

WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING OUT

RE-DEFINING ST GEORGE FOR A NEW ERA

By Simon Barrow and Jonathan Bartley





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Executive Summary

This paper proposes that the figure of St George should be reclaimed according to his true, hidden story – as a dissenter against the abuse of power, a contrast to religious crusades, a global figure we share with other nations, someone who offered hospitality to the vulnerable, and a champion of right rather than might.

It proposes that St George's Day should be re-branded as a national day to celebrate an English contribution to the history of dissent – the witness of people like the abolitionists, the suffragettes and those who have sought to combat racism, nationalism, debt, poverty, colonialism and war with the vision of a nation and world open to all.

For the churches, we believe, St George can be a post-Christendom saint. He is a Christian figure, but he does not 'belong' to Christians. However, in his faithful nonconformity he invites the churches to become better servants of Jesus by abandoning reliance on a romanticised past and (in the case of the Church of England) a legacy of Establishment privilege – and seeking a better way.

Introduction: the English problem?

St George is a figure who embodies the curious 'traditional' relationship between religion and social order, nation and identity. More-or-less emptied of its (chequered) Christian history, his flag and symbolism has increasingly been adopted as an emblem of 'Englishness' in recent years. At football matches, in pubs and on houses the red and white has displaced or augmented the red, white and blue. [1]

But what does it all mean? No-one is very sure. In an age of digital and online gaming, ordinary dragons don't quite pass the cultural muster. Politically things are changing, too. Recognising the strides the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish have made towards a new sense of national selfhood, the government seems to recognise that there remains (though they don't quite put it this way) 'the English problem'.

The English retain a global reputation, in some cases deserved, in others not, for xenophobia and insularity. Others see them as being hospitable and fair, but also aggressive and suspicious. The English have 'lost' an Empire with which they strongly identified – had is wrested from them, more like – and they have gained... what? This is where there seems a lack. The flag of St George seems to be a cipher for nostalgic longing, where once it was monopolised by those wanting to assert a mythical and exclusive 'whiteness' (a dangerous idea which still threatens to fill the void).

Section 1: Calling power to account

In face of this confusion, Ekklesia believes that the St George and his national Day needs to be 're-branded' (re-thought and re-defined) for the 21st century – not in a superficial way that conveniently adjusts the past in our own interests, but to regain a global sense of how those who identify with St George have been shaped by history (good and bad) and how they can be enriched through embracing a diverse cultural inheritance.

When we re-read the story of his origins and literary interpretation, St George, it turns out, was a dissenter. Starting out as an establishment figure, a military leader, his Christian faith led him to forsake his weapons and wealth in order personally to confront the Emperor Diocletian (303 AD) [2] with the wrong he was doing in persecuting minorities.

St George's conversion towards the cause of the persecuted started out, so legend has it, with an act of hospitality towards someone else, a Christian as it happens. These days we often feel threatened by strangers and those who seek refuge with us. For St George it was a spur to challenge the source of oppression by going directly to the Imperial Court. His action cost him his life. He was beheaded. But he became a symbol of courage for others. [See section 6. for more details]

Here, then, is a tale of the just person calling power to account through truth, something very relevant to the quest for post-imperial identity in a global world divided by power and violence, including religious violence. It also fits well with the long English tradition of dissent and with a renewed sense of internationalism.

Yet it is a story largely lost amid self-assertive flag-waving and harmless tales of dragons. Worse, St George has been co-opted to justify the 11th century crusades (which still blight modern history, especially the encounter with Islam), and in recent times has been manipulated into being a standard bearer for narrow nationalism – though he was, according to the tradition, black and Middle Eastern.

