

Englishness Explored through Ritual and Poetry

What does it mean to be English? What is this country called to be, and to become? In the 16th century Edmund Spenser proposed an answer in the six books of his epic poem *The Faerie Queene*. With its patriarchal, nationalist and violent strains, it may seem an unlikely starting point for an exploration of Englishness today, but it was by engaging with this neglected work that Ewan Fernie and his team, funded by [Religion and Society](#), developed a new vision of religion and society in England today. They could not have anticipated the controversy they would provoke.



Between 2010 and 2011 Fernie, the theologian Andrew Shanks, and the poets Jo Shapcott, Michael Symmons Roberts and Andrew Motion, collaborated in the creation of 'Redcrosse', a new poetic liturgy for St George's Day. It was performed at St George's Chapel Windsor and at Manchester Cathedral, with specially commissioned music by Tim Garland. At the same time, Simon Palfrey and Elisabeth Dutton worked with pupils from two secondary schools in deprived areas, and students from Oxford University, to develop a drama inspired by *The Faerie Queene*, which was performed in London and Windsor.

Spenser offered a new vision of St George as above all a spiritual seeker, and Fernie and his collaborators placed this questing George at the heart of their new quest for spiritual solidarity in present-day England. They point out that our patron saint is a figure from the Ancient Near East revered by Muslims, Jews and Christians alike, and also the patron saint of Aragon, Catalonia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Greece, Lithuania, Montenegro, Palestine, Portugal, Russia and Serbia. Inspired by a modern painting displayed in Manchester Cathedral, residents of the Booth Centre for the Homeless built two Catalan-style 'gegants' (giant puppet figures) of St George and the dragon (pictured above). This depiction of George as a black man proved so provocative that plans to process through Manchester and into the cathedral for liturgy had to be shelved in the face of hostility from the BNP (British National Party) and EDL (English Defence League). But 'Redcrosse' wasn't intended to divide as it was intended to encourage us to open ourselves up to each other and to truth.

Spenser's poem may be largely forgotten, but the project revealed how St George remains a symbol of an English identity which is as contested and negotiable as it has ever been. It shows how poetry and religious ritual still have the power to speak to topical, often painful, issues. The process may be difficult, but it is no less important for that. Fernie's project of exploration of identity through art and ritual continues, supported by new sources of funding and support, and unfolding in a series of creative works and publications.

Find out more...

- Visit the project's website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/English/faeriequeene/index.html>
- Read an article published in *The Guardian* about the project on 24 January 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jan/24/poets-enlist-st-george-liturgy>
- Keep an eye out for the book of the liturgy *Redcrosse* to be published by Continuum late 2012 with contributions including from John Milbank, Salley Vickers and Sarah Apetrei as well as the poem's authors: <http://www.continuumbooks.com/books/detail.aspx?BookId=167726&SubjectId=1080&Subject2Id=1246>

You might also be interested in...

- The Religion and Society-funded research network 'Performance, Politics, Piety: Music and Debate in Muslim Societies of North Africa, West Asia, South Asia and their Diasporas': <http://www.smlc.religionmusic.leeds.ac.uk/>, which has also led to the creation of the new journal *Performing Islam*.
- 'The experience of worship in late medieval cathedral and parish church', another Religion and Society-funded project: <http://www.bangor.ac.uk/music/AHRC/>
- Medieval musicologist Emma Hornby's Programme-supported project about Old Hispanic Chant. You can watch videos of it being performed from here: <http://www.youtube.com/user/bristolunischolacant>
- Findings from medieval historian Miri Rubin's Programme research network on William of Norwich: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/trail_of_a_deadly_cult

Award Title

***The Faerie Queene* Now: remaking religious poetry for today's world**

Team

Principal Investigator: Professor Ewan Fernie (University of Birmingham)

Reverend Canon Andrew Shanks and Manchester Cathedral: writer and Manchester Co-ordinator

Professor Michael Symmons Roberts of Manchester Metropolitan University: project poet

Reverend Canon John A Ovenden St George's Chapel, Windsor: Windsor Co-ordinator

Mr Martin Denny: Director of the Windsor Festival

Windsor Advisory Group:

Sarah Apetrei (Postdoctoral Fellow in Theology, Keble College, Oxford and expert in early modern female spirituality); David Fuller (Emeritus Professor of English, Durham, former University Orator and co-author of Signs of Grace); Graham Holderness (Professor of English, Hertfordshire, poet, novelist, and critic of early modern/religious literature); Kevin Morris (Vicar of St Michaels and All Angels, Chiswick); Andrew Taylor (University Chaplain 1997-2003, arts administrator, parish priest); Salley Vickers (novelist and advisor to the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England); Monawar Hussain (Muslim Tutor at Eton College); Ben Quash (Professor of Christianity and the Arts, King's College, London and formerly Academic Convenor of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme), and David Ruitter (Professor and Chair of the English Department at the University of Texas, El Paso).

Manchester Advisory Group

Pam Elliott (Cathedral Education Officer who runs a local young people's religious poetry competition); Michael Powell (Librarian of Chethams Library); Albert Radcliffe (former Canon, composes a cycle of poems for a Good Friday meditation service at the Cathedral each year); Michael Schmidt (Professor of Poetry at Glasgow University, founder and managing director of Carcanet Press).

Faerie Queene Fable and Drama Project

Elisabeth Dutton of Worcester College, Oxford: Dramaturg

Mr Pete Watson of George Mitchell School: Liaison

Mr Stuart Shepherd of Bishop David Brown School: Liaison

Dr Farah Karim Cooper of Shakespeare's Globe: Liaison

Matthew Evans, director at Gameshow Productions

Professional actors: Max Pritchard, Matt Lacey, Fiona Watson, Sophie Alderson

Oxford University Students: Katherine Carpenter, Chloe Wicks, Lucy Fyffe, Chloe Cornish, Chloe Courtney, Anna Schell, Matt Gavan, Caitlin Macmillan, Victoria Princewell.



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



Year 9 drama class of Debbie Scott's, Bishop David Brown School

Overall Project

Dr Alastair Niven, Cumberland Lodge: Host of associated Poetry and Spirituality Conference

Mr Graham Henderson, Poet in the City: Host and Patron of associated King's Place event

University

Royal Holloway University of London

Award Type

Phase 3 Small Grant

Key terms

nationalism, poetry, St George, Spenser, Anglicanism, Church of England