The Christian Right in the UK

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Introduction

This chapter analyzes the Christian Right in the United Kingdom. Both of these terms are misnomers because although there are right-leaning protagonists who draw on Christian discourse to frame their ideology and Christian adherents to ground their support, there is not a Christian Right in the sense of an established religio-political movement (Walton, Hatcher, and Spencer 2013). Nor is the United Kingdom all that united, with its constituent parts—England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland—diverging in their churches, politics, and church–state relations. With its historic and contemporary tensions between Catholics and Protestants, Northern Ireland especially presents a microcosm of how culture wars can create opportunities for right-wing movements and parties. Looking toward the continent, Brexit severed legal ties with the EU, while historical and cultural attachments face pressure from cross-Atlantic groups seeking influence. Rather than as a movement, the Christian Right in the UK currently manifests as disparate actors and groups who connect less with each other than with transnational networks promoting Christian nationalism in Europe and the US (Stewart 2019). As of yet, British actors and groups have succeeded only in sustaining themselves, not in coalescing a movement. It remains to be seen whether institutional and cultural hindrances will remain a check on the development of a Christian Right in the UK.

Political and religious landscape

The UK is a parliamentary democracy with a unitary structure. Although there are some devolved powers in the regional bodies of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, central power is organized in the UK Parliament. Religious author-

ity is institutionalized in this system via the Church of England, with the King being both Supreme Governor of the Church of England and Head of State. Twenty-six bishops of the Church of England sit in the House of Lords. Although they are non-partisan, the Lords Spiritual sit on the government's side of the chamber and exercise legislative powers. The UK is a multi-party system with two major political parties: the Conservative Party (right) and the Labour Party (left). The Conservatives have governed alone since 2015, with five prime ministers since then—the turnover prompted by the contested and singular issue of Brexit.

The picture of religion in the 21st-century UK has been one of decline. Between the 2001 and 2011 censuses, there was a 10% growth among those who claimed *no religion* and a drop of 13% among Christians in particular (White 2012). This decline has winnowed away weaker adherents, so those who remain hold their religious identity more strongly, an assessment borne out by a longitudinal study from 1998–2018 in which the proportion of *very or extremely* religious individuals held steady at 7% of those surveyed, while the *very or extremely* non-religious more than doubled to 33% (Voas and Bruce 2019). Moreover, those with the highest levels of religiosity were found in non-Christian faiths (Voas and Bruce 2019).

Christian decline has occurred among the institutional churches (Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Church of Scotland /Presbyterian), while there has been a pattern of growth within nonconformist churches, which comprise about 36% of the Christian population in the UK (Brierley 2021). For example, the number of Pentecostal churches in the UK grew from 2,500 congregations in 2000 to 4,200 in 2020, with some experts thinking the real figure could be twice as many because of the pop-up nature of these churches (Brierley 2021; Aldred and Ogbo 2020). There is some evidence to think that the political orientations of Black Majority Churches differ from those of institutional churches, particularly in their openness to political activity. However, they are limited by lack of resources (Hatcher 2019). Still, with less than 8% of the population regularly attending Christian churches, active Christians represent small numbers of the British population and are thus not fertile ground for an established Christian Right (Brierley 2017; Voas and Bruce 2019).

Protagonists

The first set of actors necessary for a Christian Right are religious elites, including denominations/networks, churches, and individual clergy who act to leverage their religious positions into political influence. These can give motive to a cause by anchoring a political issue in a religious context, and they can connect political actors to congregational adherents who become the rank and file of a movement. The vacuum of religious elites willing to carry out this role in the UK is readily apparent. The Reverend Nicky Gumbel, vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), has gained international notice for his promotion of the Alpha course around the globe. His parish represents a growing evangelical wing of the Church of England and has consequently sponsored a series of church plants in London, the UK, and around the world. HTB has become its own church network. From this position, it would appear that Gumbel has the name recognition and resources to politicize his religious outreach, but he has been adamant in his refusal to directly engage in political issues. Indeed, the consensus among all religious elites is that the American Christian Right is *un-British* (Hatcher 2017).

Second, there is an absence of political leaders willing to provide, through their positions in parties or government, opportunities for religious actors to access the political system via electoral campaigns or policymaking. Some members of parliament are open about their Christianity and describe the role it plays in their lives, both personally and politically. Nadine Dorries, a Conservative MP since 2005, for example, is known for her vocal opposition to abortion. In her time in Parliament, she has tabled bills and pushed amendments to lower the time limit for abortion availability from the current legal period of 24 weeks. These have been overwhelmingly defeated, but they have garnered her attention from media outlets and lobbyists who see her as a ready voice to advance their agenda on this issue. However, largely owing to the shrinking numbers of Christians in the UK, no political party—right or left—has found it advantageous to engage in active outreach to Christians because of the risk of alienating the larger swathe of the British public who are not Christians, are not religious, or do not think it appropriate for there to be an overt relationship between partisanship and religion.

