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ARTICLE

G. K. Chesterton and Islam

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G. K. Chesterton's anti-Semitism has attracted much scholarly attention, but his views on Islam have largely passed without comment. This article situates Chesterton's writings in relation to historical views of Islam in Britain and the political, cultural and religious context of the early twentieth century. Chesterton's complex and contradictory opinions fail to support easy conclusions about the immutability of prejudice across time. His views of Islam are at times orientalist and at other times critical of imperialism and elitism. As well as drawing on medieval Catholic ideas about the "heresy" of Islam, Chesterton also links Islam with Protestant Christianity. From another perspective, his views of Islam draw on liberal traditions of humanitarian interventionism and democratic patriotism. Finally, he also used Islam as a symbol of a corroding modernity. This study suggests the need for a historically sensitive genealogy of the evolution of anti-Muslim prejudice which is not predetermined by the politics of the early twenty-first century.

The impression given by the proliferation of websites and blogs on G. K. Chesterton seems to be that while he may have been wrong about the Jews he was right about the Muslims.[1] While Chesterton's anti-Semitism has gained a huge amount of critical attention, from both his defenders and his critics, his views on Muslims have passed largely without notice until recently dragged out as "prophecy" relevant to the cultural politics of the twenty-first century.[2] G. K. Chesterton is too important a writer to be left to his admirers and a reassessment of his views on Islam is overdue.

[1]See, for example, Nick Milne, "Chesterton and Islam," 6 Feb. 2006, at http://chestertonandfriends.blogspot.com/2006/02/chesterton-on-islam_06.html; William Kilpatrick, "Chesterton's Islamic England," *Crisis Magazine*, 9 Dec. 2014, at www.crisismagazine.com/2014/chestertons-islamic-england.

[2]For two book-length treatments of Chesterton's anti-Semitism see Simon Mayers, *Chesterton's Jews: Stereotypes and Caricatures in the Literature and Journalism of G. K. Chesterton* (Marston Gate, 2013), which is largely critical; and Ann Farmer, *Chesterton and the Jews: Friend, Critic, Defender* (Kettering, OH, 2015), which is broadly supportive. For an example of G. K. Chesterton being used in the cultural battles of the twenty-first century see Hal G. P. Colebatch, "Chesterton's Prophesy," *The Spectator*, 21 Oct. 2017, at www.spectator.co.uk/2017/10/chestertons-prophesy. See also Stanley L. Jaki, "Myopia about Islam, with an Eye on Chesterbelloc," *Chesterton Review*, 28/4 (2002), 485–501; and Paul Stenhouse, "Chesterton's View of Islam," *Chesterton Review*, 30/1 (2004), 208–9. There are works which mention Islam in a less politicized way, especially Julia Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism, and Nationhood: The England of G. K. Chesterton* (Plymouth, 2009). Another recent work which engages with Chesterton's negative views of Islam is Ralph C. Wood, *Chesterton: The Nightmare Goodness of God* (Waco, 2011), although Wood does feel that he should be motivated to justify Chesterton's essential humanity, seeing his task as "to determine where, within Chesterton's work, there may be found a distinctively Christian and nonreductive way of engaging Muslims." Ibid., 109. A book-length work in French, Philippe Maxence, *Chesterton face à l'Islam* (Paris, 2014), is also sympathetic to the author.

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Both the articulation and reception of his views are important for understanding perceptions of Islam in early twentieth-century Britain. His writings provide numerous arguments and images which seem to have proved remarkably durable. However, care must be taken to understand the cultural and political context in which he was writing. Prejudice can coexist with sophisticated engagement with the philosophical and political problems of the time in a way which resists a binary division between "Islamophobia" and "Islamophilia."

It is important to read Chesterton's views with a focus on the early twentieth century rather than through the lens of the early twenty-first. He was writing before the age of mass Muslim immigration into Britain and before religious prejudice had acquired its contemporary meaning. "Islamophobia," for example, although existing as a term in the 1920s, has only gained widespread usage since the influential Runnymede Trust definition in 1997.[3] It is therefore anachronistic when applied to this period. However, it is valuable to contextualize Chesterton's views in order to build up a more sophisticated history of the images of Islam in British culture. His anti-Semitism, for example, attracted comments from his contemporaries, but his views on Islam largely passed without criticism.[4] Chesterton's views need to be understood and taken seriously on their own terms, without the condescension of posterity. His views contain orientalist and racist images, for example, while at the same time criticizing imperialism and biological racism. Chesterton sees himself as writing in a liberal tradition, but is also critical of the direction of modern liberalism. Islam is criticized as a theological threat to Trinitarian Christianity in way which reflects medieval ideas, but is also seen as mirroring the atheist "progressivism" of the early twentieth century. Before exploring the context of these ideas in detail, however, it is useful to briefly introduce Chesterton and to explore how his views could be seen as part of a long history of writers who have consciously or unconsciously produced images of Islam in British culture.

