Between Opposition and Dialogue: Anti-Racist and Anti-Fascist Practice Informed by Baptist Tradition

Paul Weller

Paul Weller is Research Fellow in Religion and Society at Regent's Park College and Associate Member of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Oxford; Emeritus Professor, University of Derby; Visiting Professor, Centre for Peace and Security, Coventry University.
paul.weller@regents.ox.ac.uk
https://www.theology.ox.ac.uk/people/professor-dr-paul-gareth-weller
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1690-5261

Abstract
This article responds to the recommendation in Helen Paynter and Maria Power's *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity* (2024). In the face of a far-right appropriation of Christian symbols and concepts, this invites those in 'dissenting' Christian traditions to identify 'creative' ways to 'embody and articulate' dissenting values in 'fresh ways'. Informed by wider Baptist heritage, autobiographical reflections from practice, and particularly referring to the UK and Germany, the author argues for what he sees as the socio-political implications of a Christian anti-racist and anti-fascist practice, before setting out some tentative recommendations for individual and corporate Christian practice that seek to *differentiate* between the inclusive good news of Christianity and the Far Right's 'claims to Christianity', while *opposing* the *political parties*, *organisations*, *and initiatives* of the Far Right, and maintaining the possibility of robust *individual* dialogue with those who have lent their support to such.

Keywords
Anti-racism; anti-fascism; dialogue; Baptist tradition

Introduction

This origin of this article is in a response to the timely and important collection of papers edited by the Baptist scholar Helen Paynter and her Roman Catholic colleague Maria Power on *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity*,[1] including an oral presentation made in one of

[1] *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity*, ed. by Helen Paynter and Maria Power (SCM Press, 2024).

the seminars that was organised to engage with aspects of the book.[2] The article's aim is to focus on responding to the last of the book's ten key recommendations; namely that 'churches in the dissenting traditions should seek creative ways to draw on the deep values of dissent and democracy that they embody and to articulate these in fresh ways to their congregations of today and tomorrow'.[3]

The overall relevance and challenge in relation to the Far Right's 'claim to Christianity' is especially pertinent to the attempted appropriations of Christian symbols and concepts being made in some European countries. In the introduction to their book, Paynter and Power note that there is no consensus on the use of the term 'the Far Right'.[4] And, while it is in principle important to differentiate between the Far Right and other right-wing forces that have a more democratic orientation, much of what is advocated by the Far Right in extreme forms both builds upon and, in turn, feeds what have become tropes that are more widely amplified within the echo chambers of the wider right-wing populist environment, leading to the increasing normalisation of these tropes in broader political discourse.

The timeliness of Paynter and Power's book was evidenced by the fact that the publishers brought forward its originally planned date of publication in the light of the violent attacks on asylum-seeker hotels and on Muslims and their places of worship that took place in the United Kingdom (UK), and especially in England and Northern Ireland,

---

[2] Book launch and panel discussion on *The Church, the Far Right and the Claim to Christianity*, organised by the Centre for Baptist Studies and the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence, at the Centre for Baptist Studies, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, 14 September 2024. Presentations at that event made by the editors of the book and by the present author are accessible via the Centre for Baptist Studies' You Tube channel, 'The Church, the Far Right and the Claim to Christianity Book Launch', CBS, 14 October 2024 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZfPZ7j-Uz3o> [accessed 12 November 2025]; and Paul Weller, 'Response 1', CBS, 14 October 2024 <https://youtube. com/9kzD0N6HOOM> [accessed 12 November 2024]. The Revd Professor Dr Paul Fiddes also made a response on the day.

[3] *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity*, ed. by Paynter and Power, p. 191.

[4] *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity,* ed. by Paynter and Power, pp. 3–7.

at the end of July and the beginning of August 2024.[5] These happened within a few weeks of the new Labour government and its Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, coming to power. They followed the fatal stabbings in Southport of three children and the injury of eight others. In relation to this, those whom the Prime Minister identified as 'far-right thugs' sought, through the rapid spread of social media disinformation, to exploit popular anger around these stabbings by (falsely) identifying the perpetrator of the attack as an asylum-seeker and/or a Muslim.

Many who were not themselves members of, or even necessarily sympathisers with, far-right groups or ideologies joined in with these events. But, equally, in contrast to the framing of these events by many media reports at the time, what took place was often far from the spontaneous gathering of general, public protests which then descended into violence. Rather, there was clear evidence that what took place was specifically organised and targeted by far-right forces which exploited broader public anger through connecting it with wider right-wing populist tropes concerning Muslims and asylum-seekers, and that this resulted in the threatening gathering of groups of people outside a number of mosques and places of asylum-seeker accommodation which, in some cases, also led to physical violence against these buildings.

Given their primarily Anglo-American market, the book's publishers will also have been aware of the relevance of Paynter and Power's book to the intensity of the 'culture wars' being fought out in the USA. In this, aspects of the 'claim to Christianity' were especially deployed in the run-up to the 5 November 2024 Presidential Election of Donald Trump and, following his election, have most recently been further stoked in the context of debates around the life and death by

[5] Rob Picheta, 'Rioters Carry Out Violent, Racist Attacks Across Several British Cities: What Happened, and What Comes Next', *CNN*, 7 August 2024 <https://edition.cnn.-com/2024/08/05/uk/uk-far-right-protests-explainer-gbr-intl/index.html> [accessed 17 October 2025].

assassination on 10 September 2025 of Charlie Kirk, and his role in relation to Christian Nationalism in the USA.[6]

Indeed, 'culture war' tensions also rose again in England in the wake of demonstrations held in late August and early September 2025 outside a hotel in Epping, Essex, which was being used to accommodate asylum-seekers and refugees, that took place in the wake of the arrest, trial, and conviction of one of those who had been resident there for, among other things, sexual assault on a fourteen-year-old girl. A widespread public hanging of St George flags[7] then took place across England in support of these protests in a way that (outside the context of major sporting events) has not been historically traditional in the country.

