

Christian Nationalism: A Double-Edged Sword?

Lessons from the Welsh tradition and the challenge of the phenomenon today

Rev. Dr. Rhys Llwyd, February 2026

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Introduction

On a warm, sunny afternoon on the Maes of the National Eisteddfod at Swansea in 2006 — almost twenty years ago now — I made my way to Bangor University’s tent. I had received an invitation to a reception where I, along with a number of other prospective research students, would be congratulated on being awarded scholarships. As was typical at such events at the time, the red wine flowed freely. There is no need to name the company, but it is enough to say that he was well known for his contribution to nation building — and for being good company.

The subject of the research I was about to begin was “*The Christian Nationalism of R. Tudur Jones*.” On hearing this, one of those present turned to me and asked, in a rather patronising tone: “Rhys, why on earth have you chosen to study such an irrelevant subject in the twenty-first century?” It has to be said that this was not the kind of response a fledgling research student would expect from one of the University’s senior officers.

And yet, almost twenty years later, here we are — on the eve of an election in 2026 — and one of the topics of discussion, one of the ideologies that may play a not insignificant role in public debate, is that old “irrelevant” subject: Christian Nationalism.

From a Christian and theological perspective, it remains a profoundly relevant subject — but, unfortunately, for all the wrong reasons. For it is not the “Cenedlaetholdeb Gristnogol” of Lewis Valentine, Gwynfor Evans, or Dr Tudur Jones that has returned to public discourse, but rather a very different phenomenon: *Christian Nationalism*. An ideology that uses much of the same language and rhetoric, but which arises from a wholly different source.

This is a phenomenon that has been simmering in the United States since the rise of the religious right in the 1980s, but which reached a disturbing climax in the unholy alliance of certain elements of the evangelical tradition with Donald J. Trump and the far right. By now, it is

also a phenomenon that can be seen gaining ground here in Wales — through the influence of figures such as Tommy Robinson, and also Welsh Christian leaders such as Faith Jarvis, who has given a platform on social media to voices from the far right, even though her ministry is sponsored by her church in Neath.¹

In this paper — which is intentionally more of a pastoral response than an academic one — I hope to share something of my personal pilgrimage in relation to this subject; to outline some of the key principles of the Welsh tradition of Christian Nationalism; to show clearly how the *Christian Nationalism* that has recently come to our attention is a very different phenomenon; and, finally, to draw some conclusions for our present context.

A product of nonconformist Wales

I was brought up in a Christian household that was also, quite naturally, a nationalist one. Going to chapel on Sundays and putting up Plaid Cymru posters were two rituals that formed an integral part of the rhythm of family life, and ones I had no reason to question as a child. I have a trolley-load of warm childhood memories: taking part in chapel activities, and going around the village with my father at election time, delivering the Plaid leaflets. For us as a family, our Christianity and our Welshness sat together in a wholly natural and comfortable way.

But in time — as I reached my teenage years and began to question almost everything — I encountered a new phenomenon that left me completely perplexed: Welsh-speakers who chose to worship in English-language churches! Gradually, I began to hear some Christians explain that choice by saying that “the gospel is more important than the language”. It sounded pious, but there was something about it that made me deeply uncomfortable.

By the end of my time in secondary school, the Plaid Cymru posters had turned into Cymdeithas yr Iaith placards. And although I continued to go faithfully and joyfully to chapel every Sunday, by then I was ready to question the beliefs I had previously accepted without question. Although my parents encouraged me both to grapple with the big questions of faith and to throw myself into campaigning for the language, that combination did not please everyone. My rebellion was not a comfortable one for every Christian I encountered.

The crisis intensified after I arrived at university. At times, a meeting of the Christian Union would take place at the same time as a cell meeting of Cymdeithas yr Iaith. The tension that already lived within me thus became tangible: I had to choose one meeting and neglect the other. I was told — sometimes kindly, sometimes unkindly — that I had to decide who I really was. Did I belong to God’s people, or was I a “nashi”?

It was around this time that I first met Arfon Jones. Having soon come to understand that he had once been very active in Cymdeithas yr Iaith, and at the same time deeply passionate about the

¹ <https://nation.cymru/news/concerns-over-evangelist-youtubers-promotion-of-the-far-right/>

work of the gospel in Wales, I ventured to send him an email, sharing something of the anguish in my heart. I told him of my frustration: that many of my evangelical Christian peers were unable to understand my concern for the language, and that many of my fellow language activists had no interest at all in my faith. So what, then, was I to do on this lonely island?

I remember clearly the first sentence of Arfon's reply: "Are you familiar with the work of Dr Tudur?" And that changed everything. Through the work of Dr Tudur, it became clear why I had been raised in a household that saw faith and nationalism not as a contradiction, but as two wholly natural realities that could belong deeply together.

In truth, however, this was not just my story. This close relationship between the Christian faith — particularly in its nonconformist expression — and the development of Christian nationalism has been part of our shared story in Wales, whether we are believers or not.