Section 2: An open-hearted sense of identity

We say that it is high time St George was reclaimed from the dragon, from past associations with racism and the far right, from religious crusades, from inward-looking nationalism, and from images of arrogant flag-waving. Instead his hidden story encourages us to celebrate an open-hearted sense of identity by recognising:

- Our role as global relations, not narrow nationalists
- The need for dissenters to call power to account
- Black Britons as vital contributors to our culture
- Shared values of social justice arising from the past
- Hospitality to migrants in an interdependent world
- Exemplars of faith, hope and love, not thin celebrity

When we take a second look at the legend of St George as defender of the vulnerable, we see that he does not truthfully belong to those who seek to dominate or exclude others. He belongs to those who are persecuted, to ‘the awkward squad’, to Black history, to many nations and regions, to those who sojourn and travel, to those who look for something more enduring than celebrity culture.

To consider St George a symbol of ‘England alone, above, better’ is narrative nonsense, as well extremely damaging to the English as a people with a delightfully mongrel heritage [3] and a global future. When we study the hagiography, we discover that we actually share his patronage with Turkey (his attributed birthplace), Syria (his probable nationality), Palestine (where he served), and Portugal, Aragon, Catalonia, Lithuania, Germany, Greece, Moscow, Istanbul, Genoa and Venice (where he is also honoured as a saint). [4]

On closer examination, St George turns out to be a global icon, not a local hero.

One important task, therefore is to take the sin out of his sainthood. Just as he was co-opted by the crusaders, so St George’s misappropriation as an excluding figure has continued in recent history. And it is not just the BNP who have done this [5]. It has happened in the political mainstream, too. In parliament, he sits over the exit from the Central Lobby of the House of Lords, lending presiding authority to the vestiges of an unelected, top-down social order.

But as the story of St George’s defiance of the Emperor Diocletian shows (and there are many who actually did what is claimed of him, even if he is a largely constructed figure), this particular patron belongs somewhere other than established order. He belongs to the people, not their overlords.

Section 3: St George's Day – celebrating the dissenters

It therefore makes sense that St Georges's Day should become a Day of Dissent when we mark and celebrate the noble, alternative English tradition of rebellion against the abuse of power (the pro-democracy Putney Debates [6], the equality-seeking Levellers, the anti-slavery abolitionists, the women's suffrage movement, conscientious objectors and peacemakers, anti-racism campaigners, human rights activists, those struggling against debt and poverty, and many others).

In shared stories such as these – some with a particular religious component, others not – we discover that to be 'English' is not to exist in splendid isolation, but in solidarity and friendship. [7] It is not about whiteness but blackness and diversity too. The values human beings cherish are not ours to possess, but things shared and developed with others. Our identity is formed by what enables us to relate positively, not what makes us 'different'. Drawing boundaries is often far less useful than pooling resources.

Re-branding St George, re-assessing his history and significance (and the interests it has been developed to serve) also involves a new honesty about ourselves. England has been a land of freedom and fairness. But it has also sought to rule the waves and waive the rules. It has been built on injustice and exploitation as well as courage and adventure. Trying to tell the story only one way, for good or ill, misrepresents it. The question is: how do we take the best of our inheritance into a future which will continue to involve radical change?

In order to address this question we don't need 'patron saints' who simply justify who and what we are. We need people – living and dead, historical and mythological – who point us to what we can become as people of character. Increasingly, these will be people of many nations – Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu, Dorothy Day, Václav Havel, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi... the cloud of witnesses is huge in number, especially when we begin to delve beyond those who are 'well known'.

The Black Britons project [8] is but one way of looking for fresh examples of hope. The British (perhaps especially the English) tend to elevate the 'heroic individual', but those we come to see as symbols were often part of much larger movements that had their origins in the grassroots.

St George is one name among many who resisted waves of persecution by kings, dictators and tyrants. Wilberforce's action against the transatlantic slave trade needs to be read alongside the resistance of the plantation workers and the endeavours of the abolitionists who went before him, and who are still working against new forms of slavery (sex trafficking, indentured labour) today. Many women who struggled for equality and justice still find their names hidden from history. [9]

Section 4: Saints, celebrities and converts in post-Christendom

There is also an important religious twist in all this. George is a ‘saint’ in the Christian tradition, albeit a minor one for some. Rightly understood, saints are not impossible heroes – they are ordinary people who, in some important aspect of their lives, show us a better way of living before each other and in the transforming presence of God. They give us practical examples of courage, truth-telling, holiness (integrity), justice (right relations), selfless love, reconciliation and hope. [10]

Such figures have, of course, been abused in church history. St George gave up his symbols of power to confront a ruler who was a tyrant, not least toward Christians. But subsequently the church, under the Edict of Milan, became incorporated into the imperial order itself, and its gospel of love and justice was deeply compromised.