Then, on 13 September, a large demonstration was organised in London under the slogan of 'Unite the Kingdom' at which many St George and Union[8] flags were also in evidence. In addition, some of the demonstrators also carried crosses and chanted 'Christ is King', asserting forms of Englishness and Britishness through which Muslims were being defined as alien and Islam as a foreign religion in ways that were strongly condemned by the presidents of Churches Together in England.[9]

But the book is also very timely when seen in the context of the rise of both the Far Right and of the wider populist right wing in many other European countries. This includes, for example, Germany, which since early 2022 has been the author's country of formal and main

---

[6] Mara Richards Bim, 'How Charlie Kirk Went from College Dropout to Trump Influencer', *Baptist News Global*, 10 September 2025 <https://baptistnews.com/article/how-charlie-kirk-went-from-college-dropout-to-trump-influencer-2/> [accessed 17 October 2025], from an original article published by *Baptist News Global*, 15 April 2025.

[7] The red cross on a white background is the national flag of England. It is associated with St. George, the warrior patron saint of England who has often been depicted as a crusader.

[8] The Union flag, often referred to as the 'Union Jack', consists of the cross of St. George, edged in white, superimposed on the red saltire of Saint Patrick (the patron saint of Ireland), also edged in white, superimposed on the blue saltire of Saint Andrew (the patron saint of Scotland). This is the flag of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Wales having already been incorporated into the English kingdom when the English flag was created).

[9] 'Church Leaders Express "Deep Concern" at Christian Symbols Used in Unite the Kingdom March', *Religion Media Centre*, 23 September 2025 <https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/news/religion-news-24-september-2025/> [accessed 17 October 2025].

residence and, of which, since the summer of 2024, the author has also been a British–German dual national. Here, the seemingly inexorable rise of the political party the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*/Alternative for Germany) has been a powerful, if disturbing, reminder that the kind of nationalist furies that were unleashed in the UK's toxic Brexit debate by an increasingly confident tide of racism presenting itself in terms of the national interest are not confined to one part of Europe.[10]

Indeed, support for the AfD has continued to grow despite the fact that, in March 2020, the German *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (BfV, or Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution) had formally classified the AfD's faction known as *Der Flügel* (the Wing, and which at the time probably included around 20% of the AfD's membership), as 'a right-wing extremist endeavour against the free democratic basic order' and as 'not compatible with the Basic Law'; and it then also having classified the *Junge Alternative für Deutschland* (or JA, which from 2015 until January 2025 was the official youth wing of the AfD) as 'confirmed right-wing extremist'.

Having failed in its legal appeals against the findings of the BfV, with regard to *Der Flügel*, the AfD leadership requested that it should dissolve itself, following which its website was taken offline; while, with regard to the JA, the party's January 2025 conference resolved to replace it with another youth body. And at the same party conference in the run-up to the February 2025 German Federal Election, one of its co-leaders, Alice Weidel, invoked the highly controversial language of 'remigration'[11] as a concept within which the party proposed to approach issues around migration and the claiming of asylum. In the Federal Election, just over 20% of the electorate (including over 17% in the author's small German hometown of Boppard-am-Rhine) voted for the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD).

---

[10] Anthony Reddie, *Theologising Brexit: A Liberationist and Postcolonial Critique* (Routledge, 2019); and Paul Weller, 'Brexit: A Colonial Boomerang in a Populist World', *Social Justice*, 41.196 (2019), pp. 8–11 <https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/23839845/Binder2.pdf> [accessed 17 October 2025].

[11] Jessica Parker 'AfD Embraces Mass Deportation of Migrants as German Election Nears', *BBC News*, 13 January 2025 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62q937y029o> [Accessed 17 October 2025].

Then, on 2 May 2025, on the basis of a 1100 page, currently still classified and officially undisclosed expert report, the BfV announced that, due to the overall party's 'extremist orientation' that 'disregards human dignity' the AfD as a whole was declared to be a 'confirmed right-wing extremist endeavour'.[12] Reacting to this, the AfD took out an urgent lawsuit against the BfV, in response to which, on 8 May, the BfV made a so-called 'standstill commitment', under which it would temporarily suspend the 'confirmed right-wing extremist endeavour' classification and remove the corresponding press release from its website. In the meantime, according to a recent *Politico* poll of polls, the AfD has recently been polling at around 27% of the electorate.[13]

In the light of all the above, the following section of the article will signpost some headlines of distinctive ways in which the heritage of Baptist theologies and ecclesiologies, as well as those of the broader 'dissenting' Christian traditions, might have things to contribute to the debate on Christian responses to the rise of the Far Right and especially to its 'claim to Christianity'. Following that, given that theology is always formed at the intersection between a broader tradition and what are necessarily contextualised and personal appropriations of it, the article will share some more autobiographically informed reflections that draw on my personal and professional practice from over nearly half a century as a Christian whose opposition to racism and fascism and engagement with inter-religious dialogue have both been, at least implicitly, and often explicitly, informed by aspects of the Baptist Christian heritage. Then in moving to its conclusion, the article makes a number of tentative recommendations for individual and corporate Christian practice in the context of, and in relation to, the seemingly inexorable rise of the Far Right and its 'claim to Christianity'.

