



Angela Tilby

Kindling what, exactly?

WE ARE just at the end of the period of prayer for the renewal of the Church urged by our two Archbishops. When I first heard about the initiative “Thy Kingdom Come”, in a letter to all clergy, I was mildly sceptical, although inclined to be obedient.

Sceptical, because I instinctively disliked the idea of sending a “wave of prayer” to persuade the Almighty to kindly co-operate with our leaders’ earnest aspirations for church growth; obedient, because I tend to be anyway, and promised to be reasonably so when I was ordained — and what could be better than to spend the nine days between Ascension and Pentecost praying “Come, Holy Spirit”?

I have to admit, my heart sank when I looked at the video on the Church of England’s website. I wondered if it had been put together from offcuts of the banned Lord’s Prayer cinema video. Perhaps some Christian media editor had sat down amid the ruins of that doomed initiative, and thought: “What can we do with the footage?” and concocted a new version for in-church consumption.

My problem was, even when I had watched it, I could not really work out what it was we were meant to be praying for. The conversion of England? This was never quite said, presumably because we embrace diversity these days, and we cannot bring ourselves to ask God to make us a Christian nation, because we are not entirely sure that being a Christian nation is all that good for us. (Think of intolerance, jingoism, and, if you must, the threat of Brexit.)

But perhaps we were meant to be praying for the renewal of personal faith? In current C of E speak, this is about “knowing Jesus”, a phrase that always makes me feel uncomfortable. It reminds me of an ordinand who used to growl crossly about those who spoke of Jesus in terms of what he regarded as undue familiarity: “Jesus is not my best mate. He is Lord.” Just so.

In spite of all this, I have prayed — oh, how I have prayed: “Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people and kindle in us the fire of your love.” Then I saw that the Church’s Ministry Division was considering new criteria for the selection of ordained ministers. These would shift the current guidelines in the direction of certain key adjectives: “passionate”, “entrepreneurial”, “imaginative”. What is being discussed is ministers for the age of *The Apprentice*.

All this makes me wonder whether, with all those clerical-collared Sugars and Trumps in the parishes, there will surely soon be no need to pray for the Holy Spirit at all.

Clues found on an ancient silk road

New evidence may revolutionise understanding of Jewish history, says David Keys

GENETIC research carried out at a British university is helping to reveal the much under-appreciated complexity of the history of the Jewish people. It also has huge implications for understanding how religions developed in ancient and early-medieval times.

The research suggests that in the first millennium AD, Christianity was not the only religion with origins in the Middle East to spread through widespread conversion. Contrary to popular belief, it suggests that Judaism also grew in that way.

The work — the largest genomic study ever carried out on Ashkenazic (Northern and Eastern European) Jews — indicates that a substantial element of the Jewish population is descended from people from what is now northern Turkey.

THE study, carried out by Dr Eran Elhaik, of the University of Sheffield, says that many Ashkenazic Jews are the descendants of Greeks, Iranians, and others who colonised northern Anatolia (northern Turkey) more than 2000 years ago, and were then converted to Judaism, probably in the first few centuries, after contact with Jews from Persia (at that stage, the Persian Empire was home to the world’s largest Jewish communities).

The research is based on genetic, historical, and place-name evidence. For his genetic research, Dr Elhaik used a Geographic Population Structure computer-modelling system to convert Ashkenazic Jewish DNA data into geographical information.

Dr Elhaik, an Israeli-born geneticist, believes that three surviving Turkish villages — Iskenaz, Eskenaz, and Ashanaz — on the western part of an ancient Silk Road route, were part of the original Ashkenazic homeland. The word “Ashkenaz” may have originally come from Ashguza, which is the ancient Assyrian and Babylonian name for the Iron Age Eurasian steppeland people, the Scythians.

Referring to the names of the three Turkish villages, Dr Elhaik argues that “north-east Turkey is the



REX SHUTTERSTOCK

Identities within Judaism: protesters against a court ruling concerning the education of Ashkenazi and Sephardic girls in 2010

thought that many non-Jews saw the mercantile success of the Jewish community and wanted to share in it.

In some places — for example, in the early first millennium in Anatolia, and in the Crimea — non-Jews associated themselves closely with Judaism for mainly pro-monotheistic religious reasons, and were often known simply as God-fearers.

In North Africa, for as yet unknown reasons, various Berber tribal groups appear to have converted *en masse*; and, in Yemen, at least the political elite converted, probably for geopolitical and mercantile reasons (perhaps partly to ensure support from pro-Jewish Persia against Christian Ethiopia).

THE new genetic research not only helps to demonstrate that Judaism appears to have competed with Christianity in terms of conversions, but also strongly suggests that conversion was a significant factor in the expansion of Jewish populations, and thus helped the faith’s survival.

Further research is now planned to try to measure the precise size of the Semitic genetic input into the Jewish genome.

