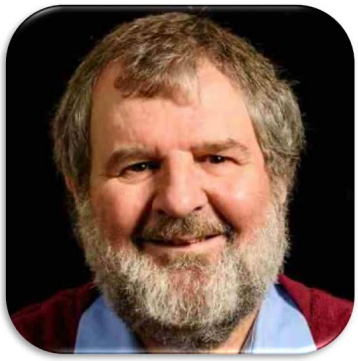
God, government and Christian Nationalism

Guest Editorial – Pentecost 2026



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Britain is getting through its prime ministers at speed. David Cameron lasted a whole six years, but in the last ten since then we have had May, Johnson, Truss, Sunak and Starmer. As I write Starmer is already being plotted away. They have all been opposed by a growing movement often calling itself 'Christian nationalism', much to the annoyance of both politicians and church leaders.

Why is this happening? Who *should* govern us? And why should the rest of us consent?

In 1651, two years after the beheading of King Charles I, Thomas Hobbes published *Leviathan*, arguing that life would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' unless the people submitted to rule by a monarch. A little later John Locke defended the ousting of another king, James II. Both produced a social contract theory. These two, still big names in political philosophy, were concerned with events of their own day and both saw fit to invent a new theory.

Why? It is not as though governments had only just been invented. What had gone wrong with the old theories?

Theologies of government

Previous ones had depended on God, and in Western Europe God had become the object of too much conflict. From the early days of Christianity church leaders had denounced each other for heresy. Augustine had taught that only members of the true church would escape punishment in hell after death. Come the Black Death, the threat became urgent: *anybody* might be dead next week. And come the Reformation, who knew which was the true church anyway? To seventeenth century European intellectuals, *any* justification of government power had to be kept away from theories about God.

This was the innovation. Since at least five thousand years ago – and probably way before, for all we know – kings had claimed that their power to rule was authorised by the chief god.

In reality of course kings became kings because they had the biggest army. But if everybody accepted that, it would be obvious that they had no moral authority: they were simply the biggest robbers. The *only* reason for obeying them would be the threat of punishment. Governments therefore have always claimed that their authority comes from beyond themselves: typically, the chief god. They have often taken trouble to present themselves as more godlike than other humans, closer to the divine. In England Henry VIII was careful to cultivate his image. In France the supreme example was Louis XIV. For To attract consent rulers like to acquire an aura of divinity.

The will of the people

So when, in the seventeenth century, God was expelled from the system of moral justification, why *should* people obey their governments? The dominant theory since then has been that government should accord with the will of the people being governed.

This is more democratic. But unlike gods (as usually conceived) the people can be unsure what to will, can fall out with each other about it, and can change their minds. Ten years ago 'the will of the people' in Britain was tested in a referendum on the European Union. Many voters didn't know how to vote and regretted their decision afterwards. If the will of the people is paramount, they need reliable information and a moral commitment to willing what they ought to will.

Decision-making by 'the will of the people' gives immense power to those who can manipulate it. We may boast of a 'free press' but our newspapers, television channels and social media are in fact controlled by a small number of very wealthy people, all committed to the interests of people like themselves.

For a few decades after the Second World War the will of the people was explored through public debate on what the nation's priorities should be. Then came neoliberalism, with its emphasis on the individual: voters should forget about society and vote according to self-interest. The 'rational actor' in the economy, it told us, *ought* to maximise his or her own money.

But is this really the will of the people? Or is it rather the will of the loudest voices trying to manipulate us? Many people have other priorities, like feeding the hungry and net zero emissions. And if neoliberalism does not show us how to decide what to will, what does?

To look for an answer is to look for something with moral authority to transcend our gut individualism: a sort of god-substitute. Recently the usual one has been the economy. 'Managing the economy' has become the dominant political narrative. In reality the economy is just an abstract of statistics, but it is often treated as the one thing that must be obeyed. Governments tell us that managing it well will produce increasing wealth.

For many it has delivered increasing poverty instead. It is not at all surprising that its victims are rebelling. Whether we call them 'far right' or 'fascist' they are reacting against the gap between the promises and the reality.

'Christian nationalism' lumps together Christianity and national identity as though they are the same kind of thing. They are not. Christianity, like Islam, was a universalist tradition from the start, appealing to a god who created and loves all the world's people regardless of nation – though sadly, demonising Muslims and conducting crusades against them is a significant part of medieval history. Nationalism, as an identity marker, came later.

Whether we see ourselves as Catalan or Spanish, English or British, has its roots in past rulers seeking power at the expense of competitors. If you get your DNA tested you will probably find you are of mixed nationality.

Yet it will not do to simply despise the purveyors of these appeals to past values. Yes, it mangles Christianity; but it is a rising movement because it expressed a real need. 'The will of the people' as expressed through the voting system has become, in practice, the will of some people at the expense of others. While it suits governments to claim that they represent the will of the people, the only way opponents can make their case is by appealing to a moral authority that transcends them.

Movements of the oppressed always face a dilemma. They do not have powerful leaders among their number. Do they look for one from outside? Mark 8:27-30, if I read it correctly, illustrates the issue.

> Jesus asked his disciples: 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'

Then Peter gets a telling-off. The text is unclear about why, perhaps because Mark saw Jesus as the true messiah while Jesus himself would have rejected the role of military leader. The context was increasing starvation at a time of Roman occupation. The text indicates that the people saw him as a *prophet* in the tradition of Elijah and John the Baptist, representing the peasants as he spoke truth to power. A *messiah*, by contrast, would be a powerful outsider using force to intervene.

Today, given the widespread concern with what is now called 'the cost-of-living crisis', it is not at all surprising that the powerless long for an outsider to intervene with power to make changes: Farage, Trump or whoever. A messiah. But people like that usually have their own, very different, agendas.

'The will of the people' doesn't work well because it is too open to manipulation. Whether the will of God works any better depends on what we think God is like. This is one reason why I remain a monotheist. If we could publicly debate better ways of organising our society so that the needs of all are met and the world can live at peace, one way to approach it would be to ask what an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent god would recommend.

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