---

[12] Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 'Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz stuft die "Alternative für Deutschland" als gesichert rechtsextremistische Bestrebung ein', 2 May 2025 <https://web.archive.org/web/20250502081336/https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/pressemitteilungen/DE/2025/pressemitteilung-2025-05-02.html> [accessed 17 October 2025].

[13] 'German National Parliament–Voting Intentions', *Politico*, 13 October 2025 <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/germany/> [accessed 17 October 2025].

Tropes of Nation and Faith: Christendom, Dissenting Traditions, and the Far Right

The majority of believing and practising Christians would want to dissociate themselves from the kind of violence that erupted in parts of England and Northern Ireland in August 2024, and from the 'remigration' rhetoric of the AfD in Germany (which is ever more frequently being partially mirrored in parts of the UK's political landscape[14]). However, across Europe there are also increasing currents of activity that promote aspects of the Far Right's ideology in ways which can be particularly seductive for those who identify themselves in terms of a Christian civilisational identity.[15]

In connection with these intersecting trends, one of the key underlying pillars of both the organised Far Right and also of wider contemporary right-wing populisms, is the differentiation of 'our' way of life as a nation and/or religion from that of 'others' (especially Muslims) even when they are either citizens or members of the wider civil society. In this context, aspects of a Christendom vision of society and support for what Stuart Murray calls its 'vestiges'[16] can (even if not intentionally) tend in practice to buttress the ideological positions and projects of the Far Right and its 'claim to Christianity', as well as in the wider environment of right-wing populisms.

As one example of this, during a research project that I directed just over a decade ago on religion and belief, discrimination and equality in England and Wales, in an interview with an Anglican priest around the changed position of Christianity in the country, the respondent both poignantly and disturbingly stated that it is, 'almost like losing the empire all over again, it's just that it's the empire of your own country'.[17] In

---

[14] Sam Francis and Georgia Roberts, 'Reform Plans to Scrap Indefinite Leave to Remain for Migrants', *The Independent*, 22 September 2025 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c930xypxpqpo> [accessed 17 October 2025].

[15] *The Christian Right in Europe: Movements, Networks and Denominations*, ed. by Gionathan Lo Mascalo (Transcript Verlag, 2023).

[16] Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Paternoster, 2004), pp. 188–200.

[17] Cited in Paul Weller, Kingsley Purdam, Nazila Ghanea and Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, *Religion or Belief, Discrimination and Equality: Britain in Global Contexts* (Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 114.

speaking in such a way, this priest arguably revealed both the deeply rooted connections between Christendom inheritances and perspectives and colonialism, as well as a nostalgic unpreparedness for living in our world of increasing cultural and religious plurality.

In relation these issues, I would argue that the Baptist Christian heritage contains a theologico-ethical vision of a kind that can contribute distinctively to the evolution of an ecumenical Christian praxis which is capable of challenging the Far Right and its 'claim to Christianity'. And, in addition, that it can do so by equipping contemporary Christians to live in more faithful, committed, and peaceful ways in a world of ever-increasing diversity of religion or belief,[18] the diversity of which the organised political forces of the Far Right and the sentiments of a broader right-wing populism ultimately see as a threat and want to roll back.

In setting out such a vision, it is hard not to begin with Thomas Helwys's remarkable seventeenth-century articulation of a theologically rooted, socially inclusive ethics of diversity as reflected in his famous declaration, 'Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.'[19] In this, of course, by referring to 'Turks', Helwys was in the language of his time and place referring to Muslims who have become one of the main targets for contemporary Far Right and wider right-wing populist 'othering' in terms of their portrayal as being 'alien' to socio-political projects that claim Christianity as a religio-cultural foundation.

By contrast, Helwys's statement affirmed the religion or belief freedom of the 'other' as having an individual and corporate theological and social legitimacy. This also had clear implications for a social ethic that secures religion and belief freedom from the state and/or any

---

[18] Paul Weller, 'Less Christian, More Secular and More Religiously Plural: 21st Century Census Data as Contextual Challenge and Opportunity for Christian Presence and Witness in England', in *'Lived' Mission in 21st Century Britain: Ecumenical and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. by Victoria Turner, Ben Aldous, Peniel Rajkumar, and Harvey Kiwani (SCM Press, 2024), pp. 201–218.

[19] In Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity (1611/1612) by Thomas Helwys (ca. 1550–ca. 1616),* Classics of Religious Liberty 1, ed. by Richard Groves (Mercer University Press, 1998) p. 53.

religious body within it imposing any required or established form of religion. Indeed, if anything comes close to being a Baptist 'universal' it is this theologico-ethical commitment to religion and belief freedom in combination with the affirmation of social equality between religious groups. For example, in terms of its practical application in nineteenth-century England, as set out in his 1999 book *Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in Mid-Victorian England*, Timothy Larsen pointed out that, in line with such a vision, the most radical dissenters of the time argue that it should 'rightly be applied to all citizens, even if they happened to be Hindus, Moslems, Mormons or atheists'.[20]

