

An All-Purpose Saint for the Church of England: The Post-Reformation Evolution of the Cult of St George in England

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At first sight, St George is an improbable figure to be patron saint of England. Unlike St Patrick and St David, the patron saints of Ireland and Wales respectively, St George did not preach the Gospel in the land that came to revere him. He could not even lay claim to an ancient tradition that his relics had come to his adopted country, as in the case of St Andrew and Scotland. Moreover St George was a Near Eastern saint and had no shrine in England until the late Middle Ages. Yet the cross of St George is the flag of the Church of England, and also appears in the flags of its provinces and dioceses. The flag should be flown by Church of England parishes on St George's Day. Moreover in 2000 the Church of England made St George's Day, 23 April, a festival in order to encourage wider celebration of his feast.

This move is the latest stage in the evolution of the tradition of St George, which has been continually re-shaped for different purposes since he, alone apart from the New Testament saints, survived the comprehensive cull of the pantheon of saintly intercessors brought about by the Reformers of the 16th century. Even so, the post-Reformation 'cult' of St George, which was of course largely secular, cannot be understood apart from its medieval antecedents.

The figure of St George survived because of the intertwining of the religious tradition, reinterpreted in a Protestant sense, and the royal and military tradition centred on the Order of the Garter. These were reinforced by the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. In fact the Tudor era was the source of what were until the mid-20th century the received notions of the tradition of St George, of what it meant to be English, and

indeed of modern nationalism in general. The Tudor monarchs, not without resistance, consolidated their power bases by expanding the aristocracy, creating a new elite which had a special need to look to the rest of society for legitimation. Consolidating a Protestant-English identity in the face of the Counter-Reformation with its persecutions and continual threat of invasion, this new class led the way in the formation of the first truly national identity (Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*). Thus the tradition of St George was co-opted from the medieval past not so much to win over the allegiance of the majority but the cooperation of local elites, especially in towns.

Indeed, contrary to Reformation practice elsewhere, considerable myth-making about St George took place from the Tudors onward, despite the fact that there is no evidence that St George knew the emperor Constantine as alleged by many former writers, far less that St George visited England and founded a chapel at Glastonbury. Scepticism about the received tradition may come naturally to readers of this website, but not by the authors of older books that are still being reprinted telling the traditional patriotic myth of St George. The story and symbolism of the saint has, though, continued to play many different roles in post-Reformation England.

Even so, once we have unravelled the story of how the tradition of St George developed in England, we must ask ourselves if the image of the chivalrous young Christian soldier can have anything more to say to us, who are now a multicultural *us*, in the age of the space probe, genetic engineering, environmental degradation and the crimes of the world's wars. In a sermon at the annual Victoria Cross/George Cross service in London on 15 May 2003, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, had this to say: 'A Christian celebration of bravery is not an admiring gaze at acts of frenzy but the recognition of

something that is created in us by decision and good habit. But does our society still provide the vision necessary for this? Though there would be no successful wars without some deployment of the spirit of the berserker or the joyrider, often behaviour in war or in a crisis is so mixed that it is hard to tease out real virtue from the courage of temperament or madness. But we shall live in a very small world if we cannot see why some people take mortal risks for the sake of generosity and life.'

Since the 17th century, English antiquarians, scholars and popular authors have sought to explain why St George became the patron saint of England. A century or so ago, in the Edwardian autumn of Britain's imperial power, the occasional doubts that had been raised down the centuries about the tradition of St George were seemingly disproved by the course of history. As Britain had risen to world preeminence, so the tradition of England's patron saint appeared self-evidently true, requiring only a few refinements to establish it as a history that people of a scientific age could rationally accept. The method of historians was to collate and harmonize the mundane elements to make a coherent story, omitting the miraculous and re-telling the famous legend of the dragon as a moral allegory, usually with the Dragon, which Protestant Christians as well as Catholics could use to encourage all that was best in the English people.

Even after the Reformation, the English tradition of St George still drew on its pre-Conquest roots. These consisted of *Acts of St George*, first written in Latin, which were localized to include visits by the saint to Caerleon and Glastonbury while on service in England as a member of Constantine's staff. These *acti* were translated into Anglo-Saxon in the 8th and 9th centuries.

Probably initial English interest in St George was a response to the transfer of his supposed head to the

church of St George in Velabro by Pope Zacharias in 741. After that the saint began to be culted in Rome and his feast found a permanent place in the Roman service books and their northern offspring.

