

Sam Jackson & Charlie Pemberton

Patriotism? A Set of Questions...

This paper presents patriotism as a set of stories about national identity and loyalty rather than as something with an essential substance. Utilising presentations from a conference on patriotism, we provide three divergent understandings of patriotism and consider their theological basis. We then consider the issue of otherness as it relates to the theoretical construction of patriotism and in the creation of a political other, questioning the effect of simplistic patriotic sentiment on international conflict.

The large crowds gathered to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee suggest that patriotism is not past. The nature and utility of patriotism ('in a religiously plural and culturally differentiated "nation"') was considered in a one-day conference hosted by the Lincoln Theological Institute in Manchester. ¹ Articulating a variety of theological perspectives, this conference asked how politicians and other leaders should encourage a population to participate in their local communities? As indicated in the conference prospectus, leaders often refer to a set of values including 'fair play, respect, tolerance, desert, value of the individual, and freedom.' Such values are assumed to be part of what it means to exist in a (political) community, and are often given theological legitimisation. Patriotism is absent from this list, but is its content distinct from cited norms?

With the alleged failure of multiculturalism and the rise of nationalist political parties (ranging from the SNP to the BNP), patriotism seems to be an idea that is returning to public discussions. While tied to notions of belonging and community, specific understandings of the term seem illusive. Patriotism is love of one's country, but behind this simple definition lies complexities of individual identity, national belonging, and an alleged essence to which patriotism points (often assumed to be territory, ethnicity, language, or cultural heritage).

Some of the presentations asked whether notions of attachment (implied by the utility of patriotic or nationalist sentiment as a force for positive involvement in one's community) are appropriate models for the Christian. Is 'nation' the proper sense of community, or is there a better model? If the nation is the proper model, is the standard understanding of such a group sufficient, or should it be modified to remove harmful distinctions or boundaries? Do national sentiments respect the diversity and multiplicity of identities that comprise the way many individuals think about themselves? These thematic questions were hinted at in the conference prospectus: 'The conference aims to achieve greater clarity over whether or not the revivification of Patriotism is warranted, and in what ways a revitalised Patriotism may differ from past Patriotisms.'

The pages that follow make up a brief discussion of the resources upon which the presenters built their perspectives on patriotism, with a view to considering the social or political utility of 'patriotism'; we would argue that the substance of the above questions is primarily determined by how the story of patriotism is told. We conclude by questioning the banal and benign nature of patriotism. If patriotism is contingently constructed on a variety of values, definitions of people, and understandings of space, what is there to ensure that patriotism is a positive force for social unity and a generous relationship with the other?

Narratives of Patriotism

Patriotism is a term whose simple definition masks its underlying complexity. Rather than attempting to describe the perspectives on patriotism as universalisable, abstract arguments, the following section presents three narratives of patriotism. Here, we argue that the best way to understand a perspective on patriotism is as a story, taking into account details specific to the person discussing the issue. This method of investigation recognises the mobilizing capability of patriotism, which can form the basis of civic activity towards a variety of ends. We chose three perspectives to represent the divergent takes on the topic: traditional understandings of national identity; marginalised minority identities within a hegemonic community; and a rejection of the abstractness of the nation.

Ian Bradley presented a monarchy-centric notion of patriotism. ² According to his paper, the idea of Britishness is embodied in the person of the monarch and the institutions that surround her. Bradley cited a number of recent polls, one of which found that the monarchy is second only to the Union Jack in a ranking of the things that epitomize the United Kingdom. In the recently developed citizenship ceremonies, it is the act of swearing allegiance to the Queen that imparts citizenship on the individual. Bradley noted that the national anthem of the United Kingdom is unique among national anthems in its focus on the ruler of the nation. 'I think it's first very important to note the fact that the United Kingdom is organized and governed not around ethnicity or nationalism or some abstract political principle like *liberté* or *égalité* or *fraternité*, but rather around a dynasty. And I think this has a very significant bearing on national identity.'