In further considering the relevance of this vision to contemporary far-right tropes around religion and culture, it is also important to understand that the vision is rooted in a theologically prior conviction that, however important nation and family may be, the good news of Christianity is an inclusive one of the possibility for individuals to have a fundamentally free, chosen, and responsible destiny rather than one that is merely inherited and/or assumed by virtue of being a member of particular people group, nation, or state. Such a socio-theological vision is most visibly embodied in the practice for which the Baptists are probably most widely known — namely that of offering Christian baptism on confession of faith — but in relation to which, the Baptist scholar and former Principal of Regent's Park College Henry Wheeler Robinson underlined that the tradition's 'plea for baptism becomes a mere archaeological idiosyncrasy, if it be not the expression of the fundamental constitution of the Church'.[21]

Thus, in advocating for an approach to baptism which differs from what has historically been the main practice in the Catholic, Orthodox, and majority Protestant traditions of Christianity, Wheeler Robinson emphasised that the Baptist tradition is 'testifying against much more than an isolated and relatively unimportant custom' and is rather 'testifying against the whole complex of ideas of which it was a

[20] Timothy Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in Mid-Victorian England* (The Boydell Press, 1999), p. 239.
[21] Henry Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, 2nd edn (Carey Kingsgate Press, 1946), p. 71.

symbol'.[22] In other words, at best, such Christendom approaches entail an insufficient differentiation between nation, society, the state, and religious communities; while at worst, they can lead to the capture of Christianity by projects that have sought to create and maintain social and religious homogeneity.

That such a 'complex of ideas' in combination with the interventions of organised far-right groups within a wider right-wing populist environment can have extremely serious consequences for both society and for the church can be seen in the history of what happened to the main so-called *Volkskirchen* Protestant Churches of Germany during the rise of the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP or Nazi party). In this context, the NSDAP's appropriation and distortion of the central operative symbolisms and concepts of Christianity succeeded in capturing such a significant proportion of Protestant Christianity in Germany that a minority of Protestants became convinced that the development of a confessing church counter-project was necessary to save the soul of Christianity.

Indeed, at this point, in order that the arguments of this article about the value to ecumenical Christian praxis of aspects of the Baptist dissenting tradition should not be misunderstood as making either inappropriately imperious or a-historically idealistic claims, we need (albeit necessarily briefly) to draw attention to something of what was, during the Nazi period, the complexity and ambiguity of Baptists in Germany. Baptists had, for example, both been denied citizenship by the Prussian state and also for many years marginalised within German society under the perception of them being a 'foreign' religion. In this context, therefore, the emergence of the Third Reich seemed to present them with a wider degree of religious freedom than had previously been available to them, while the NSDAP's anti-Communism was also socio-politically seductive and attractive for many German Baptists. As Blake McKinny puts it,

[22] Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, p. 73.

> German Baptists present difficulties of categorization as many praised National Socialism for defeating communism but at other times chastised its anti-Semitism. They were at once both nationalistic and nationalistically suspect. They were a faith group well versed in varying levels of persecution, but they experienced their greatest liberty of practice to date under a regime renowned for its persecution of the churches.[23]

Symbolic of these ambiguities was the Fifth Baptist World Congress that took place in Berlin on 4 to 10 August 1933, which was only a few weeks after the 30 June to 2 July wave of political assassinations known as the 'Night of the Long Knives', and which cleared the way for Adolf Hitler, in his 13 July Reichstag speech, to present himself as supreme leader of the German people, beyond democracy and the rule of law. In this context, while the Congress advocated the separation of church and state and decried nationalism, and its Commission on 'Racialism' condemned both the colour bar and antisemitism, when referring to Hitler, the Congress's official report chose to highlight that 'it is reported that Chancellor Adolf Hitler gives to the temperance movement the prestige of his personal example since he neither uses intoxicants nor smokes'.[24]

The juxtaposition of this with the political earthquake of the still very recent 'Night of the Long Knives' sharply highlights not only the ambiguities but also the dangers to which those claiming to live within the Baptist tradition can be prone when, overall, albeit that it is recognised that the temperance movement was one that included important social dimensions, pietistic tendencies come to predominate over wider kingdom of God perspectives. And this, at least in part, explains why within the German *Kirchkenkampf*, although there were exceptions, the majority German Baptist position was to keep apart

---

[23] Blake McKinny, '"One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism" in the Land of *ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*: The Fifth Baptist World Congress (Berlin, 1934)', *Church History*, 87.1 (2018), pp. 122–148 (pp. 147–148).

[24] *Fifth Baptist World Congress, Berlin, August 4–10, 1934: Official Report*, ed. by James Henry Rushbrooke (Baptist World Alliance, 1934), p. 52.

from both the so-called *Deutsche Christen* (or, 'German Christian') movement,[25] which advocated a *Völkish* Christianity, and also from the oppositional *Bekennende Kirche* (or, 'Confessing Church').[26]

In what eventually became such an extreme context, the extent to which such an attempt at a 'third way' either was or could ever be successful, is a matter of historical debate and evaluation with much depending on the criteria adopted for 'success'. But that it was attempted highlights what are likely also to be tensions across a spectrum of contemporary potential interpretations and applications of the Baptist Christian heritage in the face of choices about how to respond to contemporary social and political movements, which, at the least, might be evaluated as having conceptual and political echoes of what developed in Germany during the inter-war years. This is also so bearing in mind that, despite such 'alarm bell' events as the 'Night of the Long Knives', the NSDAP did not reach the initial peak of its sole governing power through the revolutionary overthrow of an extant democratic system, but rather through the development of an atmosphere of street thuggery in combination with an insidious consolidation of social and political power from within the democratic institutions of the time.