The most important early source for the English tradition of the saint, however, was the alliterative metrical homily by Aelfric 'the Grammarian', c.955-1020, the abbot of Eynsham (not to be confused with Aelfric of Canterbury or Aelfric of York). Aelfric's homily on the passion of St George appeared in his *Lives of the Saints* (990-992). In it, Aelfric turned St George into 'a rich earldormann from the shire of Cappadocia', of whom the Emperor [Diocletian] asks from what *borough* he comes.

Aelfric set the tone for most of the subsequent English versions of the legend of St George by making use of a significantly reduced version of the Latin form of the legend. This recension recounts only three tortures and George's final beheading. Retained, however, are the saint's victories over the magician Athanasius and the god Apollo and his worshippers, as examples of George's favour with God. The final intercessory prayer, for those who remember him and his feast day, is also preserved, but in shortened form. After the Conquest this version continued to be used to provide lessons to be read in churches on the saint's feast day, as well as for devotional reading among monastics. The final intercessory prayer remained prominent in the English tradition until transformed at the Reformation.

After the Reformation, the secular, mainly royal and aristocratic, cult of St George saw the militant knightly piety promoted by Bernard of Clairvaux on the eve of the First Crusade, transformed into a focus for Protestant nationalism. Yet as long before as the 12th-century chronicler William of Malmesbury, clerical writers had had a preoccupation with boosting the notion of England

as a leading Christian power. According to this received account, stories about St George were mostly transmitted to the West by Crusaders, but there is no evidence for this oft-repeated assertion, even if, as is often claimed, they had heard them from Byzantine troops, who had previously adopted St George as patron saint of their armies. More likely it was ecclesiastics accompanying the Crusaders who transmitted the stories. The red cross banner of St George may have been thought particularly appropriate because of a passage in Is. ch. 63: Who is this coming from Edom, coming from Bozrah, his garments stained red?

Until very recently the creation of the royal cult of St George in England was attributed to Richard I, who was claimed to have adopted St George as the patron saint of his armies when the saint led them to victory at the siege of Acre during the Third Crusade in 1191-92. Subsequently, the king is said to have discovered the tomb of St George at Lydda and, following a dream, repaired the saint's tomb. The visit to Lydda, however, and the personal and important part that Richard I is generally supposed to have played in establishing a national cult of St George in England, was probably a later invention. Only one of the numerous contemporary chronicles, Ambroise, reports that Richard even invoked St George in battle. No contemporary source records that Richard placed his army under the protection of St George, adopted the banner of St George for his troops, repaired (or even visited) St George's tomb at Lydda, far less established a national cult of St George when he returned to England. The details of the Council held at Winchester on the eve of the Crusade, when Richard is supposed to have decided to re-found a previous Order of St George, are taken from a history of the Order of the Garter by Elias Ashmole published in 1672. Moreover, there is no reason to suppose, as is often assumed, that Richard I particularly contributed to the spread of representations of St George and the Dragon.

The story that Richard I placed his army under the protection of St George can be found in the 16th-, 17th- and 18th-century historians Anstis, Ashmole, Camden, Dawson, Heylin, Salmon and Seldon, all of whom expressed doubts about it.

A second widespread belief, that the cult of St George was made 'official' by Richard the Lionheart has also been challenged. Richard may have invoked St George in accordance with local custom, whether or not the 'appearances' to the troops actually took place. But he is unlikely to have visited the tomb of St George at Lydda. It was off the beaten track, and all we know of his movements shows that they were dictated by strategic necessity, not personal piety. It is more likely that he simply sent money as a thank-offering, although even that cannot be proved.

The French scholar Olivier de Laborderie has traced the myth of Richard I and St George to a speech made by John Taylor, Master of the Rolls, in 1527 at the conferment of the Order of the Garter on Francis I of France by Henry VIII. De Laborderie thinks that Taylor invented the role of Richard as a pre-founder of the Order of the Garter as a 'white lie' to avoid the embarrassment of referring to Edward III and Henry V, who had inflicted crushing defeats on the French. At the same time, the figure of king Richard supplied a fittingly martial origin for the Order, which was essential because Henry VIII saw his rivalry with Francis I in terms of chivalry.