When the bloody crusades (wars of religion) were launched in the 11th century the genuine example of St George was forgotten, and he was turned into a symbol of violence in God’s name. The ‘Christian Empire’ had no use for an emblem of resistance from within the system. On the contrary, it needed someone to buttress its claims and ways. This, sadly, has often been the case with ‘patron saints’, where faith, government and territory have been aligned as interests to be defended across national borders.

For Constantine, who bequeathed what became Christendom (the variegated history of the alliance of religious and governing powers in Europe), the red cross of St George was a symbol of domination: “In this sign you shall conquer” (*In hoc signo vinces*).

By contrast, the early followers of Christ saw the cross as the abolition of sin and sacrifice, a confrontation with ‘the powers that be’ whereby God in Christ absorbed, defeated and transformed the death-dealing that swallows us all. Jesus’ sacrifice was divine because it embodied the power of love overcoming the love of power. [11]

Christians, therefore, need to reclaim the St George story as an exemplification of what theologian Brian McLaren has called “the secret message of Jesus” – resistance to abusive power and injustice which uses active love, peacemaking, protest, personal transformation, self-sacrifice and the politics of forgiveness as its tools – not weapons of war and coercion. [12]

But can nations be expected to behave like this? Not unless their mini-communities of identity, geography and interest (civic groups, associations, churches, religious and non-religious networks, and campaigns for human betterment) start to think and behave differently. We get the governance we deserve. And we get the saints – these days, merely the celebrities – we deserve, too.

That is a particular challenge to the churches, too. Their role is to be exemplary communities demonstrating a different way of living on the basis of God’s love, not human force. But historically, under Christendom, they have often aligned with dominant cultures and elites, colluding with institutions such as slavery and the subjugation of

women and minorities. This represents a reversal of their origins among those who were persecuted and cast out by the ruling religious and political authorities. [13]

St George, perhaps, provides a route back. He was a person, it seems, from a relatively privileged background who became a servant of the state, a tribune in the army. But he turned in a different direction to speak out for the victims of a system which lurched into tyranny.

In a less dramatic way, maybe, St George can become a post-Christendom saint for the churches today. He is a Christian figure, but he does not 'belong' to Christians. However, in his faithful nonconformity he invites the churches to become better servants of Jesus by abandoning reliance on a romanticised past and (in the case of the Church of England) an Establishment legacy of privilege – and seeking a better way.

Section 5: Telling a different kind of story – ‘gospel truth’

What we call ‘re-branding’ is about reconsidering what is important in a story about someone or something, and telling it afresh. In a cynical advertising culture where products and vested interests rule, however, this can easily be seen as nothing more than ‘spin’. But in politics, in national identity and in religion, ‘spin’ mostly fails to work – in the longer run anyway. People have an innate sense of what has dignity, truth and value, and what is simple propaganda. It is the role of dissenters to encourage this awareness.

The Christian faith speaks not just of a change of image or appearance, but more fundamentally of a change of heart, of relationships and of life-direction. The New Testament’s distinctive word for this is *metanoia* – that is conversion, a turnaround enabling us to head in a new direction.

In the liberating story of Jesus, so the Gospel suggests, who we are and who we can be is radically redefined. [14] We are not isolated individuals, we are persons-in-relation. We are not consumers, we are people free to give and receive in non-monetarized ways. We are not subjects of a nation, race or ideology – we are citizens of an all-embracing realm (God’s) whose unendingly generosity is not mortgaged to imperial domination.