Bearing in mind all of this, among the challenging questions posed in Paynter and Power's collection were the following: In which context(s) and at what point might faithful Christian witness require the drawing of a clear line of demarcation *between* the content of Christian witness and the Far Right? Also, the question of whether, and if so in what circumstances, might it be appropriate for Christians dialogically to engage with persons who support far-right parties and organisations. And finally, when might faithful Christian witness demand the taking of a clear stance *against* such expressions?

---

[25] Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
[26] Arthur Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler* (The Westminster Press, 1962).

Such questions will now be explored in the next part of this article through an autobiographically informed reflection on the author's almost half century of involvement in anti-racism and anti-fascism as a UK citizen and a Christian in the Baptist tradition of Christianity.

Anti-Racism, Anti-Fascism, and Inter-Religious Dialogue

Between 1997 and 1987 the main part of my personal Christian identity and of my professional life and work (at that time also as an accredited Baptist minister) was expressed in terms of an anti-racist and anti-fascist activism.[27] In the subsequent three decades, during which I became an academic scholar, albeit while still continuing to address matters relating to racism and fascism,[28] an engagement came to predominate with matters of religion and belief freedom, equality and discrimination, together with an involvement in the development of dialogical theory and practice, especially in relation to inter-religious relations,[29] until after my retirement from full-time employment in higher education when I began once again to also re-engage more strongly and explicitly with anti-racism and anti-fascism.[30] And, indeed, over the past half century, the convergence of anti-racist, anti-fascist, and inter-religious dialogical

---

27 Paul Weller, *The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority* (Christians Against Racism and Fascism/One for Christian Renewal, 1984), available online via <https://www.academia.edu/51117192/> [accessed 17 October 2025].

28 Paul Weller, 'The Changing Face of Europe: The Nature and Role of Ethnic Minorities in European Societies', in *Ethnic Churches – A Baptist Response*, ed. by Peter Penner (European Baptist Federation/International Baptist Theological Seminary, Neufeld Verlag), pp. 17–63; Paul Weller, 'Between Prophetic Symbolism, Pastoral Practice and Parliamentary Process: Religious Groups and the Practice of Sanctuary in the UK', in *L'Asile Religieux: Entre Désobéissance Civil et Obligation Légale/Giving Sanctuary to Illegal Immigrants: Between Civil Disobedience and Legal Obligation*, Les Éditions Revue de Droit de l'Université de Sherbrooke, ed. by Lorraine Derrocher, Claude Gélinas, Sebastien Lebel-Grenier, and Pierre Nöel (Université de Sherbrooke, Quebec), pp. 203–239.

29 Paul Weller, 'My Inter-Faith Journey', in *Faith and Society Files: Inter-Faith Journeys*, Baptists Together, 2013), pp. 24–26 <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/370321/Inter_Faith_Journeys.aspx> [accessed 17 October 2025].

30 Paul Weller, "'The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority" Revisited: A Personal, Theological and Political Review', *Practical Theology*, 15.1 (2022), pp. 23–26, doi:10.1080/1756073X.2021.2023950> [accessed 12 November 2025].

work has become ever-clearer, as both racism and fascism have taken on ever more 'religionised' forms, especially in relation to Muslims.

During the late 1970s, the then main party-political expression of the Far Right in the UK was the National Front. And in the early years of my work as a team minister in the (Baptist and United Reformed Church) Tameside Fellowship of Churches, in Greater Manchester, the National Front organised a provocative march through the towns of Dukinfield and Hyde in which there were significant numbers of people with a South Asian background. In that context, when a pig's head was left outside the door of a mosque in Hyde, in what was probably my first conscientised political act of Christian anti-racism and anti-fascism, informed by my Baptist Christian predilection to affirm freedom of religion or belief as inclusive also of Muslims, I felt called to visit the affected mosque. This was in order both to express solidarity with these Muslims by taking a clear stand against the National Front and such kinds of actions, and also against the wider social and political atmosphere that had enabled the emergence and development of this party.

During the early 1980s, I was substantially involved as an activist in Christians Against Racism and Fascism (CARAF) becoming, between 1982 and 1988, a member of its national executive committee; its secretary in 1985–1986; and its vice-chair in 1987–1988. CARAF was an example of a Christian initiative that took very clear anti-racist and anti-fascist positions in ways that some other Christians at the time found not only too 'negative' in substance (as reflected in its name that was clearly *against* something) but also as rather combative in style. At this time, among other things, I also worked with colleagues from predominantly Jewish and secular backgrounds who, at considerable personal risk, contributed journalistically to the important and still regularly published anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight*, which does precisely what its name suggests in terms of shining a light of exposure into the nooks, crannies, and hidden places of the Far Right in the UK and across Europe more generally.[31]

[31] *Searchlight* is now available only online at <https://searchlightmagazine.com/> [accessed 17 October 2025].

During much of this period, learning from the experience and warnings of other activists in this field, I adopted the practice of using a letter opener in relation to the post that I received. This was because, at that time, far-right groups had developed a particularly nasty practice of sending to individuals whom they wanted to target, envelopes that contained a small razor blade in the seal at the place where one might otherwise use a finger to open the letter.