Bradley argued that institutions and events that refer to the monarchy hold greater significance for many British people than those that focus on other parts of national identity. In another poll, service organizations that pledge loyalty to the monarch rank highly in respectability, led by the Armed Forces. National remembrances, both commemorations of tragedy and celebrations, often feature the monarch or some other member of the royal family participating in a religious service. Referencing Jonathan Freedland of *The Guardian*, Bradley noted that love of country is somehow converted to 'love for the house of Windsor.' Bradley briefly alludes to the theological rationale for this social unity expressed through the symbolic affinity with the monarch: the unity of people and monarch is, to Bradley, equivalent to the unity of the church and Christ. To Bradley, such connections demonstrate the centrality of the monarchy for ideas of British identity, British pride, and thus, British patriotism.

It is significant that, in diverse Britain, the monarchy is able to draw together a variety of cultural positions. Bradley reminded the audience of the Golden Jubilee celebrations of 2002, which featured a large gospel choir led by Nigerian-born Patti Boulaye 'which danced and sang its way down the mall as part of the parade' for the Golden Jubilee. The crowd that gathered to watch the procession seemed to be energized more by the Black Gospel music of this choir than the 'traditional national airs played by military bands.' Other monarchy-related celebrations have encouraged a communal 'feel-good factor,' often taking the form of street parties to mark occasions including the coronation service of 1953 and the Royal wedding of 2011. The Queen has also demonstrated a commitment to celebrating less traditional parts of British life through her involvement in interfaith organizations and her relationship with Commonwealth nations.

The prominence of the Royal Family in recent time (seen especially in the media connected to British holidays or other events with a particular British dimension) demonstrates the great impact that the monarchy has on conceptions of national identity. While other pillars of Britishness diminish, the monarchy remains strong and even resurgent in public opinion. Thus, it forms a stable platform for the development of patriotism across the diversity found in the UK. As such, the patriotism that focuses on the monarch at its centre relies on a single national identity that incorporates individual difference by focusing on what is shared by all of those who are British.

Anthony G. Reddie offered an account of that emphasised important differences that are ignored within a unitary national identity: his narrative describes otherness within the nation. ³ He and his brothers, despite their being raised in working-class Yorkshire, identified themselves as 'post-colonial refuseniks' who refused to adopt the identity of their 'habitual home.' His story is told from an intentionally marginal perspective; he adopts an outsider status relative to a national identity implicitly assumed to be homogeneous (white). His identity recognises frequently ignored difference and otherness within an alleged uniform sense of Englishness.

Reddie presented the story of the 1976 cricket competition between an all-black West Indies team and an all-white England team captained by a South African. As young boys, Reddie and his brother rooted for the team with which they identified: that is, the team with African-Caribbean players. 'It never occurred to us that we should support England. It never occurred to us that our allegiance or our love might lie with a team of Englishmen, even though we were, and indeed are, English.' Notions of national identity, as revealed in the makeup of the English cricket team, include an assumed homogeneity that does not have room for an internal other.

He introduced the idea of a 'nomenclature of choice,' which is the assumed identity used at any given moment. For Reddie, 'Black British,' while perhaps an appropriate description, is rarely his assumed identity; his rejection of this appellation mirrors the rejection (or marginalisation) of black bodies in Great Britain. He notes that, while his parents were encouraged to immigrate to the United Kingdom following World War 2 to rebuild the economy, current immigration policies make it more difficult for a black Commonwealth veteran to enter the country than the white descendants of Britain's European enemies.

But Reddie's presentation was not a static definition of the status of the other. He told the story of his nephew approaching Reddie's brother: 'Daddy, I want an England football shirt. I like Frank Lampard.' The post-colonial refusenik identity of Reddie and his brother does not automatically resonate with the next generation, which has not had the same experiences that led to the intentional adoption of an outsider status by the refuseniks. The emphasis here is on the changing dynamics of internal relations within a supposedly homogenous national body. He suggests that the value of Black theology is that, 'if it does nothing else, at least [it] throws up the ways in which concealed and tacit forms of discourse are embedded within our body politic, around what it means to belong or what it means to be perceived as the other.' That is, the context of an individual too often goes unnoticed as that person's identity is established. His story is one of the reclamation of the history behind his life as a black British man born in working-class Yorkshire. For Reddie, it is not merely attentiveness to context but the intentional selection of a partisan Black position which is paramount; though Reddie never explicitly justified it, his apologetic 'God's preferential option for the poor,' a

significant constitutive element in both Liberation and Black theologies, permeated the contours of his whole talk. Does patriotism possess the resources to engender collective loyalty amongst diverse ethnic and socio-economic groups of people? Such a patriotism must make room for those who are somehow different to be faithful to their unique perspectives.