Finally, there must be linkage actors such as think tanks and advocacy groups to sustain a movement by fundraising, messaging, and generally keeping issues alive in the consciousness of the public and decision makers. To the extent that there is Christian-Right activity in the UK, it is among these

groups. What follows is by no means a comprehensive review, but it highlights two of the commonly identified Christian-Right groups in the UK (Kettell 2016; Walton, Hatcher, and Spencer 2013).

Founded in 1990, the Christian Institute (CI) helps "Christians to understand the arguments about key contemporary issues, seeking 'to demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up from the knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:5)'" (Dobson 2016). This organization promulgates its views by producing scorecards on how MPs vote on *key issues*, a tactic borrowed from the Christian Coalition in America. These scorecards emphasize *culture war* issues of abortion, marriage, assisted suicide, family, and religious liberty, although the CI varies in how it campaigns on these issues. The CI's activism is principally oriented around its Legal Defence Fund, which solicits funds to file lawsuits and "intervene in strategic court cases where precedents could be set which may affect Christian religious liberty" (Christian Institute n.d.). Recent cases concern alleged discrimination against Christians for their views on same-sex marriage. With 10,000 followers on Twitter, 6,000 on YouTube, and an email subscription list, the CI reaches modestly into Christian Britain.

Christian Concern (CC) might be the most nationally prominent of these organizations. Owing to the charisma of its leader, Andrea Minichiello Williams, as well as its connections to Christian-Right groups in the US, CC has been successful at centering itself on the issues of abortion, sexuality, and gender. These, along with access to street preaching, form a core of religious liberty claims that CC and its subsidiary organization Christian Legal Centre file lawsuits to advance. The structure of these groups has evolved to support its mission and the expertise of its founder. Minichiello Williams, a trained barrister, was head of the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship (LCF), a 150-year-old self-labeled evangelical legal network that actively promotes the spiritual lives of its members. Its public activities grew under Minicihello Williams, who created Christian Concern as the policy arm of the LCF. Her work partnering with MP Nadine Dorries on an abortion bill gained national attention, and she left the LCF in 2008 to found Christian Concern as a separate organization. CC currently maintains the broad mission to "speak and influence, challenge and protect, mobilise and equip," which projects its efforts into the policy, political, media, and legal spheres; however, its most effective current work is channeled through the Christian Legal Centre and its steady docket of religious liberty claims (Christian Concern n.d.).

Strategies and audiences

Legislative strategies have never been central to any action plan of a would-be Christian Right. When culture war issues, such as abortion time limits, marriage equality, or assisted suicide, have come up for parliamentary debate, not only have individual Christian conservative or Conservative MPs been unsuccessful in persuading their colleagues to support their positions on these individual issues, but they have also been unsuccessful in forming a stable, ongoing coalition to advance a coherent agenda. For example, when in 2008, Nadine Dorries proposed an amendment to lower the time limit on abortion from 24 weeks to 20 weeks (a text purportedly written by Andrea Minichiello Williams), the measure failed on a vote of 332 to 190. There were similar outcomes for her proposals regarding abstinence advocacy and abortion counseling. Even the parliamentary group Conservative Christian Fellowship does not maintain a defined agenda, and a blog on its website rejects the proposition that "Christians need to unite around a political movement"—hardly the makings of a Christian Right (Burrowes 2020).

Similarly, winning elections is an unlikely pursuit. In fact, the most obvious partner for Christian-Right activists, the Conservative Party, now pushes a *one-nation conservatism* that is more pluralistic and less inclined to tolerate the exclusionary views of religious conservatives ("What Is One Nation Conservatism?" 2019).

Thus far, then, these groups have waged single-issue campaigns as issues such as equal marriage and assisted suicide have arisen on the parliamentary agenda. These campaigns might include a web-based approach to produce some position papers, generate media soundbites, mobilize *clicktivism* among followers, and thus draw the attention of decision makers (Kettell 2016). This strategy might be successful at raising awareness, subscribers, and perhaps funds, but it has not changed policy on any of the heated issues because neither the wider public nor politicians are the target. Rather, the audience are those who are already attentive to such groups or issues and are then catalyzed by rhetoric that is confirmative not persuasive.

The founding of the CI's Legal Defence Fund and CC's Christian Legal Centre, along with the transition of the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship from a devotional to an activist group, has centered legal strategies at the core of the Christian Right in the UK. In this, the Christian Right in the UK looks most like its American counterpart, which has long co-opted the judiciary as politics by other means. In the claims raised (e.g., discrimination against religious

beliefs) and the arguments made (a rights-based approach to society), legal strategies have raised the profile of these Christian-Right groups and garnered them substantive victories that have eluded them in other spheres.