It was also during this period that, in 1983, I wrote an essay called *Thinking the Unthinkable and Saying the Unsayable*,[32] the title of which referenced John Casey's call, in the journal *The Salisbury Review*, for thinking the unthinkable in relation to the potential repatriation of immigrants.[33] This stance was also amplified by the *Review's* editor, Roger Scruton, who wrote a letter to the *Guardian* newspaper saying that 'it is our job to re-open the argument by saying the unsayable' [34] — in relation to which both were advocating 'voluntary repatriation' of people with migrant backgrounds which at the time was also being promoted by the Conservative Member of Parilament, Harvey Proctor.[35]

My essay was later re-published (as one of three related essays) in a 1985 booklet published under the title of *The New Right and the Church*.[36] Without my explicitly referencing Baptist Christian perspectives (but certainly in at least an implicit way informed by them) in a context in which the political discourse of racism and fascism was becoming ever-more frequently expressed in cultural and religious

[32] Paul Weller, 'Thinking the Unthinkable and Saying the Unsayable: A Christians Against Racism and Fascism', Occasional Paper (One for Christian Renewal/Christians Against Racism and Fascism, 1983).

[33] John Casey, 'One Nation: The Politics of Race', *The Salisbury Review* (Autumn 1982), pp. 23–27.

[34] Roger Scruton, 'Letters to the Editor', *The Guardian*, 1 March 1983.

[35] Harvey Proctor, *Immigration, Repatriation and the Commission for Racial Equality* (London: The Monday Club, 1981).

[36] David Edgar, Kenneth Leech, and Paul Weller, *The New Right and the Church* (Jubilee Group, 1985). Ken Leech was an Anglo-Catholic socialist priest, anti-racist, and anti-fascist, while David Edgar is a playwright and co-author of the recently published analysis of right-wing populism, John Bloomfeld and David Edgar, *The Little Black Book of the Populist Right: What It Is, Why It's on the March and How to Stop It* (Byline Books, 2024).

terms, my essay of the time sought to critique the danger of attempts to 'identify "our" (who are "we" anyway?) way of life with Christianity in such a way that reinforcement is given to policies, practices and attitudes which define British Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Jews as essentially "alien"'.[37] This essay also highlighted and critiqued the way in which, in the context of the promotion of arguments in favour of cultural homogeneity by these 'New Right' thinkers, Roger Scruton in his book *The Meaning of Conservatism* had invoked a model of the Christian religion as being a glue of the social order, with regard to which he went so far as to argue that, in relation to any future religious revivals, it will be 'politically important to guide the direction that they take' and that 'the restoration of the Church could well become a serious political cause'.[38]

As mainly a by-product of a change in my marital circumstances which led to my no longer being able to continue on the accredited list of Baptist Ministers, in 1988 I became the Resources Officer of the then new Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom. During this time, the focus of my Christian identity, activism, and scholarship became ever more involved in inter-religious dialogue. In a subsequent role as an academic scholar in the study of religion at the University of Derby (1990–2016), I became (in 1998) Professor of Inter-Religious Relations and developed a specialist focus on research into the nature and extent of unfair treatment and discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief.

Both before and during this period, and not least because of the encouragement and opportunity provided by the Baptist Permanent Private Hall of the University of Oxford, Regent's Park College,[39] and its then Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture, I also became increasingly engaged in working on ways in which the theological and ecclesiological dimensions of Baptist tradition and heritage might be interpreted and both explicitly and implicitly applied to contemporary

[37] Weller, 'Thinking the Unthinkable and Saying the Unsayable', p. 6.
[38] Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (Pelican, 1980), p. 175.
[39] Regent's Park College, University of Oxford <https://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/> [accessed 17 October 2025].

religion and belief, state and society relationships, including their implications for the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue.[40]

In this work, while advocating for freedom of religion or belief I also advocated for use of the law in promoting religious equality, challenging religious discrimination, and curbing incitement to religious hatred. In relation to this, some might argue that a readiness to countenance such a use of the law runs counter to what has so far been presented concerning the theological and ecclesiological resources that the Baptist tradition can offer in engaging with the Far Right and its 'claim to Christianity'.

However, while the Baptist heritage does include a fundamental confidence in the power of truth to prevail in the context of the free exchange of convictions, the mainstream of the Baptist Christian tradition has also recognised an important role for the law, including its coercive instruments, in maintaining the peaceful social conditions needed for free expression, and in advancing justice within the wider civil society. For example, the black Baptist pastor and civil rights activist Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr is widely known for having made an argument about the importance — as reflected in the title of the 1963 collection of his sermons *The Strength to Love*[41] — of believing in the

[40] Paul Weller, 'Freedom and Witness in a Multi-Religious Society: A Baptist Perspective Part I', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 33.6 (1990), pp. 252–264, doi:10.1080/0005576X.1990.11751834; Paul Weller, 'Freedom and Witness in a Multi-Religious Society: A Baptist Perspective. Part II', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 33.7 (1990), pp. 302–314, doi:10.1080/0005576X.1990.11751834; Paul Weller, 'Balancing Within Three Dimensions: Christianity, Secularity and Religious Plurality in Social Policy and Theology', *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift/Bern Interreligious Oecumenical Studies*, 3 (2016), published as a special themed issue on Religious Minorities and Interreligious Relations: Social and Theological Challenges of the journal *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 26.2 (2016), pp. 131–146, doi:10.2143/SID.26.2.3200411; Paul Weller, 'Religious Minorities and Freedom of Religion or Belief in the UK', *Religion and Human Rights: An International Journal*, 13 (2018) pp. 1–34, doi:10.1163/18710328-13011160; Paul Weller, 'Changing Socio-Religious Realities, Practical Negotiation of Transitions in the Governance of Religion or Belief, State and Society', *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift/Bern Oecumenical Studies*, 5, published as a special themed issue on Secular Society and Religious Presence: Religion-State Relations of the journal *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 30.2 (2020), pp. 145–162, doi:10.2143/SID.30.2.3288770; and Paul Weller, 'Historical Sources and Contemporary Resources of Minority Christian Churches: A Baptist Contribution', *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift*, 111.3-4 (2021), pp. 140–157.