Stephen Backhouse presented a radically different sort of otherness, introduced through a stereotypical reflection on his own identity early in his presentation: as a Canadian working in England with an English family, he lives out the trope of the foreigner who came to the UK and 'took your jobs... [and stole your] women.' ⁴ He asked of the British patriot: 'what [do you] think of me?' He portrayed patriotism (which he calls 'passionate preference for one's own') as a love for what is familiar and, ultimately, similar to the individual; this love, when attached to notions of national identity, does not respond well to outsiders who do not fit within such identity.

In place of patriotism, Backhouse proposed the notion of neighbourliness. Rather than drawing artificial distinctions based on perceived similarity, he followed Kierkegaard to suggest that one should simply go out and encounter someone, and to that person one owes one's love. He argued that the abstract notions of patriotism (and cosmopolitanism) distract from the issue of real encounters with individuals. The merit of these individuals is secured, not by a national identity or emotive loyalty to a country, but by their position in relation to God; a theological account of the validity of the individual, secured by God's image in every individual was crucial to Backhouse's position.

He admitted that it is difficult to move past one's context, including the political. A contextual portrayal of the story of an individual may indeed make patriotic identity seem natural. Yet for Backhouse it is important to realize the artificiality of national identity: 'During the Great War of 1914 to 1918, men fought in the name of nations that their grandparents had never heard of. Our conception of the nation is relatively new and in constant flux.' Such national conceptions are better understood as stories than concrete historical givens, suggested Backhouse. 'It is nations and not neighbourhoods which are imagined communities,' imaginings which led to the construction of narratives. As such, distinctions made between groups of people by national or patriotic sentiment are not only constructed, but unnecessary. Backhouse proposed that his identity as an outsider presents the opportunity to engage with someone on the basis of one's identity as neighbour rather than compatriot. In this narrative, patriotism relies too heavily on artificial boundaries constructed around imagined similarity; to be a selfless member of a community, one must treat people as neighbours rather than compatriots.

Resources of Patriotism

Jo Carruthers, ⁵ who set out to characterise British patriotism by considering it under the auspices of a Protestant aesthetic of simplicity, provided a useful lens through which to view these contrasting stories of patriotism. Towards the beginning of her talk, she outlined 'various kinds of affiliation' which are contained within, or implied by, the term 'patriotism.' Is British patriotism 'about loyalty to a set of values,' such as fair play, tolerance, respect or freedom, or 'is it loyalty to a group of people' as inferred in the term *patros* which 'literally means "of one's father [or]...clan,"' or 'is it loyalty to a place?' Carruthers presented these three elements around which the narratives of patriotism can reify: values, people or place.

The apparent simplicity of this tripartite schema, whereby patriotism can be equivocally related to a readily available and definable object – either values, people or place – is quickly destabilised, for patriotism ‘seems to fulfil all of these or some of these whenever it’s used as a term.’ That is, patriotism, as love or affection for one’s country, draws on a variety of constitutive resources which can be utilised or discarded, defined in a variety of ways and arranged in contrasting conceptualisations.

Looking back to the previously discussed narratives of patriotism, one can find these resources utilised in different ways. In the paper presented by Bradley, the monarch, both as an individual and an institution, is a centre around which the people of Britain organise themselves. He argues that ‘there is not a single free nation in the world that has managed to hold a pluralist society together without some very powerful unifying centre.’ The monarchy synthesises both values (tolerance, social unity and interfaith dialogue) and diverse groups of people who emotively invest their identity as citizens in this unifying institution. For Bradley, the monarch secures social unity, which is theologically desirable as it is a temporal expression of the unity of Christ and his Church; yet this raises two further questions: firstly, what is the nature of the relationship between this ecclesiological unity in Christ and the civic union in the monarch; secondly, is ‘social unity’ a theological value above and beyond, for example, Christian solidarity with, or representation of, the poor? Not only does Bradley’s story of monarchical patriotism draw on the affections of the people and a set of desirable values, the monarchy also represents a particular place, differentiated from other places over which the monarch does not preside. Bradley draws our attention repeatedly to the relationship between the Queen and her role in the Commonwealth, a sort of halfway territory between a place that is properly British and a place that is utterly distinct. However, does Bradley’s specificity concerning the centrality of the monarch necessarily involve an excluded other? That is, does British patriotism rely on a binary conception of British versus not-British?