I

G. K. Chesterton was a prolific author and journalist. Born in London in 1874, he wrote at least eighty books on a variety of subjects as well as hundreds of articles for newspapers such as the *Daily News*, for whom he was a long-standing columnist; the *Illustrated London News*; and the periodicals which he was involved in editing, such as the *New Witness* and *G. K.'s Weekly*. When he died in Beaconsfield in 1936, he was one of Britain's best-known writers, gaining obituaries in all the major papers and even a telegram from Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli (the future Pope Pius XII) on behalf of Pope Pius XI, commiserating the British people on their loss. His political views are hard to classify in the terms of conventional British party politics. Chesterton defined himself as a Liberal for much of his life, and was an avowed anticapitalist; but he was also a fierce critic of collectivist socialism, an English

[3]Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (1997), at www.runnymedetrust.org/companies/17/74/Islamophobia-A-Challenge-for-Us-All.html.

[4]G. K.'s alleged anti-Semitism was much discussed while he was alive. See, for example, the interview with G. K. Chesterton and the response to it in "G. K. C.: Interview for the *Jewish Chronicle*," *Jewish Chronicle*, 28 April 1911, 18. For a discussion of contemporary attitudes see Dean Rapp, "The Jewish Response to G. K. Chesterton's Antisemitism, 1911–35," *Patterns of Prejudice* 24/2–4 (1990), 75–86.

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nationalist, an antimodernist and a Christian controversialist. The political movement which he helped found, distributism, was an attempt to find a middle way between capitalism and socialism by trying to foster a society of small property owners. His critical reputation has been similarly varied. Much of the work on him has been produced by his fierce admirers and often has a tinge of hagiography, literally so given the recent campaign to make him a saint.[5] On the other hand, in a completely separate bibliography, he also makes an appearance in studies of British anti-Semitism and varying accounts of the "radical right."[6] His literary reputation has also been mixed. Some see him as a master of prose and paradox while others criticize his complete rejection of all the strands of modernism which helped shape the twentieth-century literary canon. More recently, however, authors such as Michael Shallcross have shown that Chesterton's seeming rejection of modernism masked a more serious engagement with some of its more important themes.[7] Whatever one's views of Chesterton's lasting reputation, however, his writings are worth taking seriously both as a reflection of his wide readership and as an articulation of an important strand of British cultural and political criticism. Christianity was central to Chesterton's life, so it would be useful to start with a brief consideration of the historiography of English Christian views of Islam.

Negative perceptions of the Orient and Islam in English Christian culture go back a long way. The Venerable Bede (673–735) described Muslims as "undifferentiatedly shiftless, hateful, aggressive (*uagos, incertisque sedibus; exosi et contrarii*)."[8] It is tempting to see, with Sophie Gilliat-Ray, that "[t]hese kinds of connections, associations and prejudices, established so early in Christian Anglo-Saxon views, appear to have resulted in a unique kind of opposition and antipathy towards Islam within English-speaking Christendom, a legacy of which arguably remains evident in the contemporary world today."[9] However, as Katharine Scarfe Beckett reminds us, it is important to be historically specific in thinking about these attitudes. When Bede was looking at Islam, for example, he was not describing it from a position of power but from the point of view of a small and insignificant island: the relative power of the "East" and the "West" were the opposite of what they became in the modern period. The Anglo-Saxon world was also equally essentializing about the North, seeing Viking raiders as evil, barbaric and pagan.[10]

[5]This is particularly true of some of his biographies, such as Joseph Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G. K. Chesterton* (London, 1996); and Michael Coren, *Gilbert: The Man Who Was G. K. Chesterton* (London, 1989). The more recent and scholarly Ian Ker, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (Oxford, 2011), is still almost universally positive.

[6]See, for example, Alan Sykes, *The Radical Right in Britain: Social Imperialism to the BNP* (Basingstoke, 2005), 73–7; Colin Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society, 1876–1939* (London, 1979), esp. 210–16; Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of "the Jew" in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875–1945* (Cambridge, 1993); Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England* (Oxford, 2010), esp. 288, 305, 422; and David Cesarani, "Joynson-Hicks and the Radical Right in England after the First World War," in Tony Kushner and Kenneth Lunn, eds., *Traditions of Intolerance: Historical Perspectives on Fascism and Race Discourse in Britain* (Manchester, 1989), 118–39, at 127.