[41] Martin Luther King Jr, *The Strength to Love* (Harper & Row, 1963).

power of love to confront and overcome racism and to transform those whose lives had become constricted by it.

But King did not see this emphasis as being incompatible with the coercive use of law. Rather, as he put it in a 27 December 1962 speech in Nashville, Tennessee, 'Judicial decrees may not change the heart; but they can restrain the heartless.' [42] And, as we saw over the summer of 2024 in the UK, the use of such a restraint of the heartless can be extremely important in giving Muslims, asylum-seekers, and others who were targeted by organised far-right activity at least some restored sense of security in the face of both the general threat and the actuality of physical violence.

And, indeed, King's position with regard to such matters was not idiosyncratic in relation to the Baptist heritage. Thus, in early seventeenth-century debates with the Mennonites, apart from in matters directly relating to the practice of freedom of religion and belief, Baptists did not in general rule out what, in the language of the times, was referred to as the use of 'the sword'. This did not mean approval for individual retributive violence. Rather it referred to the potentially and actually beneficial use of legally based coercion when exercised in ways concerned with upholding, defending, and extending the conditions of social peace and justice of a kind that enabled the wider enjoyment of freedom, including that of religion or belief.

Therefore, in contrast to many Mennonites of the time, Baptists generally allowed their church members to become magistrates. And while quite a number of Mennonites recognised the civil benefits to society of the office of magistrate, Thomas Helwys, who so strongly advocated for freedom of conscience and religion, criticised those among the Dutch Mennonites whom he perceived as having attacked the office of the magistrate whilst having benefited from the protection of the Dutch rule of law in the face of the Duke of Alba's persecution of non-Catholic Christians:

[42] King, *The Strength to Love*, p. 37.

> Of all the people on earth none hath more cause, to be thankful to God for this blessed ordinance of Magistracy than you, and this whole country and nation, in that God hath by his power and authority given unto you magistrates who have so defended and delivered you from the hands of a cruel destroyer, and will you notwithstanding condemn this ordinance, and consider it a vile thing.[43]

Thus, in seeking to understand how key historical, theological, and ecclesiological sources and resources from the Baptist dissenting heritage might become contemporary resources, I would argue that it is likely that the law of the wider civil society will have an important role to play, including, on occasion, through the use of force to 'restrain the heartless'. In addition, and notwithstanding its own ambiguities and failures in practice, I would argue that the vision of the Baptist dissenting heritage can indeed, at least in principle, offer creatively distinctive resources for challenging religious and/or ideological projects in which the relationship between religion and nation, state and society become instrumentalised in the service of the other. More broadly, in relation to such projects and the dangers involved in them, in his 1992 journal article on 'Reflections on Communalism and Nationalism in India', the Indian political scientist Achin Vanaik has set out what I think is as good as possible, a 'secular' articulation of some of the key aspects of what the Baptist dissenting vision has to offer in this regard:

> To say that politics and religion should be kept separate is understandable, especially at a time like ours. But what it really should mean is that politicians should not use religions for short-term political ends and religious leaders should not use politicians for narrowly communal gains. But surely every religion has a social and public dimension. To say that religions should be a private affair is to misunderstand both religion and politics.[44]

---

[43] Thomas Helwys, *An Advertisement or Admonition Unto the Congregations, which men call the New Fryelers in the Lowe Countries*, quoted in Timothy George, 'Between Pacifism and Coercion: The English Baptist Doctrine of Religious Toleration', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 58.1 (1984), pp. 30–49 (38).

[44] Achin Vanaik, 'Reflections on Communalism and Nationalism in India', *New Left Review*, 196 (1992), pp. 43–62 (p. 56).

Towards Some Recommendations for Individual and Corporate Christian Practice

Informed by the author's personal appropriation of the wider Baptist Christian heritage, in considering a range of theoretical and concrete options for how to respond to far-right ideologies, parties, organisations, and projects, the closing section of this article concludes with a number of recommendations for individual and corporate Christian practice along the spectrum of to 'differentiate between', to 'dialogue with', and to 'struggle against'. In making bold to offer these recommendations, I will preface them with words from another great foundational figure of the Baptist tradition of Christianity, namely John Smyth who, in advocating for what he thought was right in his place and time, wisely acknowledged that 'we are in constant error; my earnest desire is that my last writing may be taken as my present judgment'.[45]

While taking seriously Smyth's cautionary warning, I would want to begin by advocating as clearly as possible that, in relation to the Far Right, it is of fundamental importance for Christians individually and corporately not only to *differentiate* the inclusivity of the good news to which Christianity is called to bear witness from exclusionary Far Right ideologies, but also to be *opposed* to, and actively to take part in the struggle *against*, the political, organisational embodiments and initiatives of far-right ideologies, and especially so when these make a 'claim to Christianity' by appropriating Christian concepts and symbols for exclusionary purposes.