The account of patriotism presented by Reddie is quite different because of its contrasting definition of the constitutive elements. The ‘tacit forms of knowledge embedded within our body politic,’ unmasked by Black Theology, include the widespread assumption of a ‘symbiotic relation between whiteness and the nation of belonging in Britain.’ Reddie, though acutely aware of the plight of disaffected white working class communities, argued that there is still a ‘symbolic power of being white’: white continues to be a ‘signifier of that which is normative and acceptable.’ This, Reddie noted, has led to black British Christians voting for the BNP to safeguard British Christian culture. If theology can be co-opted to support white British hegemony, Reddie’s theology, sourced in the ‘preferential option for the poor,’ is intentionally partisan; it is a theology of fissured sociality which aims at the liberation of Blacks from white norms. Yet here again we have theology utilised in the name of a social end. A ‘people’ is a crucial aspect of Reddie’s idea of patriotism. Yet, in contrast to Bradley for whom the people found symbolic expression in the Queen, ‘people’ as a source of patriotism in Reddie’s narrative is predicated on ‘whiteness’ over and against marginalised ‘blackness.’ ⁶ Drawing on these same constitutive elements but defining them from the position of a distinct internal other, Reddie’s talk left the conference with a very different assessment of ‘patriotism.’

Backhouse’s story of patriotism was distinct again from those of Reddie and Bradley. His was the story of the migrant travelling between places and applying alternative universal theological criteria to the person. Backhouse contended that, ‘by telling you who you are and

what you should love, patriotic narratives makes over-arching and abstract identity claims.' In this process of 'reducing what is most important about a person to one and only one group they might belong to,' the value of individuals is defined according to only one pre-eminent criterion that has no room for nuance. 'The kind of loyalty understood as patriotism,' Backhouse said, 'is ultimately incompatible with or perhaps at least eternally subverted by Christian ethics,' which offers an alternative account of the person whose integrity and value is found not in relation to either another individual or the state but in a third party: God. Backhouse introduces an alternative hierarchy of values, drawn from Christian theology which supersedes and can thus critique the values that contribute to and help define patriotism. ⁷ Backhouse's transition across the spatial borders, between two places, transgresses, in his account, the simple association of normative individual merit with allegiance to a particular and contingent political boundary, value or population.

Though Reddie, Backhouse, and Bradley define patriotism in a similar manner, they tell very different stories about patriotism. These three contrasting stories – drawn from the many offered at the conference – were based on the same three elements: people, place, and values. But these elements were evaluated and defined in contrasting ways, offered through the lens of individual narratives. The unity of the people expressed in a symbolic relationship with the monarchy stands in contrast to the duplicity of the people, split by race and class, in the work of Reddie. Backhouse gave an alternative account of the person sourced in Christian theology and dependent, in part, on his suspension between two distinct national boundaries. These observations suggest three significant problems in systematising and comparing stories of patriotism. Firstly, the apparent simplicity of patriotism bellies the complexity of its conceptual construction. Drawing on a variety of resources, then combining and recombining these, patriotism becomes a sophisticated synthesis of complex and diverse loyalties. Secondly, Reddie, Backhouse, and Bradley in their talks defined people, place, and the values of patriotism according to their own criteria and from their own perspectives. The divergent engagements with people, place, and values which defined the stories that were ultimately told about patriotism infer that patriotism, rather than possessing a stable essence, is parasitic; it is a term waiting for content, substance and definition. Thirdly, each of the three theologians which we have examined used distinct theological resources to justify a particular political or social program; patriotism narratives reveal the application of theology in the life of the people of the nation. This presents a problem for the Christian patriot that went unasked at the conference: what arises first, theology or politics?