Ideologies and narratives

In the ideology of a Christian Right, religion becomes inextricably linked with conservatism so that the one becomes the justification for the other. In recent years, some political actors have enfolded Christianity into their narrative, harkening back to a cultural conservatism in debates over immigration, Muslim growth, and especially Brexit. In the call for Brexit, Nigel Farage, head of the UK Independence Party, rejected British multiculturalism: "My country is a Judeo-Christian country, so we've got to start standing up for our values" (Warren 2017). Farage's political prominence diminished after Brexit, but the invocation of Christian values for this central political issue found resonance. Even a more mainstream politician, Michael Gove, a member of the Conservative government and a leader of the Vote Leave movement, justified Brexit as an inherently Protestant position, based on the individual rather than communitarian ethic that had historically led the British Empire and countered Catholic Europe (Gove 2017). The point is that exclusionary Christian rhetoric, at times inflammatory and at times tempered, is being used to strengthen a narrative of cultural conservatism at the heart of nationalist ideas. The irony is that this tactic appeals to cultural Christians but not so much to those with high levels of religiosity (mostly British Evangelicals), whose vision of Christianity is not monocultural but global (Smith and Woodhead 2018).

In the courts, the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship, the Legal Defence Fund, and the Christian Legal Centre draw on a rights-based jurisprudence that claims Christians have been discriminated against for practicing or voicing their faith: for example, a nurse fired for violating a uniform code by wearing her cross pendant; street preachers removed and fined for proselytizing in public spaces; and a baker fined for refusing to bake a cake advocating same-sex marriage. All of these cases were in some way framed in terms of religious liberty or free speech to be protected against claims of equality that challenged them. This emphasis on a legal strategy signals attempts by these Christian-Right groups to gain a broader reach, for appeals to liberty are universal, grounded not in a sectarian religious belief system but in a framework of human rights (Kettell 2016; McIvor 2020). But at the heart of such legal claims

is a persecution narrative—that secular society is tolerant of all views other than those of sincere (i.e., conservative) Christianity, which it even seeks to purge from civic life. This persecution narrative, and the threat perception that it fuels, sustains the work of these groups (Wyatt 2021).

Effects

For the Christian Right in the UK, the judicial process has broadened its platforms across employment tribunals, local magistrates, the UK Supreme Court, and the European Court of Human Rights. And there have been key victories, such as the Ashers bakery case referred to above in which the UK Supreme Court ruled that the refusal to bake a cake was not an act of discrimination against the gay man who had ordered it but a legally protected refusal to promote a message in violation of the baker's sincerely held religious beliefs. More recently, a group of church leaders challenged various lockdown orders that banned church (among other) gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Scottish government enacted severe criminal penalties for those in violation. The Scottish High Court heard arguments and quickly ruled that the government's restrictions were excessive and struck them down. The result was to permit the opening of not only churches but also mosques and synagogues, thus bringing nonsectarian benefit. However, the victory was significant for Christian-Right advocates not only for the outcome but also because the ruling was grounded in a freedom of religion supported by both the European Court of Human Rights and UK constitutional common law (Dunne 2021). Thus, it appears, the narrative of these Christian-Right legal groups has been well-established in courts of law. Even the lost cases have been fruitful in creating a frame of persecution and inserting the interests of these groups into public discourse.

As of yet, individual legal victories have not formed a groundswell, although efforts to do just that draw from the American Christian Right, which seeds strategies and funding to some of these UK groups. Christian Concern especially leverages its American connections. Its founder, Andrea Minichiello Williams, lived for a time in the American South—the birthplace of the American Christian Right—and refers to this as a transformational moment in her life and career. Her organization receives funds from American donors and support in kind from the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), a pioneer of

Christian-interest litigation, which has a European office to further similar work internationally (McIvor 2020).

This common cause with American actors and strategies is one area of success by which these groups have been able to sustain themselves. Certainly, the persecution narrative has generated a persecution industry, bringing together campaigners and legal aid groups to beef up fundraising, draw media attention, and generally support their existence (Wyatt 2021). Across America and Europe, the National Conservatism Conferences draw governmental and cultural leaders to promote a right-wing populist ideology that, among other principles, asserts, "public life should be rooted in Christianity" ("National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles" 2023). Their 2023 conference in London featured not only back-bencher MPs but also Home Secretary Suella Braverman and Michael Gove, who has served in a variety of Cabinet positions as well as Conservative Party leadership candidate. Although these efforts have not yet come together in a comprehensive movement with a coherent political agenda and real political outcomes, they have alerted the public, politicians, and scholars to look for a Christian Right in the UK, making them cast a wary eye toward the expansive reach of the transnational networks of Christian nationalism.

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