At the same time, in a wider social sense, it is arguably important for the properly inclusive functioning of a democracy to recognise that those who vote for and/or support such parties, organisations, and initiatives, and/or advocate wider right-wing populist tropes may not be ideologically wedded to these and may therefore be lending their support out of a range of motivations. Indeed, at the level of persons, one of the remarkable things that emerged within the context of the threatening gatherings that took place in England in August 2024 outside of mosques and asylum-seeker accommodation is that, in the

[45] John Smyth, quoted in Paul Ballard, 'The Dynamic of Independency', *Baptist Quarterly*, 23 (1969–1970), p. 246.

face of a considerable sense of not only psychological but also actual physical threat, there were examples of dialogical engagement with at least some of the individuals and groups who had gathered outside these places under the influence of organised far-right agitation.[46]

If Muslims, who in this context were the group most immediately affected by such events, could find the capacity to engage dialogically, there is surely at least a question about whether and the extent to which Christians should also be ready and able to engage in such ways. From a specifically Christian perspective, the inclusive vision of humankind which derives from the affirmation that *all* human beings have been created by the divine and are included in the good news's offer of potential liberation for *all*, holds out the promise of ultimate horizons which should at least allow the possibility of taking a 'bigger view' of persons who, without having a strong ideological commitment to the Far Right, may for all kinds of other reasons lend their support its political and wider organisational expressions and initiatives. Indeed, some of the concerns expressed by persons within a right-wing populist milieu may, at root, not be contrary to kingdom of God values, even if they have in practice become distorted and weaponised through their exclusionary use against other groups. At the same time, informed by the experience of Christians who have attempted dialogical engagement, Paynter and Powers point in their book to cautions and warnings with regard to how such attempts can all too easily be used/misused by far-right groups.[47]

In the light of all this, I would suggest that there is a case for differentiating the question of dialogical engagement with persons who may express support for the Far Right, from that of the desirability or otherwise of 'corporate' Christian dialogue with the parties, organisations, and initiatives of the Far Right. And, in the final analysis, it is likely that a careful and difficult exercise of what the wider Christian tradition refers to as discernment will be required. For myself, taken in

---

[46] Adam Kelwick, 'Protesters Came to Vandalise my Mosque – I Offered Them a Hug Instead', *Metro*, 5 August 2024 <https://metro.co.uk/2024/08/05/far-right-protestors-gathered-outside-mosque-opened-doors-21364206/ [accessed 17 October 2025].

[47] *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity*, ed. by Paynter and Powers, pp. 178–179.

the round, and in the light of the important injunction of Jesus to his disciples to be not only 'gentle as doves' but also as 'wise as serpents',[48] I am persuaded that Christian dialogical engagement of a more organisational kind with ideologies, parties, organisations, and initiatives that contain substantial elements which have a clearly evidenced intention of undermining a society's ethnic and religious inclusivity would, at the very least, not be wise.

This is because whatever ambiguities may inform the electoral and related stances of individuals who support either far-right political parties, organisations, or initiatives, or those of wider right-wing populisms, the historical evidence would suggest that once these have collectively coalesced into powerful and organised social, political, and historical forces, this can all too quickly lead to the shrinking of a society's democratic inclusivity and therefore also of its dialogical space. In this context, those who argue that it might be better to try to 'tame' and 'moderate' either far-right or broader right-wing populist political forces by incorporating them into the responsibilities of governance, should not overlook that Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP came to power precisely through using democratic processes before they set about systematically dismantling them.

Taking all this into account, as Karl Loewenstein argued in his then timely and arguably still relevant two-part 1937 article on 'Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights',[49] democracies are not obliged to facilitate their own overthrow. Thus, while democratic societies need to allow as much space as possible for inclusive dialogical engagement, such a mode of engagement is unlikely to be completely and always sufficient. And in the light of this, it seems to me that it is neither incompatible with democracy nor with the Baptist inflection of the Christian heritage to recognise that a society and a state may, in some circumstances, need to place constraints upon the corporate activities of far-right parties and organisations — as long as the imposition of such

[48] Matt 10:16.

[49] Karl Loewenstein, 'Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights I', *American Political Science Review*, 31.3 (1937), pp. 417–432; and Karl Loewenstein 'Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights II', *American Political Science Review*, 31.4 (1937), pp. 638–658.

constraints takes place within the overall rule of law, within which those so constrained continue to have opportunity to present relevant evidence which might contest the legitimacy, nature, and extent of any constraints imposed upon their freedom.

In conclusion, then, the Christian tradition reminds us of the need always to take the 'bigger view' of persons in terms of their potential for dialogical change and development. In addition, the Baptist inflection of that tradition contains a theological anthropology which affirms a confidence in the power of truth itself to prevail in the context of conflicting interpretations of religion or belief. Nevertheless, taken in the round, the defence and preservation of the foundational possibilities of a dialogical and therefore democratically inclusive society means that Christians in Europe (including those in the Baptist tradition) would do well to recognise the limits of dialogue with persons of the Far Right. Therefore, as was reflected in the name Christians Against Racism and Fascism, while remaining cautiously open to the engaging in individual dialogue with persons who have lent their support to far-right ideologies, parties, organisations, and initiatives, Christians should also recognise the imperative of adopting a clear theological positionality and social practice *against* the Far Right in terms not only of its ideological content, but also its party political and other organisational forms and initiatives.