Otherness within Patriotism

A single day devoted to patriotism results in an incomplete picture of the issue. The conference asked many questions that went unanswered, and moved past some problems associated with patriotism without questioning them at all. Our understanding of patriotism indicates that it is unstable and dependent – it draws on theoretical resources other to itself; in the following pages, we argue that patriotism is not only theoretically dependent but also creates an essentialised political other. We attempt to use a narrative understanding of patriotism to discuss the oversimplification of national identity and loyalty, an issue that went unmentioned in the conference; we argue that simplistic notions of national loyalty have profound effects for international war.

Backhouse presents the issue of patriotism as the development of a collection of stories that contribute to an understanding of identity. This development implies a certain amount of selection of specific stories, whether conscious or not; and, as Backhouse points out, 'any act of selection involves multiple de-selections of elements that do not fit the preferred patriotic picture.' This limited retelling amounts to a mis-telling of the stories surrounding patriotism, where the majority identity takes over. In turn, minority identities are ignored or hidden.

This problem reveals itself in increasingly specific definitions of the patriot: as several presentations suggested, there are certain competing assumptions about the consummate British patriot (Reddie's normative whiteness, Doug Gay's British-Scottish distinction) that exclude or ignore vast segments of British population. Here, the selection of a representative patriotic perspective leads to the deselecting of minority identities within patriotism. Such de-selection creates an other out of the minority, while also creating an other of all who do not fit the mould of the consummate patriot.

There is a tendency for such notions of otherness to become abstract and essentialised. Thus, there is an absolute insider (the consummate patriot) and an absolute outsider (the consummate foreigner). This division becomes particularly troubling in international conflict, where one prescribes an identity for a soldier of an enemy nation as an other, against whom one is pitted in a struggle between the nations. Individual stories become lost in the uniformity (and in the uniforms) of the enemy. A scene in the HBO miniseries 'Band of Brothers' ⁸ depicts the irony of this essentialisation and universalisation of the other: an American soldier comes across of group of German POWs and ironically asks "where you from, son?" One German soldier, whom one might expect to stare blankly at the American, responds "Eugene, Oregon." The essential other in World War 2, a German soldier, is actually a neighbour to this American soldier who grew up 30 miles from Eugene. The similarities of the two soldiers were lost in the uniforms, flags, and oaths of allegiance belonging to each respective side.

Banal Acts of Patriotism

If stories necessarily involve a degree of selection and de-selection in the formation of the self and the other, particularly in regards to war, what is to insulate one story, such as swearing an oath of allegiance, from sliding from one context of social utility into one of international conflict? As noted by Bradley, British citizenship ceremonies centre around an oath of allegiance to the monarch; the repeating of this oath is what provides the individual with British citizenship. ⁹ Yet this act is also undertaken by soldiers fighting in the British armed forces. The same act is the first step in becoming a British insider and in participating in state-sanctioned violence. Patriotism and national identity, in their subtle forms, work to subsume an individual's ethical sense under national authority.

Michael Billig in his important text, *Banal Nationalism*, describes the difference between waved and unwaved flags. While the explicit ritualised moments of flag waving are significant for the maintenance of national memories and fund the patriotic imagination, the unwaved flag acts as a reminder of nationhood. But crucially this reminder survives as background noise, where it is 'routinely practiced' but not necessarily recognised. ¹⁰ If these banal symbols of nationalism contextualise life and can be referenced without being explicitly noted (such as the Queen's head on money) they can be 'simultaneously present

and absent,' remembered and forgotten. ¹¹ Through this subtlety, 'the significance' of the flag and the patriotic sentiments invested in it 'is enhanced: the sacral has become part of everyday life, instead of being confined to a special place of worship or particular day of celebration.' ¹² In this banal flagging, 'not only are "we" (and "them") flagged, but so is the homeland...in all this, the homeland is made to look more homely, beyond question and, should the occasion arise, worth the price of sacrifice.' ¹³ Subtle rituals that resource patriotic sentiment form the basis for both benign and dangerous acts with deep, lasting ramifications for the very makeup of national identity and patriotism.

