

Are these patriots really 'Christian'?



Andrew Bradstock, a trustee of our diocese's CSR and emeritus professor of the University of Winchester, on 'Christian nationalism'

THE flag of St George seems to be everywhere these days, evoking many different reactions. During the World Cup, people hung it in their windows and cars to support the England football team.

But it has also appeared in other ways of late – on lamp-posts, on mini roundabouts, at marches, and outside hotels housing people seeking asylum. This feels more about creating division than unity, despite some of the events being labelled 'Unite the Kingdom'.

We're seeing a renewed focus on patriotism – but not the kind we might express on Remembrance Day or other civic occasions. It's more about who's 'in' and who's 'out', with 'immigrants', asylum-seekers, and Muslims very much in the latter category.

And because it weaves together nationhood and Christianity – witness the crosses, and banners proclaiming 'Christ is King' at its events – it's become known as 'Christian nationalism'. Some of its leaders publicly identify as 'Christian nationalists'. What are we to make of this, as churches and Christians?

Are we heartened to see the Christian faith being witnessed to so boldly, or concerned that Jesus' teachings about welcoming the stranger, loving our neighbour, and being a Good Samaritan

are getting overlooked? Are we gladdened to see the cross lifted high, or worried that its message of self-giving sacrifice is being lost?

And do we rejoice to see Christ publicly hailed as 'King', or question whether it's the kingship that rides on a donkey wearing a crown of thorns, or that's preoccupied with armies and control?

Before deciding how to respond, we must first understand what is happening. Rejecting the term 'Christian nationalism' might be a good place to start, since it often serves to label and stigmatise, not help us get to the real issues.

Despite the way it is often portrayed, 'Christian nationalism' is not a synonym for racism, xenophobia or Islamophobia. Talking to people attending the Unite the Kingdom rally in London in May, researchers from the thinktank Theos found they were there for a variety of reasons, including 'a desire for re-Christianisation from below: revival, repentance, evangelisation...'

These were not just "nationalists reaching for Christian imagery", Theos concluded, "but Christians whose faith had led them to a distinct, and maybe uncomfortable, kind of patriotism." Many said they felt ignored by the media, and unrepresented in the formal political sphere.

And Theos discerned a distinction between what was motivating 'the crowd', and the provocative message from the stage – although they thought the opposition to Islam they encountered on the street was real.

One response we can make as churches is to promote dialogue and understanding. Opposition to Islam is often rooted in ignorance of its beliefs and lack of encounter with its followers. Can we bring people together, perhaps working with Portsmouth Interfaith Forum? Can we promote discussion about different meanings of 'patriotism' and 'nationalism', as our cathedral did recently in a public lecture?

The Faith and England's National Identities project at Southampton University has some stimulating material on these themes from different faith perspectives. Another excellent resource for helping us think through these issues and how to respond is Better Story – www.betterstory.info

Under the Bishop of Leicester, the Church of England is itself exploring the causes of the social fragmentation we are witnessing, encouraging churches to model 'a healthy sense of patriotism'.

And if we do that, the bishop says, we should continue to fly the flag ourselves on St George's Day!