[7]Michael Shallcross, *Rethinking G. K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism: Parody, Performance, and Popular Culture* (Abingdon, 2018).

[8]Quoted in Sophie Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 2010), 6.

[9]Quoted in ibid., 6.

[10]Katharine Scarfe Beckett, *Anglo-Saxon Perceptions of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 2003), 234–5.

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Nevertheless, from the point of view of later historians, such as Gibbon, these early struggles against Islam are used to shape a universal history of civilization with consequences for the present.[11] The Crusades, too, have underpinned later images of a clash of civilizations even though at the time they were a form of pilgrimage as well as a holy war.[12] From the earliest times, therefore, there has been a temptation to mine views of Islam in order to suggest an eternal antipathy between East and West.

Much of the work done on views of Islam in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries cautions against such reductionism. In this period, there was more substantial migration from the Islamic to the Christian worlds and the first recorded conversions to Islam in the British Isles took place.[13] Coffeehouses, for example, which first opened in England in the mid-1600s, were initially associated by some writers with the Islamization of English culture. Coffee was seen as the drink of Satan or "Mahometan gruel," and it was claimed that it had been brought to the country by the Ottomans for the nefarious purpose of "preparing Englishmen for apostasy."[14] At the same time, the exoticism of the new drink was celebrated. The same tension is brought out in a number of sophisticated studies of Islam in Renaissance and Jacobean literature.[15] Most significantly, however, Noel Malcolm's *Useful Enemies* shows how the West's engagement with Islam combined both fascination and repulsion, thus contributing to the development of modern political thought.[16]

Given this scholarship on British views of Islam in earlier periods, it is odd that the research thins out a little in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, before occasioning much work again in the second half of the twentieth century in relation to mass immigration. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw some permanent settlement of Muslims in Britain, especially in South Shields, Cardiff, Liverpool, Woking, London and Glasgow. Sophie Gilliat-Ray estimates that there were around 10,000 Muslims resident in Britain by 1900.[17] There were also, by 1910, about seven hundred Indian students studying in British universities, a proportion of which would have likely been Muslim.[18] A number of converts to Islam also made the religion more conspicuous. Abdullah "Henry" Quilliam, for example, was an Englishman who converted and became a preacher in Liverpool.[19] Other high-profile aristocratic conversions to Islam included Lord

[11]Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain*, 9.

[12]See Jonathan Riley-Smith, "The State of Mind of Crusaders to the East, 1095–1300," in Jonathan Riley-Smith, ed., *The Oxford History of the Crusades* (Oxford, 2002), 68–89.

[13]See Nabil Matar, "Muslims in Seventeenth-Century England," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 8/1 (1997), 63–82; and Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain: 1558–1685* (Cambridge, 1998).

[14]Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain*, 14–15.

[15]See, for example, Greg Bak, "Different Differences: Locating Moorishness in Early Modern English Culture," *Dalhousie Review* 76/2 (1996), 197–206; Barbara Fuchs, "Faithless Empires: Pirates, Renegados, and the English Nation," *English Literary History* 67/1 (2000), 45–69; Gerald MacLean, *Looking East: English Writing and the Ottoman Empire before 1800* (London, 2007).

[16]Noel Malcolm, *Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450–1750* (Oxford, 2019).

[17]Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain*, 32.

[18]Ibid., 27.

[19]Ibid., 40.

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Headley; Sir Archibald Hamilton, former master of foxhounds and president of the Selsey (Sussex) Conservative Association; and Lady Evelyn Cobbold, the first Western woman to make a pilgrimage to Mecca.[20]

