

Innovative project seeks to reclaim Englishness and St. George

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A leading Shakespearean expert from the University of Birmingham is seeking to reaffirm Englishness and St. George in an innovative new work which is partly an original arts event, partly a groundbreaking religious service. The project, entitled *Redcrosse*, is led by Professor Ewan Fernie, and takes its cue from one of the great neglected epics of English literature, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

Redcrosse offers its new vision of England and St. George through brand-new poetry by the former Poet Laureate Andrew Motion, the winner of this year's Costa Prize Jo Shapcott, Michael Symmons Roberts, Ewan Fernie and Andrew Shanks, as well as original music by Tim Garland for trio Acoustic Triangle and the Choir of Royal Holloway, University of London.

Professor Ewan Fernie, who recently joined the University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute as Chair of Shakespeare Studies, explains:

"Spenser refashioned St. George for his own time into a symbol of the spiritual life as an unceasing and restless quest for holiness. We've written our liturgy in that same spirit, 'still questing, always questing, and in that questing free, / still yearning, only yearning, for by that yearning we / may find that life beyond life, which is what it means to be'. It's a liturgy for everyone - all spiritual seekers, anyone who's seeking something better and seeking others who want the same. It ultimately celebrates England and St George in terms of our potential openness to each other and to truth."

Redcrosse is to be premiered at two high-profile events at St George's Chapel, Windsor, and Manchester Cathedral, but the creators hope that it might ultimately be adopted as an alternative, inclusive liturgy for St George's Day.

The project directly addresses some of the most important issues currently relating to English literature and culture, such as the ever-changing nature of Englishness in an increasingly plural and globalised society. It also tests the potential for poetry, music and other creative arts to create and reshape new forms of religious experience and practice today.

Redcrosse also attempts to reclaim Englishness and St George from damagingly narrow, jingoistic conceptions. Professor Fernie observes:

"St. George is patron saint not only of England, but also of Aragon, Catalonia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Greece, Lithuania, Montenegro, Palestine, Portugal, Russia and Serbia! In the area of Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, he's traditionally honoured not only by Christians but also by Muslims and Jews. Several historic figures seem to have contributed to his persona, but we mustn't forget that as a specifically religious figure he is at least as much a martyr as he is a crusading soldier."

"*Redcrosse* works with the powerful myth of St George and the dragon, recognising that sometimes we need to slay our demons, but it fundamentally evolves a concept of sainthood in terms of unendingly opening oneself up - to others, to God, and to the future."

"We want to proclaim and celebrate an England very different from exclusionary and defensive versions. A painting by Mark Cazalet in Manchester Cathedral depicting St George as a young black man has been one of our sources of inspiration."

Recent media reports on *Redcrosse* claimed that the project calls for St George to be represented as a woman or black. In response, Fernie said:

"It's great to be getting this level of attention but it can be misleading. We're not saying that we should now always depict St George as a black man or celebrate St George's Day instead - ours is a new poetic liturgy, not a sloganising polemic - but we do in the course of our new work explore a number of ways of making St George and Englishness potentially relevant and representative for all."

Redcrosse premieres at the Windsor Spring Festival where Andrew Motion will be giving a reading of his original material, followed by a service in May at Manchester Cathedral. Both these events will climax with a collective remaking of the red cross from roses, the national flower of England, in a ritual gesture meant to celebrate a renewed solidarity between the very different people who make up contemporary England.

Redcrosse is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council/Economic and Social Research Council's Religion and Society Programme; the Arts Council; London Centre for Arts and Cultural Exchange; the PRS for Music Foundation; and Royal Holloway, University of London

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