The belief that the figure of St George is part of the English religious tradition has long been traced back to a decision supposedly made by the Synod of Oxford in 1222 that St George's Day should be observed as greater feast day. But re-examination of the documents has shown that the Synod simply made a general statement about the observation of the feast of St George as the nation's

protector. Although some 60 copies of the canons passed by the Synod remain, including seven from the 13th century, not a single one contains a list of saints' days or makes any reference to the feast of St George. The earliest list so far found is that published by Peter Crabbe in his printed edition of 1551. Crabbe's list is the more suspect because it contains St Edmund, who was only canonized in 1247.

Meanwhile St George became an inspiration for writers about the Knights of the Round Table. According to the medieval version, St George came as tribune of Beirut under Diocletian, having become a friend of 'Queen Helen'. She was identified with Helena (c.250-c.335), mother of Constantine and discoverer of the True Cross. St George became friendly with the future emperor while both were serving at York. From there they journeyed together to visit the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury, a supposed kinsman of George.

The royal religious and secular cult of St George in England was effectively founded by Edward III (1327-1372), when he adopted the saint as principal Patron of his new order of chivalry, the Most Noble Order of the Garter. The other patrons were the Holy Trinity, the Virgin and St Edward the Confessor. St George is first known to be described as the 'special protector of the English' in 1351.

The College of St George, Windsor Castle, was also founded in 1348, with revised statutes in 1352. The College was entrusted with the maintenance of the Royal Free Chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St George and St Edward the Confessor, more commonly known as St George's Chapel, on behalf of the Order of the Garter. The Dean and canons symbolized Christ and His 12 disciples. The numbers of Knights of the Order of the Garter; the Dean, Canons and Priest Vicars; and the Poor Knights, who acted as surrogates for the Knights of the

Order, were chosen to match. This structure in turn matched that of the Sainte Chapelle, the palace chapel of the French kings in Paris. Originally at Windsor there was a statue of St George with the Dragon, a painting with Edward the Confessor on the rood screen, and a reliquary containing three of his bones. Today, there are still fourteen carvings of the saint on the wooden desk ends on the south side of the choir. Ten are about the saint, the princess and the dragon; the final four detail the martyrdom.

St George was particularly appropriate as patron of the new Order, and indeed more suitable than any of the native English saints (such as St Edmund, St Edward the Confessor, or St Thomas of Canterbury) because as well as being well-known and universally popular, he was patron of knights and of nobility of behaviour, and protector of the Holy Places and the Crusaders. Although stories of British saints slaying dragons were common, no Anglo-Saxon saint was said to have done so. St George's combat with the Dragon echoed the stories told about a number of French saints, which made St George acceptable in France, where Edward III ruled large territories and had made claim to the throne in 1337. Furthermore, no other order of chivalry had St George as its patron. The choice of such a famous and military figure in place of the pacific Edward the Confessor was probably made to rival St Denis of France, rather than reflect the popularity of St George, however: public opinion in the modern sense in any case did not exist.

St George was thus politically acceptable both to Normans and Anglo-Saxons and an international figure who symbolized the commitment of England to the cause of Christendom. He was an inspiring example of a faithful soldier of Christ (*miles Christi*) and indeed indistinguishable from him. Langland in *Piers Plowman* (1367-70, 1377-79 and 1385-86) was to describe Christ as a

knight 'going to Jerusalem to joust for our salvation'. Yet, as Samantha Riches has noted, St George did not displace his rivals overnight, but was identified as one of a group of patrons of England for a number of years. Indeed, the idea of a national cult in the sense widely assumed can be said to be an anachronism.

Edward III was apparently personally devoted to St George. The Milemete treatise (1326-27), Christ Church, Oxford, shows St George arming the young king. The figures closely resemble each other, in conscious identification. The treatise instructed the new monarch on his responsibilities and the moral and chivalric virtues he should embody. Among the king's collection of relics was some of the blood of the saint, two of his fingers and part of an arm. The apparent restriction of accessible relics of St George in England to the royal chapel at Windsor (the only English site of pilgrimage to St George we know about) may have limited his appeal to the rest of the country, in geographical terms at least.