According to Gilliat-Ray, converts to Islam were seen in this period more as "eccentrics of the Raj" than as the "enemy within."[21] This might account for the relatively scant scholarly interest in British views of Islam in this period. Gilliat-Ray herself mentions the "lack of in-depth research on Muslims in Britain during the interwar years."[22] One possible reason for this disinterest, according to Chris Allen, was the widespread belief that Islam was a dying religion. According Allen, Islam was seen to be in "the final throes of a religious or theological power that was soon to be replaced with a European model of secularized nationalism."[23] His argument gains some weight by the sheer military superiority of the West. Victory in the First World War and the fall of the Ottoman Empire further entrenched this situation: by the 1920s, European powers controlled more than three-quarters of the Muslim world: "the period of colonialism saw Islam and Muslims as part of a retrogressive and backward tradition, one that was immensely inferior, impossibly subordinate, and unable to engender the European values of truth through its inherent manipulative nature and its lack of civility."[24] There has not been enough work on the detail of how people in Europe conceived of Islam, however, to confirm the truth of Allen's generalizations. Certainly, the variety of views expressed by Chesterton and his contemporaries suggest both a fascination with and a fear of Islam which cannot be reduced to "backwardness." It is perhaps a weakness of scholarly work on this period, therefore, that it tends to look at prejudice through the lens of ethnicity, race and nationalism rather than religion. There is a relative lack of work on early twentieth-century views of Islam in English literature amidst the vast bibliography on structures of racism and other forms of prejudice.[25]

Negative views of Islam in English culture clearly have a long history. It is important, however, to be sensitive to both the continuities and the discontinuities across time. While historical views of Islam might influence later periods, there are also vast differences in the political and cultural context. There is a tendency in some studies of Islamophobia to project ideas from the late twentieth century onto an undifferentiated past. For Ziauddin Sardar, for example, contemporary Islamophobia is the reawakening of a prejudice which has existed since before the Crusades.[26] Other scholars, such as Dilwar Hussain, use the idea of a plurality of "Islamophobias" to try and problematize the idea of a monolithic and timeless

[20]Ibid., 42; *Islamic Review*, March 1924, 117; Lady Evelyn Cobbold, *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, biographical introduction by William Facey and Miranda Taylor, notes by Professor Ahmad S. Turkistani (London, 2008; first published 1934).

[21]Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain*, 42.

[22]Ibid., 42.

[23]Chris Allen, *Islamophobia* (London, 2010), 32.

[24]Ibid., 33.

[25]A notable exception is Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (Albany, NY, 2005).

[26]Ziauddin Sardar, "Racism, Identity and Muslims in the West," in Syed Z. Abedin and Ziuaddin Sardar, eds., *Muslim Minorities in the West* (London, 1995), 1–17.

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prejudice.[27] However much many works on contemporary Islamophobia recognize that the past is a foreign country, it is still primarily invoked as a way of understanding the present.

It is therefore important to at least attempt to see the history of ideas through a reconstruction of the world as it was perceived at the time. Chesterton's views on Islam, therefore, do draw on the past and influence the future, but in a way which eludes easy generalization. It is time now, therefore, to move to a more precise consideration of Chesterton's views of Islam, beginning with the extent to which his ideas presented it as an alien "other."

II

Some of Chesterton's views of Islam do indeed seem like obvious expressions of what Edward Said has famously called "orientalism."[28] One of Chesterton's best-known poems, "Lepanto" (1911), tells the story of the naval victory of the Holy League over the Ottoman Empire in 1571. Chesterton's words evoke an alien and terrifying enemy. The images are of an undifferentiated horde. For example, when the Turkish army gathers, they "rush in red and purple from the red clouds of the morn, / From temples where the yellow gods shut up their eyes in scorn."[29] It is hard to imagine these lines referring to anything specifically Islamic: "yellow gods" with "shut up" eyes brings to mind statues of Buddha and is simply a way of conjuring up alien heathenism. It is an obvious image of undifferentiated foreignness. Other troops "rise in green robes roaring from the green hells of the sea / Where fallen skies and evil hues and eyeless creatures be." Here the soldiers are dehumanized by association with sea creatures and literally rise from hell. Later the image changes to reference the mysticism of the Orient, conjuring up images of evil genies, smoke and mystery: "They swell in sapphire smoke out of the blue cracks of the ground,—/ They gather and they wonder and give worship to Mahound." Mahound was a term for Mohammed with deliberate pejorative connotations in the medieval period. In medieval mystery plays it was used when the prophet was represented as a demon or false God. Chesterton complained later in the introduction to his 1920 travelogue, *The New Jerusalem*, of editorial intervention trying to change "Mahomet" into "Mohammed":

> I never could see the point of altering a form with historic and even heroic fame in our own language, for the sake of reproducing by an arrangement of our letters something that is really written in quite different letters, and probably pronounced with a quite different accent. In speaking of the great prophet I am therefore resolved to call him Mahomet; and am prepared, on further provocation, to call him Mahound.[30]

[27]Dilwar Hussain, "The Impact of 9/11 on British Muslim Identity," in Ron Geaves, Theodore Gabriel, Yvonne Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith eds., *Islam and the West Post 9/11* (Aldershot, 2004), 115–29.