Finally, these themes that are flagged in *Banal Nationalism*, which links sacrifice for the nation with the ubiquity of national symbols that fund the patriotic imagination, imply the crucial work of Benedict Anderson, who considers these themes in relation to religious theodicy. Anderson begins his seminal work, *Imagined Communities*, by noting the cenotaphs and tombs to the Unknown Soldiers that are 'saturated with the ghostly national imaginings.' ¹⁴ Where once religion provided a means for turning the contingency and suffering of life into continuity (through 'karma, original sin' ¹⁵ the 'eighteenth century mark[ed] not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought' and precipitated the necessity of a 'secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning.' ¹⁶ A new transcendent rationale (the allegiance to an entity that precedes and will outlast the individual, such as a nation, a dynasty, even a church) is required to legitimise human suffering and give it a meaning. While religious theodicy once provided a frame for human suffering and a legitimisation for war, it has, in Anderson's interpretation, been incorporated and transformed into the (secular) transcendence of the nation. Patriotism, often banal and sometimes benign, is the form of loyalty to the transcendent nation that provides a reason and justification for the suffering and sacrifice of the citizen, epitomised by the unknown soldier.

Conclusion

Our conference on 'Patriotism?' presented a variety of different views on the utility and desirability of patriotism, which we considered in this paper as a collection of stories. Rather than deal with the substance of these particular stories (due in part to the diversity and breadth of the papers that were presented at this one day conference) we chose to examine how these narratives are constructed or told. We extracted Carruthers' 'people, place, and values' in three key presentations. Though these scholars defined patriotism similarly, their constructions of patriotism sometimes stood in juxtaposition; this was traced to the contrasting ways they thought of people, place, and values in the construction of national identity. While this conference presented many divergent views on patriotism, we contend that this variety of stories indicates the complexity of patriotism as a civic virtue. Its apparent simplicity and popular availability, which, we imagine, will be on ready display this summer in Great Britain, hides a complex interweaving of elements which can be articulated to support, or deconstruct, a diversity of political or social programs.

In our examination of subtle contributions to patriotism, we raised the issue of the secular replacing the sacred with regard to justification of suffering. Whether, to a Christian theologian, this transition of theodicy from the religious to the secular political sphere is problematic is a significant question. Given the reservations raised in this paper about the construction of patriotism, its parasitic nature, its partiality, its precariousness, and the

widespread projection of otherness onto the alien, even the critical deployment of patriotism as a virtue seems highly problematic, especially when national loyalty comes to replace loyalty to God.



Sam Jackson is an MA student in the Religion and Political Life program at the University of Manchester. He is studying religion, violence, identity, and politics.



Charlie Pemberton is a PhD candidate in the Religions and Theology department at the University of Manchester, where he is studying Christian charitable work with the homeless in the UK.

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Endnotes

- 1 The conference prospectus can be found at the bottom of the conference webpage. <http://religionandcivilsociety.com/patriotism>. Look for a link on this website for videos of the presentations in the coming weeks. Also, several of the papers will be published in the October 2012 issue of *Modern Believing*
- 2 Bradley, ordained in the Church of Scotland, is Reader in Practical Theology and Church History at the University of St Andrews
- 3 Reddie is the Research Fellow in Black Theology at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham
- 4 Backhouse is the Tutor for Social and Political Theology at St Mellitus College

5 Carruthers is Lecturer in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University

6 Black in the ethnic sense and the 'political sense to mean poor people and non-whites.'

7 Nigel Biggar and Alasdair MacIntyre might ask of Backhouse: where does one learn these values? Could a communitarian account of the values sit at ease with patriotic values?

8 Ambrose (2002): Episode 2: 'Day of Days'

9 One conference attendee noted his distaste for swearing loyalty to an individual. The discussion that followed suggested that, while the implications are quite different for nations that replace a ruler with a symbol of the nation (flag, constitution, etc.) as the object of such a pledge, any allegiance to a country seems to place the Christian in a precarious situation

10 Billig 1995: 42

11 Billig 1995: 42

12 Billig 1995: 50

13 Billig 1995: 175

14 Anderson 2006: 9

15 Anderson 2006: 11

16 Anderson 2006: 11