religion, and the view that these represent 'real' as opposed to diluted and wishy-washy religion has gained ground.

At the same time, new generations, increasingly raised to value personal sovereignty, are disposed to react against authoritarian religion, just as I did in Cambridge. As familiarity with alternative forms of the religion diminishes, they may even believe the propaganda that the authoritarian forms are the norm. They therefore turn either to the alternative forms of spirituality that have grown and diversified enormously since the 1980s and/or to solitary practice of their faith in a personal way, also a striking trend.[20] Others become fully secular. This accounts for the striking rise of those saying they have 'no religion' in censuses and surveys to around half the population.[21] In this way the public religious stage is increasingly left to more authoritarian forms of religion.

National religion and nationalism

Although I am highlighting how authoritarian movements in mainstream religious institutions like the Church of England aid and abet political authoritarianism, I do not wish to suggest that national religion is necessarily nationalist. Certainly, there have always been chauvinistic

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[19] 'Post-liberal Christian Revival Discussed at Pusey House, Oxford,' Madeleine Davis, Church Times, 27 March 2026, accessed 17 April 2026, https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2026/27-march/news/uk/post-liberal-christian-revival-discussed-at-pusey-house-oxford; 'The Gospel According to St Viktor,' David Aaronovitch, Notes from the Underground, 26 March 2026, Substack, accessed 17 April 2026, https://davidaaronovitch.substack.com/p/the-gospel-according-to-st-viktor

[20] Linda Woodhead, 'How Spirituality Grew Up and Out of Christianity,' in *The Shape of Spirituality: The Public Significance of a New Religious Formation,* eds Dick Houtman and Galen Watts, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2025), 39-58.

[21] 'The Rise of "No Religion" in Britain: The Emergence of a New Cultural Majority,' Linda Woodhead, The British Academy, 2016, accessed 17 April 2026, https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/1043/11_Woodhead_1825.pdf

and nationalistic tendencies in English Christianity, but there have also countervailing forces, both internal and external. These have included breadth of internal opinion, a greater variety within earlier English Christianity (Catholic and nonconformist), and close links with liberal institutions of state and society, including universities.

There have long been powerful non-nationalistic forms of national religion. I refer you, for example, to the priest and Anglican theologian after whom my chair at King's College is named, F D Maurice (1805-1872). Maurice thought that the national church's business was the self-critical improvement of itself and its society. This, Maurice argues, should make a national church modest through awareness of its limited, fallible, and enculturated nature. It is part of a culture, not high above it dispensing unmediated truth for all times and places. The religious, wrote Maurice in the 1850s, should rely on the Spirit of God to maintain 'national steadfastness, to support their love of truth… to purify their patriotism of exclusiveness…. To enable them to feel that all citizens of the same commonwealth, however different their ranks and civil positions, are, in the highest sense, equal; to give them the freedom, the manliness, the sympathy with those of other races, which selfishness is taking from them'.[22]

The Church of England is one of seven historic national Protestant churches in northern Europe, all dating from the Reformation of the sixteenth century.[23] They were integral to the early modern process of nation building, and they have histories of entanglement with nationalism and imperialism. Some of these national churches have recently shown themselves to be more capable of a decisive rejection of Christian nationalism than others.

The clearest example of successful distancing is by the Church of Norway, in response to the terrorist attacks by the Christian nationalist Anders Breivik in 2011. Breivik's 'Manifesto' appealed to both culture Christianity and crusader Christianity. He called for a 'Crusader Pope' to defend European culture against Islam.[24]

Breivik's attacks took place at a time when the Church of Norway was at the start of a process that would lead to its formal disestablishment. The Church embarked on a self-critical exploration of its role in an increasingly pluralist country. The idea of the *folkekirke* (peoples' church) as truly for all, whatever their religion or none, was taken seriously. Should not Muslims be welcome to pray in churches, and if so then Christians can pray in mosques, without either compromising their faith. The Church began to speak more openly about Christianity's anti-semitic and anti-Islamic past, as Christians and Muslims were drawn into more equal exchanges.

Later that same year, the leaders of the Islamic Council of Norway and the International Council of the Church of Norway signed a 'joint statement' in which they acknowledged that as faith leaders they have a special responsibility to distance themselves from the extremism that justifies itself in the name of their religions. They spoke of their concern about authoritarian tendencies 'in our own ranks'. In 2013, the Church published a book of

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[22] F.D.Maurice, *Theological Essays.* London: James Clarke, 1957 [1853], p. 275.
[23] The Churches of England, Scotland, Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland.
[24] Strømmen and Schmiedel, *The Claim to Christianity*, 44

resources arising out of these dialogues that aims to equip young people in churches, schools and other settings to assess what they are told in the name of religion. The resources explain how Christianity has contributed to ethnonationalism, and they point to Biblical and other texts that challenge this. In other words, the Church of Norway has responded to religious authoritarianism and prejudice not just by criticising it, but by taking a hard look at how it has been complicit, and by working in partnership with Muslims and others to do so.[25]

Conclusion

The dichotomy that authoritarian religion sets up between itself as the true religion and everything else as liberal and compromised is as false as its choice between patriotism and rootless cosmopolitanism. Timothy Synder's book *On Freedom* (2024) is dedicated 'To those who wish to be free'. Authoritarian religion does not wish us to be free, it wants us to tell us how bad everything is and how only it has the answers. It is altogether different from the kinds of liberal religion, spirituality and secularity that support sovereign individuals in sovereign nations.

I have tried to show that even rather mild and mainstream forms of religious authoritarianism can aid and abet extreme forms. My focus has been on Christianity in England. The fact that English Christian ethnonationalism is not as strong or well-embedded as it is the USA makes the support of mainstream churches more rather than less important to its success over here.[26]

[25] All information in this paragraph from Strømmen and Schmiedel, *The Claim to Christianity,* 54-59.

[26] In their book *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2022) Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry trace American Christian nationalism back to 1690, arguing that it has existed as a continuous, evolving tradition for three centuries.