Scientific, historical, and linguistic investigations are gradually revealing the extraordinarily complex and diverse story of the Jewish people. As new research yields ever more data, it is a story that is likely to become ever more fascinating and surprising.

David Keys is the archaeology correspondent of *The Independent*.

The academic paper by Dr Elhaik and others from *Genome Biology and Evolution* is available at <http://gbe.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2016/03/03/gbe.ev046.full.pdf/html>.

only place in the world where these place-names exist”.

THE new genomic data is the first scientific evidence to confirm scattered and little-known historical and other information, which hints at widespread conversion to Judaism in the first millennium.

The best-known large-scale conversion of this kind took place by the early ninth century, when the elites — and possibly others — within a vast Turkic state (the Khazar Empire, in what is now Ukraine and southern Russia) converted to Judaism.

The conversion apparently took place for geopolitical reasons: Turkic paganism made the Khazar State a military target for neighbouring Muslim and Christian empires. But conversion to either of those two larger religions would have risked provoking the enmity of the faith that had been rejected in favour of its rival. Judaism, therefore, appears to have been a diplomatic compromise.

It is likely that many of the converted Jews from what is now northern Turkey (that is, those identified by the new genetic research) eventually made their way to Europe via the Khazar Empire, especially after that empire

collapsed in or around the late tenth century.

THE genetic research has also identified a strong European element within the Ashkenazic Jewish genome. This is consistent with linguistic and other cultural evidence of substantial Slav conversions.

Between the seventh and tenth centuries, some pagan Germanic groups systematically raided Slav and other peoples to enslave them and sell them commercially.

The Jews, like many other peoples, bought slaves, but, from the sixth century onwards, were prohibited by the Talmud from keeping them for more than a year. Under Talmudic law, all slaves had to convert to Judaism if they wished to continue to serve their Jewish owners. Jews, however, were also prohibited from holding Jewish slaves. So, for pagan slaves to gain their freedom and continue working for their Jewish patrons as free men, they had to convert.

It was an attractive way for slaves to win their freedom, and large numbers of them almost certainly used it.

Other factors also prompted conversion. In some places — perhaps especially in Iran, Anatolia, and possibly Mesopotamia — it is

Reasons the Right hates the BBC



THE politics is heating up over the renewal of the BBC’s royal charter, which expires at the end of the year. And while Conservative politicians routinely genuflect towards only wanting to improve the BBC, their behind-the-hand mutterings often suggest the opposite.

Take the reports that the Prime Minister wants to replace the BBC Trust with a body mainly chosen by the Government. Or the idea that the BBC will be forced to disclose the salaries of its stars, making it easy for rivals to poach them by offering just a wee bit more. Or the plan that the BBC should be prevented from running its best shows in prime time, when commercial stations run their top offerings. Some even say that it should not run its main news at 10 p.m., because ITV does the same.

That is not all. The Chancellor, George Osborne, has previously accused the BBC website of having “imperial” ambitions. The Culture Secretary, John Whittingdale, has denounced the licence fee as “worse than the poll tax”. He recently told young Conservatives that the prospect of the BBC’s ceasing to exist was “occasionally a tempting prospect”.

All governments have a love-hate relationship

Paul Vallely looks behind what he sees as the Government’s sniping

with the media. Politicians rely on them to get their message across, but dislike penetrating journalistic scrutiny. But it seems that the Conservatives have a particular problem with the BBC.

THIS is for three reasons. Some Tories wear ideological blinkers, insisting that the private sector is always better than the public; so the BBC should be privatised or curbed. So it was rather inconvenient when the BBC trounced commercial TV at the BAFTAs this week.

A second group insists that the BBC is run by liberal Lefties with an inherent anti-Tory bias. Many on the Labour Left, of course, feel the opposite, and complain with equal vehemence of the negative lens placed over the words and actions of Jeremy Corbyn.

But set aside politicians’ prejudices on both sides. A substantial content analysis of BBC coverage conducted by Cardiff University in 2013 showed that, whichever party was in power, Conservatives

got more air time. Business representatives get 19 times more coverage than trade unions; and coverage of the financial crisis was dominated by stockbrokers, investment bankers, hedge-fund managers, and other City voices.

And yet, despite this, BBC coverage is more balanced than that of media dominated by proprietors with overtly Tory sympathies. That brings us to the third reason. Some Conservatives simply want to support the newspapers that support them. They want the BBC website curbed because they see it as competition to the websites of the Tory press. They want its broadcasting restricted because the smaller and weaker the BBC is, the more money their ally Rupert Murdoch can make, and the more his influence will increase.

The problem for the Tories is that the vast majority of the British public love the BBC. Full-frontal attacks would be politically risky. So attempts to undermine and constrain the BBC are being conducted obliquely and indirectly.

They are no less dangerous for that. Voters need to make sure that they tell their MPs, particularly Conservative ones, how deeply unhappy the nation is with the Government’s bullying manoeuvres.

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