According to the hagiography, St George was a high ranking army officer at a time when many Christians still took Christ’s words about love of enemies seriously. Should they leave a profession which appeared incompatible with Jesus’ example? Should they remain soldiers but refuse to kill or make sacrifice to the Emperor? Some apparently tried to deal with the dilemma by leaving their sword arms above the water line when they entered the baptismal waters – the beginning of a ‘two kingdoms’ doctrine.

However St George resolved this church-state tension, when he came to face down the Emperor, he realised that force of arms would be of little help. He was outnumbered, and his appeal was to right not might.

This, not nationalism, is what a true patriotism is about – commitment to ‘another country’, one where all have a place, not just those with wealth and power. If there is anything to be gained from the public debate about ‘progressive patriotism’ [15] and a sense of national identity that does not put others down (such as is being discussed elsewhere in Britain), this kind of global vision should surely be at the heart of it.

Section 6: Re-visiting St George's mythologized history

Very little, if anything, is known about the real St George. Pope Gelasius said that George is one of the saints "whose names are rightly revered among us, but whose actions are known only to God."

Tradition has it that he was born in about 280 AD in Turkey (Cappadocia). A Roman Army Officer, some suggest that he had Christian parents, others that he converted to Christianity after sheltering a Christian.

Christians were a small, but growing minority in the Empire. They faced periods of intense persecution. They often saw themselves as aliens in a foreign land. Things came to a head for George, quite literally, when Diocletian unleashed his terrible persecution of the Christians in 303 AD. He is said to have divested himself of his rank and worldly possessions and journeyed to Nicomedia to plead with Diocletian. He didn't raise an army, but confessed to his faith and challenged the Emperor's authority without force of arms. It was an action that he paid for with torture and decapitation.

It is suggested that the witness of his suffering convinced Empress Alexandra and Athanasius, a pagan priest, to become Christians as well, and so they joined George in martyrdom. His body was returned to Lydda for burial, where Christians soon came to honour him as a martyr.

Eusebius of Caesarea, writing c. 322, tells of a soldier of noble birth who was put to death under Diocletian at Nicomedia on 23 April 303, but makes no mention of his name, his country or his place of burial. The historicity, or otherwise, of this story may never be known. However the story took on a life of its own, as was often the case in the ancient world (and is not unknown in a modern, tabloid culture). [16]

Originally, veneration of a saint was authorized by local bishops but, after a number of scandals, the Popes began in the twelfth century to take control of the procedure and to systematize it. A lesser holiday in honour of St George, to be kept on 23 April, was declared by the Synod of Oxford in 1222; and St George had become acknowledged as Patron Saint of England by the end of the fourteenth century. Others in Portugal, Palestine and elsewhere have their own affinities and claims, but they did not have the power to exercise them in the same way. [17]

Timeline

303 – George challenges Emperor Diocletian

1098 - George adopted as patron saint of soldiers after he was said to have appeared to the Crusader army at the Battle of Antioch

1191 - Richard I, campaigning in Palestine, puts the army 'under the protection' of St George

1222 - A lesser holiday to honour St George, to be kept on 23 April, declared by the Synod of Oxford

1344 - 1348 Edward proclaims St George Patron Saint of England

1348 - George adopted by Edward III as principal Patron of his new order of chivalry, the Knights of the Garter

1415 – Archbishop Chichele raised St George's Day to a great feast and ordered it to be observed like Christmas Day.

1778 - Holiday reverts to a simple day of devotion for English Catholics

1940 - George VI institutes the George Cross for 'acts of the greatest heroism or of the most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme danger'

1969 - Revision of Calendar of Saints by the Roman Catholic Church leads to downgrading the recollection of St George to the lowest category, commemoration, an optional memorial for local observance.

Throughout Christian history, the details and diversities of the cult of St George are many and complex. [18]

Section 7: Reclaiming St George from the shadow of empire

Claimed by the resurgent Christian Empire seven centuries after Constantine, St George was branded ‘an English hero’ during the crusades against the Muslim armies in the 11th century. He became a symbol of religious war and conflict.