In his influential book *Dominion*, the historian Tom Holland argues that the moral imagination of the modern West has been profoundly shaped by Christianity, even where people are unaware of this or do not consider themselves Christians.

Ideas such as the dignity of the individual, the protection of the weak from the strong, suspicion of totalitarianism, and the belief that history is moving towards something better all stem from the Christian revolution that placed the crucified God — a victim, not a conqueror — at the centre of the story. According to Tom Holland, these moral values gradually permeated Western consciousness until they became invisible and almost unquestioned, like the air we breathe.

As a result, even secular movements continue to operate within a Christian moral framework — and paradoxically, the West continues to think with a "Christian worldview" even while believing it has left Christianity behind, since the very idea of the secular emerges from Christian theology that seeks to separate church and state.

In the same way, it can be argued that the tradition of Plaid Cymru today — decades after leading nonconformists such as Gwynfor Evans and Dr Tudur Jones stepped off the stage — remains, at its core, a product of nonconformist Wales. Indeed, were Rhun ap Iorwerth to succeed in his bid to become the next First Minister of Wales, this could be interpreted as the culmination of the political project of Welsh nonconformity; a culmination that may have come, perhaps, forty years too late for many to see it as such.

In other words, even in this contemporary, secular Wales, the ongoing influence of religion, faith and theology on our political imagination cannot be ignored. And when that influence is neglected or denied, a vacuum is created — a vacuum that more reactionary voices can fill, appropriating and misusing the language of our faith and turning it to narrow and dangerous ends.

Cenedlaetholdeb Gristnogol

Before going any further, it is important to make one thing absolutely clear: nationalism cannot be endorsed uncritically from a Christian perspective. Depending on its nature, nationalism may be opposed or cautiously welcomed. Nationalism is an empty ideology — that is, it is not an ideology that can stand on its own. In order to be meaningful, nationalism must adopt other ideologies.

Therefore, from a Christian point of view, it is impossible either to oppose or to embrace nationalism without first asking what kind of nationalism is in question.

It is obvious to all that nationalism can become an idol, especially when it is bound up with other ideologies such as fascism and racism. This kind of nationalism reached its horrific climax in Nazi Germany, but can also be seen in aspects of the British Empire and other Western powers overseas. More recently, it is evident in contemporary “Christian Nationalism”.

However, it is important for us in Wales to remember that even our own seemingly benign nationalism can become an idol. If anything, our nationalism may find it easier to do so, because it happens in a more subtle way due to its peaceful character. The nationalism of dictators and armies is easier to recognise as idolatrous than the nationalism of poetry and four-part harmony. Perhaps idolatrous nationalism is a bit like bad breath — you can smell it on others, but not on yourself.

And so one of the greatest contributions of the Welsh nonconformist tradition was to help us see that a healthy Christian nationalism is possible — a form of nationalism that promotes and celebrates minority cultures, and a nationalism that exists as a servant in the pursuit of a political programme that enables social justice. Not only can Christians tolerate the kind of nationalism that developed in Wales; historically, many Welsh Christians have welcomed it as a means of protecting and nurturing the kind of humanity God intended from the very beginning: the beauty of a humanity that expresses unity in diversity.

Nationalism with an agenda

Those of you who have been following developments within the nationalist movement in Wales in recent years will be aware that there has been some discussion around YesCymru’s decision to remain neutral on a range of specific political questions. They support independence, but beyond that they are deliberately ambiguous in order to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. As a result, they have been criticised for failing to be sufficiently clear about what kind of Wales they would like an independent Wales to become.

As I have followed these developments over recent years, I have found myself wondering: what would R. Tudur Jones have had to say about all this? In particular, what would he have said

about the danger of supporting nationalism or a movement uncritically? And might he have called on YesCymru to be more explicit about the ideological and philosophical foundations of their political beliefs?

By failing to be clear about the purpose of independence, and about the ideological basis of nationalism, there is a danger that the “cause” becomes an end in itself — or an idol, if you prefer. In the same way that R. Tudur Jones offered an assessment and critique of the philosophical foundations of Adfer in the 1970s, I believe there is room today for Christians to examine the Welsh nationalist movement critically. Not in order to undermine it — quite the opposite, in fact — since, in general terms, we support it and wish it well, but so that any success it achieves is rooted in a robust ideology, as a means of creating a fairer Wales that reflects the values of the Kingdom of God more faithfully than the present situation.

Certainly, Christians and churches in Wales who have historically been supportive of Welsh nationalism must refrain from becoming apologists for Plaid Cymru — especially if that party were to come to power as part of a government. Indeed, that would present a new and serious challenge for many Christians and churches in Wales: how, in such a context, can a government be held to account without those Christians who campaigned for it losing moral and theological independence?

For if the Church fails to fulfil its prophetic role — that is, to speak truth to power, even when that power is friendly — then it risks slipping into the role of a servant to a political project. And that, I would suggest, is precisely what has happened in the case of the contemporary phenomenon known as “Christian Nationalism”: when faith loses its capacity to critique and becomes a tool to justify power rather than to challenge it.