Towards the end of the medieval period, in 1473, Edward IV (1461-83) replaced the Chapel with the present magnificent building, and by 1522 nine chantries had been established. Richard III (1483-85) gave money for the Chapel's continued restoration and made it a place of pilgrimage by moving there the body of Henry VI. St George's Chapel subsequently became one of the most important pilgrimage centres in southern England. Henry VII (1509-47) decided to be buried there also. The associated College of St George was one of the few colleges of secular canons to survive the Reformation.

St George rose to the height of his popularity in the 15th and 16th centuries, when his feast day was celebrated with 'ridings' or parades featuring a model dragon and actors portraying the roles of St George and St Margaret.

Although there was no official, national cult of St George, more and more evidence confirms that he was a significant figure in popular piety in a number of places. The blessing of St George on the crops was invoked in Rogationtide processions, and visits were made to wells of St George on Ascension Day, where his intercession was sought for sick horses. The extent to which saints enjoyed localized cults, with varying responsibilities, should not be underplayed. People would probably feel far more connection to their local cult than to any 'national' figure, regardless of whom the monarchy, nobility or the urban patriciate would like to have claimed as the national patron saint.

There is dispute even as late as Henry V about what happened to the cult of St George. Some say that the Archbishop of Canterbury made St George's Day a great feast at the outset of Henry's reign, in October 1513, to proclaim the identification of king and nation with the saint. But this action is generally dated to November, 1415, after the battle of Agincourt, when it was done as an act of thanksgiving. Then the feast of St George had to be observed like Christmas Day. On such a day only vital work might be performed. (That may have had the incidental advantage of allowing the feast to be celebrated on its proper day whenever it fell in Holy Week, rather than being relegated in that case to the Monday after Low Sunday, eight days later.)

Even so, this temporary national rejoicing should not blind us to the evidence that the late medieval cult was more local than national. Whilst there is no clear pattern of dedications and devotion, it is noticeable that guilds of St George are found in larger (and richer) urban areas. Moreover, since the saint was known to have a widespread and popular cult in other places, some individual English people might not have felt any particular connection with him.

A devotion to St George was shared by both Yorkist and Lancastrian kings during the Wars of the Roses. He was regularly invoked as a patron of the English monarchy in poetry, drama and visual imagery during the reign of Henry VI, the last Lancastrian king (r. 1422-61 and 1470-71), but Henry's Yorkist deposer Edward IV (r. 1461-70 and 1471-83) also seems to have used the image of St George as a way of asserting the legitimacy of his claim to the throne. Richard III owned a Book of Hours containing a 'suffrage' to St George; the principal feasts celebrated at his college of priests at Middleham were those of Sts George and Ninian. Of four fellowships he endowed at Queens' College, Cambridge, one was in the name of St George. At Bosworth, Henry Tudor (1485-1509) invoked St George; his standards included one of St George and it was placed together with those of the red dragon and the dun cow in St Paul's after his victory procession in 1485.

By the late medieval period, according to Manfred Görlach, along with dozens of minor variants, there are 19 separate and distinctly different legends of St George in the England. The immediate source of the readings for the saint's feast day was the widely used 13th-century *Breviary of Sarum* (Salisbury). The *Sarum Breviary* skips the episode of Athanasius the magician, passing directly from George's scourging, salting, and rubbing with haircloths to the bronze wheel torture. The *Exeter Ordinal*, prepared by Bishop John de Grandisson of Exeter in 1337, however, more closely follows the shorter Latin *passio* and positions the saint's contest with the magician before George's torture on the wheel. Meanwhile, what can be called a specially English version of the story of St George appeared within the *South English Legendary*, a long Middle English poem narrating 92 saints' lives written c. 1270-80. The Dragon episode is only recorded in one extant manuscript. The Middle English poet does, however, provide an expanded version of the final intercessory prayer, lacking in both the more familiar

version created by Jacobus de Voragine in the *Golden Legend* around 1275, and in the English breviaries. Reflecting its probable Franciscan origin, the *South English Legendary* remains untouched by the chivalric and nationalist associations that later overwhelmed the saint's English image.

The feast day in this period was of the second highest rank, just below that of the feasts of Christ (Christmas, Easter, etc.) and of the Apostles, the Virgin Mary, and certain special Western saints such as Benedict, Martin of Tours, and Gregory the Great. Equal to George's feast were those of other major saints such as Agnes, Cecilia, Maurice and the Theban Legion, Sebastian, and so on.