[28]Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1995).

[29]All "Lepanto" quotes are from *The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton* (London, 1950), 114–21.

[30]G. K. Chesterton, *The New Jerusalem* (London, 1920), vii.

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Chesterton used "Mahound" for the prophet in full consciousness of its negative associations. The use of the word also demonstrates Chesterton's culturally medievalist sensibility and it is clear the some of his views of Islam are drawn from this period. He saw the Middle Ages as the peak of Christian civilization. Chesterton was not unusual in this. The Catholic artistic and intellectual world in Britain was saturated with images of a pre-Reformation Merrie England, from the histories of Hilaire Belloc to the medieval craftsmanship of Eric Gill. The younger cultural historian Christopher Dawson felt that Catholics were "too obsessed with the Middle Ages," partly because medieval culture seemed to be the social and intellectual expression of Catholic ideals.[31] This romantic attachment to the period was not confined to Catholics, however: a tendency to praise the virtues of a preindustrial age runs through the writings of numerous figures in British culture from William Cobbett to John Ruskin and William Morris.

"Lepanto" remains a popular poem, perhaps precisely because of the way it mobilizes this sense of historical romance. In one sense, it is hard to imagine a tale told of this battle which did not essentialize the Eastern enemy: Chesterton is, after all, writing about a battle which had happened more than four hundred years previously and historical fiction is full of tropes of the evil East.[32] An examination of Chesterton's political journalism from the period in which he wrote the poem, however, suggests that he was as much animated by contemporary international affairs, particularly the threat of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans.

III

Chesterton was writing from well within the traditions of British liberal culture even if he found himself increasingly out of step with the early twentieth-century Liberal Party.[33] Many Liberal voters were increasingly cynical about the financial and other self-interested motivations behind humanitarian intervention, following the arguments of J. A. Hobson.[34] Chesterton, however, identified with the liberal interventionist position elaborated by Gladstone at the time of the Turkish massacres in Bulgaria in 1876, when the Liberal leader argued that the standard of humanity required taking the Bulgarian side even though traditional statecraft argued for the support of the Turks against Russia. Chesterton's poem "Antichrist" refers back to this event by ironically suggesting that the Turks "hailed the Cross of Dizzy" and refers to how "Islam" had burned Christian "kin and kith."[35] In his articles for the *Daily News*—a Liberal paper—Chesterton bemoaned the fact that this Gladstonian tradition had been forgotten by his contemporaries. In particular, he disliked the way in which the religious and civilizational element of the conflict seemed to be forgotten. For example, in the Ilinden–Preobrazhenie

[31]Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe* (New York, 1932), xvii; Adam Schwartz, *The Third Spring: G. K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, Christopher Dawson, and David Jones* (Washington, DC, 2005), 250.

[32]The film *300* (dir. Jack Snyder, 2006) is a particularly striking example.

[33]Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism, and Nationhood*, 79–125.

[34]J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London, 1902).

[35]G. K. Chesterton, "Antichrist, or the Reunion of Christendom: An Ode" in *The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton*, 152–4, at 153.

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Uprising of August 1903 when Macedonia and Thrace rose up against the Ottomans, the Turks crushed the rebellion. Chesterton interpreted the Turkish massacres in Macedonia as being due to the "total disregard for human life" within Islam and presented it as nothing less than a civilizational struggle:

> The Moslems are not without creditable qualities in the least—courage, sobriety, hardiness, hospitality, personal dignity, intense religious belief. These are fine qualities. The thing we will not face is the enormous fact that they have along with this, not merely from personal sin, but by ingrained, avowed, and convinced philosophy another quality, a total disregard of human life, whether it is their own or other people's. Therefore our civilization is and must be at war with them, and that war is a religious war, or, if you prefer the term, a philosophical war. We are allowed by the modern mind to call the Moslems en masse thieves, beasts, devils from hell, though it is manifest to common-sense that no people can be so entirely composed. The one thing we are not allowed to say against them, the one thing that amid all our curses it would really be thought illiberal to say, is exactly the thing which is really our case against them. Our case against them is simply that they are not Christians. Our case against them, that is, is that they both think, and act, that they think and therefore act against everything for which we stand.[36]