The challenge of “Christian Nationalism” today

Turning, then, to the contemporary phenomenon known as “Christian Nationalism”, it is important for me to make one thing clear from the outset: I have not undertaken an academic study of this subject. However, for those who wish to read a thorough and rigorous analysis, I can strongly recommend the work of Helen Paynter and Maria Power, *The Church, The Far Right, and the Claim to Christianity*.

The observations I offer here therefore arise not so much from detailed research as from pastoral experience — from listening, observing, and walking alongside people in Wales today. In that sense, my intention is to try to name what is happening on the ground, and to reflect on it in the light of our faith.

We live in an age in which claims of alternative truths overwhelm us, especially online. We are now all too familiar with conspiracy theories, populism that deliberately plays on people’s fears,

echo chambers in which people hear only the voices they already agree with, and a context in which so-called alternative facts are believed on the basis of feeling rather than reality.

Such tendencies have always existed on the margins of society. But they have now moved into the centre of public life, as politicians who espouse this worldview gain popularity. It is a phenomenon that affects people from every background, every social class, and every political persuasion. It is just as easy for someone from the baby boomer generation, from a comfortable economic background, to be radicalised as it is for a young, unemployed person.

It has also become socially acceptable to deny the scientific consensus on global warming, or to spread claims about people from other ethnic backgrounds in ways that would not have been possible — or acceptable — a decade ago. This can be seen across the Western world: in the United States, under the influence of the MAGA movement; and here in Wales and the United Kingdom, under the influence of new populist parties and movements.

And what causes me particular concern as a Christian is this: that some on the far right are using Christian language, imagery and rhetoric to promote their narrative — even claiming that they, rather than the church, stand for “true Christianity”. When church leaders speak out against this, they are criticised for being “woke” and told to stick to “spiritual” matters. But, as R. Tudur Jones constantly reminded us, it is for the church — not politicians — to define the scope of the church’s mission.

Epistemological Capture

So what, then, is happening before our eyes? Perhaps what we are witnessing is what might be called *epistemological capture* (or sometimes called *epistemological captivity*). That is, a situation in which the ways we know what we know — the rules, conventions and frameworks that govern knowledge — have been seized by powerful forces. Whether through social media algorithms, political ideologies, or movements that deliberately operate by appealing to fear.

What makes epistemological capture so dangerous is not only that it leads people to believe false things, but that it corrupts the very framework for discerning truth itself. The capacity to judge, to question, and to weigh evidence has been distorted. So, as Christians, we are not only engaged in a struggle over particular truths; we are also engaged in a deeper struggle to restore people’s confidence in the very idea that objective truth exists at all.

In order to begin to understand why so many people — including Christians — are today falling into epistemological captivity, I believe we must acknowledge that we are living through a significant period of transformation in the West. For many, society has changed faster than personal identity has been able to adapt. For some Christians, the twilight of Christendom and the sudden shift to a secular, and at the same time multi-faith, society has been a profound shock. This has led some to feel that they are being persecuted, when in reality what is happening is the loss of status and privileges that had been taken for granted for generations.

On top of all this, there has been an ongoing economic crisis since at least 2008, shattering the promise that education and hard work would inevitably lead to security and a better standard of living. This combination of cultural, spiritual and economic insecurity creates a deep identity crisis. And when identity is under siege, the ability to discern truth fades. When fear reigns, truth retreats — leaving fertile ground for ideologies that run counter to the values of the Kingdom of Christ to grow and flourish.

In this light, “Christian Nationalism” can be understood as a symptom of a vacuum of meaning: an attempt to fill the gap left where identity, security and hope have receded.

And so, from a pastoral and Christian perspective, I believe we must be uncompromising in our criticism of political leaders who exploit this situation for the sake of power, while at the same time being compassionate and patient in our approach to ordinary individuals — some of whom may well be members of our own churches — who have been drawn in by this rhetoric, not out of malice, but out of fear and confusion.

Conclusions

So, what is the calling for Christians in Wales in this election year? Certainly not to retreat from the public conversation, nor to surrender our political imagination to voices that shout louder and harder, but to remain faithful to the Gospel that calls us to love the truth, resist fear, and walk humbly with our God.

At its best, the Welsh tradition of Christian Nationalism reminds us that the church and its faith are never meant to be servants of political power, but a voice that challenges power; that love of nation is not an absolute, but a call to serve your nation in the light of our allegiance to Christ.

In the face of the contemporary challenge of “Christian Nationalism” — an ideology that uses the language of Christ while denying his way — our calling is to be a people more deeply rooted in the truths that enable us to discern between good and evil. To be a people who dare to hold on to hope when others give in to fear. People who renew the mind rather than conform to the patterns of this world. People who remember that the centre of our faith is not a flag, a party, or a state, but the crucified Christ — who continues to call us, in Wales today.

Summarising his vision of Christian Nationalism at the end of his volume *Desire of Nations*, R. Tudur Jones writes: “[our nationalism] asks nothing for itself that it does not wish for others. It is surely along some such path that the desire of the nations will be fulfilled.”