Indeed it is arguably to Voragine that we owe the traditional English image of St George: the knight of the red cross who killed a dragon. Illustrations of the life of St George and of his battle with the dragon can frequently be found in Books of Hours, which were easily the biggest literary genre of the period. The pride of place also given to St George in late medieval Suffrages probably reflects the elevation of his Feast Day in the English Missals by Archbishop Henry Chichele. That people were invited to think about St George mainly as protector of the realm in the 15th century and early Tudor period is evidenced by Mirk's *Festial*, a complete cycle of vernacular sermons for the Christian year, which has been described by Alan Fletcher as 'central to preaching in English in the 15th century'. *The Festial* is the only English sermon collection to be printed in England (by Caxton) before the Reformation and was probably the most frequently printed work of its time, before religious change made it unacceptable.

A version of the legend that did survive the Reformation was that embellished by Caxton, who composed a special conclusion to the legend, which he published in 1483: 'This blessed and holy martyr S. George is patron of this

realm of England and the cry of men of war. In the worship of whom is founded the noble order of the garter, and also a noble college in the castle of Windsor by kings of England, in which college is the heart of S. George, which Sigismund, the emperor of Almayne, brought and gave for a great and precious relic to King Harry the fifth. And also the said Sigismund was a brother of the said garter, and also there is a piece of his head, which college is nobly endowed to the honour and worship of Amighty [sic] God and his blessed martyr S. George. Then let us pray unto him that he be special protector and defender of this realm’.

The Tudors reinvented St George as an English figure in the Arthurian mode before and after the Reformation. Born in 1491, Henry VIII was inducted into the Knights of the Bath at the age of three, and in 1505, while only 14, played a part in the annual Garter ceremony which was held at St Paul’s Cathedral. He took part in the procession, which included part of a leg of the saint newly-presented by Maximilian, king of the Romans. In his teens, he is known to have used a *bede-roll*, a portable illustrated aid to devotion whose use procured remission of many years in Purgatory, and which also served as a lucky charm. The saints illustrated were St Gregory, St Michael, St George, St Erasmus (not the humanist scholar), St Anthony and St Armagil of Brittany. Henry was widely read in English chronicle history. At his coronation on 23 June 1509, immediately following the king himself, the standards not only of St George but of St Edward the Confessor and St Edmund were carried to symbolize Henry’s revival of the claim of the English monarchy to the throne of France. In 1536, however, Henry restricted the cult of the saints to those of the New Testament plus St George, and processions with images were banned. The ‘ridings’ mostly ceased, although the Norwich one continued with the dragon alone.

At the time of the English Reformation, the Sarum Rite was in use along with the Roman Rite. In 1549, Cranmer produced the first complete English-language liturgy, the *Book of Common Prayer*. The first edition was predominantly pre-Reformation in its outlook. The Communion Service, Lectionary, and collects were based on the Sarum Rite. The revised edition in 1552 presented a more clearly Protestant liturgy after a critique by Martin Bucer. Successive revisions are based on this edition, though important alterations appeared in 1604 and 1662.

In the first *Book of Common Prayer*, under Edward VI (1547-1553), the feast of St George was a Red Letter day. His day was retained in the next revision of 1552 but moved from 23 to 21 April, with Black Letter status, to make way for the feast of St Mark Evangelist. In the revision of the Anglican calendar made in 1561 the feast of St George was restored to 23 April and Red Letter status, whilst St Mark Evangelist was moved to 25th. Under James 1, the feast of St George reverted to a Black Letter day.

The reason that the feast of St George was retained is not definitely known, but he was the patron saint of the nation and one of the patron saints of the Order of the Garter and we may see in this action the first attempt to transmute the figure of St George into a patron of English Protestant nationalism at a time when national independence was threatened. The 1552 Prayer Book was only in force for the first six months of 1553, until the death of Edward. Under Mary (1553-1558), the traditional Latin liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church was restored and with it the feast of St George. Elizabeth I (1558-1603) reintroduced St George's Day as a public holiday in 1560.

In none of the Church of England calendars was St George's Day celebrated as a great feast but only as an optional observance; and, of course, there was no return to

the Catholic doctrine of the invocation of saints. The Lessons and Psalms were not Propers but those which came in the normal course of the Lectionary, which, started on 1 January and worked through the Old Testament (with a few passages omitted) within the year. The New Testament was similarly read through in order three times a year. The *Alternative Service Book*, 1980, however, provided 'common' psalms and lessons for saints who were martyrs. The feast of St George was restored in the new Anglican Calendar from Advent 1997.