His image was also used to foster patriotism in 1940, when King George VI inaugurated the George Cross as the UK's highest award for bravery by a civilian or a military person where the award of the Victoria Cross (VC) was not applicable. [20] The medal bears a depiction of the saint slaying the dragon – a legend which possibly has its origins in the Greek story of Perseus, Andromeda and the sea-monster. [21]

‘Re-branding’ St George is about rediscovering forgotten elements of his early story and interpreting them after Christendom. The fact that the dissenting aspect of George’s life has been played down might perhaps account for part of its failure to capture the public imagination in other than a vague, nationalistic sense. We propose bringing his story back to its subversive origins. [22]

England has no other national day besides St George’s. In other countries, the national day is often associated with independence, liberation or deliverance from oppression – for example, the 4th July in the US, Bastille Day in France, and the various celebrations of Simon Bolivar in South America. There is also Martin Luther King Day and Holocaust Memorial Day.

To reframe St George’s Day in terms of the English traditions of non-conformity, enfranchisement and freedom for women, slaves, refugees and many others would both honour in its widest sense the story of someone who spoke for the persecuted, and it would also fit well with the theme of shared freedom – as well as highlighting how far we still have to go.

No doubt those concerned with the situation of migrants, asylum seekers, travellers, gay people, minority religious groups and others who have experienced marginalisation and mistreatment would have much to contribute to the debate about an inclusive ‘Englishness’. Both people of faith and humanists and those of no faith could own the theme of creative dissent and the development of living space for all.

It is also important to stress that ‘re-branding’ in this way is nothing new, trendy or ‘politically correct’. In 1958 Empire Day was renamed Commonwealth day, for example – broadening its appeal, recognising the significance of historical change, and creating a fresh understanding of Britain’s place in the world.

Section 8: Some practical possibilities

We offer these as some ideas and recommendations to stimulate further debate and discussion:

1. That St George's Day could become a national public holiday in England.
2. That its theme could be to celebrate historic English traditions of creative dissent and non-conformity in the spirit of St George's challenge to Diocletian's persecution.
3. That it could also be an occasion to reinforce links with other inheritances (such as our ex-enemy Gandhi's) which have enabled us to re-assess our own history, policy and self-understanding.
4. That civic events could be held to mark the contribution to national life of dissenters, martyrs, minorities and migrants – with particular attention to the plight of the excluded, the displaced and oppressed in history and today.
5. A focus on hospitality – street parties, concerts, exhibitions, multicultural events, and projects to encourage reconciliation within local communities.
6. An emphasis on those 'hidden from history' in school and education programmes.
7. An examination of non-violent techniques for tackling injustice and violence, given the failures of Iraq and the desire to relinquish war and terror as instruments of policy – recalling St George's costly decision to seek moral persuasion rather than force of arms.
8. A renewed focus within the churches on the history of Christian non-conformity, which has increasing relevance as we transition into a post-Christendom era.

*Simon Barrow & Jonathan Bartley
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Notes

- [1] This development is noted and documented by Ian Bradley, http://shop.ekkleisia.co.uk/christian-bookshop/believing_in_britain_1016383.html *Believing in Britain: The spiritual identity of 'Britishness'* (I. B. Taurus, 2006), pp. 3-4.
- [2] Rosamie Moore, 'An abridged history of Rome, Part i-xi, <http://www.romeartlover.it/Storia11.html> From Diocletian to Constantine ', 22 April 2006.
- [3] For accounts of the diverse cultural make-up and roots of English and British identities, see the Runnymede Trust educational project, <http://www.realhistories.org.uk> The Real Histories Directory.
- [4] For summaries of St George, his attributes and those who use him as a model see: BBC Religion and Ethics - http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/saints/george_1.shtml St George , and Michael Collins, <http://www.britannia.com/history/stgeorge.html> St George - England's Patron Saint (Britannia History, 1996-7). Earlier accounts include those by I. H Elder, *George of Lydda* (1939).
- [5] On the far-right British National Party (BNP) website, Alan O'Reilly offers what he calls "a traditional Christian narrative of England's national saint."
- [6] In 1647, among the pews of Putney parish church in southwest London, the rank and file of the Roundheads, led by Leveller agitators, argued their case for a transparent democratic state based on suffrage, religious toleration and the rule of law. Ekklesia associate Giles Fraser is current vicar of Putney and writes about <http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/news/columns/fraser/061030> A church that still embodies Britain's radical tradition (30 October 2006).
- [7] For a full <http://www.exlibris.org/nonconform/engdis/bibliography.html> General Bibliography of English Dissenters , see the ExLibris online project (1997-2006).
- [8] http://www.100greatblackbritons.com/bios/george_of_lydda.html George of Lydda features as part of the 100 Black Britons documentary project. See also: National Archives in association with the Black and Asian Studies Association, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/> Black Presence: Asian and Black History in Britain, 1500 - 1850, an online exhibition.
- [9] See Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History. 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (Pluto Press, 1975).