The contrast between pre- and post-Reformation devotion to St George can be seen by comparing two prayers, the first from the Sarum Missal, the second by bishop John Wordsworth in the late C19:

Collect. O God, who causest us to rejoice in the good deeds and intercession of St George Thy Martyr, mercifully grant that by the gift of Thy grace we may obtain the benefits we ask of him; through...

Secret. We offer unto Thee, O Lord, the wonted Sacrifice on the death of Thy Martyr St George, entreating of Thy Mercy that through these holy Mysteries we may in Thy victory overcome the temptations of the Old Enemy, and of Thy bounty obtain an everlasting recompense of reward; through...

Post Communion. We humbly pray Thee, Almighty Father, that we who are satisfied with the sweetness of the Heavenly Table may at the intercession of Thy Martyr St George also be partakers of His resurrection by whose death we are redeemed; through...

Bishop John Wordsworth

O Lord God of Hosts, who didst give grace to Thy servant George to lay aside the fear of man and to confess Thee even unto death, grant that we, and all our countrymen who bear office in the world, may think lightly of earthly

place and honour, and seek rather to please the Captain of our Salvation who has chosen us to be his soldiers, to whom with Thee and the Holy Spirit be thanks and praise from all the armies of Thy saints, now and evermore.

Amen. *After the Third Collect: Prayers and Thanksgivings for use in Public Worship*, 4th ed. Revd E. Milner-White, A. R. Mowbray, Morehouse-Gorham, 1952.

St George is the only martyr who is revered by the Christian Churches throughout the world. In this case perhaps the Church of England has got it right when it places St George not among the principal saints but among those who come next. The feast of St George was restored to the rank of 'festival' (the second highest of four categories) in the new Church of England Calendar which came into force at Advent 1997. The Church of England Liturgical Commission comments:

'The church is encouraged and enriched by the celebration of its fellowship with saints and heroes through the generations...

A simple system of categorization (not of sanctity, but of observance) is helpful.

Three categories (other than principal feasts) have been identified and their level of observance indicated: festivals, lesser festivals and commemorations.

The Church of England does not canonize and does not, by including a name in a calendar, make any claim about the present heavenly state of the person. It is therefore restrained in what it says about them in its liturgical texts...St George's Day is made a festival to encourage wider celebration of the feast of England's patron saint.'

The Lessons set for the feast of St George are:
Evening Prayer (on the Eve): Psalms 111, 116; Jeremiah

15:15-21, Hebrews 11.32 - 12.2
Eucharist: 1 Maccabees 2.59-64 or Revelation 12.7-12;
Psalm 126; 2 Timothy 2.3-13, John 15.18-21
Morning Prayer: Psalm 5, Joshua 1.1-9, Ephesians 6.10-20
Evening Prayer: Psalms 3, 11, Isaiah 43: 1-7, John 15: 1-8
'When St George's Day... fall(s) between Palm Sunday and
the Second Sunday of Easter inclusive,' says the new
rubric, 'it is transferred to the Monday after the Second
Sunday of Easter'.

A new Collect has been written for St George's Day for
Common Worship, which replaced the *Alternative Service
Book* in 2000:

TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE

*O God of hosts,
who didst so kindle the flame of love
in the heart of thy servant George
that he bore witness to the risen Lord
by his life and by his death:
grant us the same faith and power of love
that we, who rejoice in his triumphs,
may come to share with him
the fullness of the resurrection;
through Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord,
who liveth and reigneth with thee,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

Modern language

*God of hosts,
who so kindled the flame of love
in the heart of your servant George
that he bore witness to the risen Lord
by his life and by his death:
give us the same faith and power of love
that we who rejoice in his triumphs
may come to share with him the fullness of the*

*resurrection;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

Post Communion

*O eternal God,
who hast given us this holy meal
in which we have celebrated the glory of the cross
and the victory of thy martyr George:
by our communion with Christ
in his saving death and resurrection,
grant us with all thy saints the courage to overcome evil
and so to partake of the fruit of the tree of life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Or

*O God our redeemer,
whose Church was strengthened by the blood of thy
martyr George:
so bind us, in life and in death,
to the sacrifice of Christ
that, our lives being broken and offered with his,
we may carry his death
and proclaim his resurrection in the world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

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The Redcrosse Liturgy

St George is a leading character in Spenser's remarkable allegory *The Faerie Queene* (1590 and 1596). St George appears in Book I as the Redcrosse Knight of Holiness, protector of the Virgin Una. In this guise he may be seen

as the Anglican Church upholding the monarchy of Elizabeth I:

*'But on his breast a bloody Cross he bore
The dear remembrance of his dying Lord,
For whose sweet sake that glorious badge we wore
And dead (as living) ever he adored...Thou,
Among those saints which thou dost see
Shalt be a saint, and thine own nation's friend
And patron; thou St George shalt called be,
St George of merry England, the sign of victory'*

The figure of St George was made use of by Spenser because of the belief that God had helped England to defeat the Armada. Recent scholars have stressed the central importance of Protestant doctrine, theology and liturgy to Spenser's poetry. By transforming England's patron saint into a sinful knight, Redcrosse, who, beset by pride and lust, was being brought back to the way of holiness, Spenser made it possible for George to reject the doctrines of the Catholic church, personified by Duessa, and become the champion of Una, the true faith. Through the influence of a Tudor-esque Prince Arthur, the young knight regained the path of holiness, killed the Dragon and transformed himself into St George. In this way, the figure of St George was assimilated into a culture that no longer adhered to belief in saintly intercession or the authority of popes. In his new guise, St George bridged the gap between the Catholic past and a future where the Protestant faith had successfully taken hold under the Tudors.

2011 saw the production at St George's, Windsor and Manchester Cathedral of *Redcrosse: a celebration of St. George*, an experimental 'fresh-poetry' liturgy which included poetry written by Andrew Motion, Jo Shapcott, Michael Symmons Roberts, Andrew Shanks and Ewan

Fernie, with new music from Tim Garland and Malcolm Creese of the jazz trio *Acoustic Triangle*. The liturgy, which I joined as a member of the congregation, drew in various ways on the inspiration of Spenser's reworking of the St George legend in *The Faerie Queene*. The liturgy is part of a larger national project, 'The Faerie Queene Now'. The Manchester reading featured St George and the Dragon processional 'giants' made by a team from the *Booth Centre for the Homeless*, under the guidance of Paul Devereaux. 'Redcrosse' shows St George as a symbol of a spiritual life that is an unceasing, restless, troubled, yet hopeful, quest for holiness. One reason for the choice of Manchester Cathedral was that the Fraser Chapel has a reredos painting by Mark Cazalet in which St George appears as a young black man dressed in an England football shirt. One wonders whether the time may come when the Church of England, ideally in agreement with the Catholic, Orthodox and Free Churches, observes a Sunday, perhaps the first Sunday after Easter, as St George's Sunday, a day of national re-dedication and renewal observed in the spirit of the universal Easter message of the liberation of our common humanity.

Conclusion

The story and symbolism of St George have played many different roles in English history. Some of these may cause surprise as they re-emerge from the shadow of chivalry and imperialism and are re-shaped and re-directed to meet the liturgical and pastoral needs of our own time. St George has been commended as a patron of a mythical pre-Catholic English Christianity, patron of England and the Order of the Garter, patron of various English monarchs, the special protector of the English, especially English soldiers, (particularly against the French and Spanish), a national saint yet a local saint, a rural saint and an urban saint, an example of fortitude under suffering and of non-violence, yet a rare example within

Christianity of a military martyr, a personal intercessor, a protector against human and natural enemies, a dragon-slayer, an exemplar of Protestant nationalism, patron of the British Empire, patron of civic virtue and of office-bearers, a symbol of spiritual striving, an international, official and institutional saint, a multicultural saint, one of the greatest saints, yet a saint about whom we may be agnostic if not indeed skeptical, and a patron of many secular causes. These include the Scouting Movement, which, although not an Anglican organization, has long had associations with the Church of England.

The question therefore remains, in conclusion, what, if anything, can be made for Christian purposes out of this kaleidoscope of devotions. As André Malraux has said: ‘The cultural heritage is not made up of the works that men must respect, but of those only that can help them to live. Our heritage is made up of all the voices that can answer our questions’.

This paper is based on a talk given in 2011 to the Oxford Liturgists Group, at the invitation of the Chaplain of Merton College, Oxford, the Rev’d Dr. Simon Jones.

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