- [10] Markus Gilbert (Ed.), http://books.ekklelesia.co.uk/product_info.php?products_id=679 Radical Tradition: Saints in the struggle for justice and peace (DLT, 1992).
- [11] Simon Barrow & Jonathan Bartley (Eds.), http://books.ekklelesia.co.uk/product_info.php?products_id=1676 Consuming Passion: Why the killing of Jesus really matters (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005).
- [12] Brian McLaren, http://shop.ekklelesia.co.uk/christian-bookshop/secret_message_of_jesus_pb_112953.html The Lost Message of Jesus (Thomas Nelson, 2005).
- [13] Jonathan Bartley, http://shop.ekklelesia.co.uk/christian-bookshop/faith_and_politics_after_christendom_96610.html Faith and Politics After Christendom (Paternoster, 2006); Stuart Murray, http://shop.ekklelesia.co.uk/christian-bookshop/post_christendom_11891.html Post-Christendom (Paternoster, 2004).
- [14] Brian McLaren, http://shop.ekklelesia.co.uk/shop/the_story_we_find_ourselves_in_further_adventures_of_a_new_kind_of_christian_97392.html The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian (Jossey Bass Wiley, 2003).
- [15] On the progressive patriotism' debate, see for example: Billy Bragg, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/britain/article/0,,2053504,00.html> They're not just British values - but we need them anyway, The Guardian Tuesday April 10 2007.
- [16] Eusebius, The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine (Penguin Classics, 1989), pp. 367 ff
- .
- [17] For a fascinating scholarly survey, which illustrates the ambiguity and multivalence of the myth, see: <http://www.library.rochester.edu/camelot/TEAMS/whgeointro.htm> The Martyrdom of St. George in the South English Legendary (c. 1270-80), edited by E. Gordon Whatley, with Anne B. Thompson and Robert K. Upchurch. Originally published in Saints' Lives in Middle English Collections (Medieval Institute Publications, USA, 2004).
- [18] See also: David Woods, <http://www.ucc.ie/milmart/grgorig.html> The Origin of the Cult of St George (May 2002)
- [19] Thomas F. Madden, <http://www.godspy.com/issues/Real-History-of-Crusades-by-Thomas-Madden.cfm> The Real History of the Crusades . The Wikipedia entry on Crusades has a good bibliography. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crusades>
- [20] The George Cross Database: <http://www.gc-database.co.uk/decoration.htm> The Decoration (Chameleon HH Publishing Ltd).

[21] BBC, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/82166.stm The Great St George Revival , 23 April 1998.

[22] This has been done many times before. Giles Morgan comments: “St George is also identified with the Islamic hero Al Khidr, who is said to have discovered the fountain of youth. He has been associated with the coming of spring and has functioned as fertility symbol, and been closely linked to the Green Man of Pre-Christian Myth. St George has also acted as a symbol of chastity and served as a healing saint. His flag has been appropriated by the far right but in recent times come to identify a multi-cultural England.” See his St George: Knight, patron saint and dragon slayer (Pocket Essentials, 2006).

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