Many of the readers of the *Daily News* disagreed.[37] In 1904, a few months after a massacre at Sassun in western Armenia, Chesterton complained that his readers "will go on ignoring religion as a factor in history until it comes as near you as the Turk does, and then you will remember religion for an instant for the purpose of swearing and talking about Abdul the Damned."[38] Abdul Hamid II, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire from 1876 until 1909, was commonly known in the Britain as "the Red Sultan," "Abdul the Damned" or "the Great Assassin." Chesterton also took the side of Italy in the war with the Ottomans over Tripoli in 1911, again invoking the spirit of Gladstone. He felt that criticizing Italy only strengthened the Turks, for whom "time and very black experience" showed that oppression was ingrained.[39] He bemoaned the lack of moral fibre in Britain which kept it from intervening in the Balkan conflicts of 1912, writing that the country "which, either by unanimity of sentiment or scorn of risk, *can* do what it wants to do is a Power. That which, whether through honest perplexity or moral

[36]G. K. Chesterton, "The Nature of a Religious War," *Daily News*, 19 Sept. 1903, in *G. K. Chesterton at the Daily News: Literature, Liberalism and Revolution, 1901–1913*, ed. Julia Stapleton, 8 vols. (London, 2012), 2: 123–6, at 125–6.

[37]Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism, and Nationhood*, 91, quoting G. K. Chesterton, "The Nature of a Religious War," *Daily News*, 19 Sept. 1903, 6.

[38]G. K. Chesterton, "Paganism and Some Protests," *Daily News*, 10 Sept. 1904, in *G. K. Chesterton at the Daily News*, 2: 289–92, at 291.

[39]Quoted in Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism, and Nationhood*, 91. For the arguments over the controversy see G. K. Chesterton, "Turkey and the Liberals," *Daily News*, 9 Oct. 1911, 6. See also letters by Edmund D'Auvergne and M. D. Eder in response: *Daily News*, 10 Oct. 1911, 4; and Chesterton's response and letter from a Turkish official, *Daily News*, 13 and 17 Oct. 1911.

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cowardice, cannot at this moment do what it want to do, is not a Power."[40] In October, Montenegro attacked Turkish forces at Detchitch Mountain. King Nicholas roused his people in Holy War against Turkey but the other European powers, including Britain, were unwilling to intervene. For Chesterton, this was an ironic contrast with the heroism of European unity at Lepanto and inspired his poem "March of the Black Mountain," where the imagery of the despotic East is not nullified by the distance of time. In this poem, the prophet himself is personified as the enemy, playing with the common image of Mohammed and the Mountain to make a point about the heroic resistance of the small Christian nation of Montenegro and the eternal conflict between Islam and the West:

> When the Mountain came to Mahomet
> And looked small before his feet.
>
> His head was as high as the crescent
> Of the moon that seemed his crown,
> And on glory of past and present
> The light of his eyes looked down;
> One hand went out to the morning
> Over Brahmin and Buddhist slain,
> And one to the west in scorning
> To point at the scars of Spain …[41]

The passion inspired by the violence of the Ottoman Empire leads Chesterton in 1913 to suggest that is it led by the Devil, writing that "it is really quite as plausible to say that the everlasting massacre called the Turkish Empire was driven by a devil pretending divinity as to say that the Christian martyrs were upheld by the living Christ."[42]

However much these views might have in common with some strands of Gladstonian liberalism, they were certainly moving away from the mainstream of the early-twentieth-century Liberal Party. It is tempting to see them, therefore, as mirroring the increasing nationalist and racist direction of ideas on the right of European cultural politics. This view needs to be resisted, or at least carefully qualified. Chesterton remained a fierce critic of antidemocratic, elitist and racist ideas in Britain and abroad. Indeed, one of the positive things which he saw in Islam was its antiracism. Even though the alliance between the Ottomans and Germany in the First World War increased his earlier dislike of them, at least Islam "has no Chosen Race; it has no nonsense about lesser breeds without the law; it has no rant of merely racial superiority; there is a brotherhood of men, if it be a brotherhood of Moslems. That was the whole difference between the Turks and the Prussians, and is why any civilised Christian would infinitely prefer the Turks."[43]

[40]G. K. Chesterton, "Impotence," *Daily News and Leader*, 19 Oct. 1912, in *G. K. Chesterton at the Daily News*, 8: 176–9, at 176.

[41]G. K. Chesterton, "March of the Black Mountain," in *The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton*, 121–3, at 122.

[42]G. K. Chesterton, "A Dilemma about Demons," *Daily News*, 18 Jan. 1913, in *G. K. Chesterton at the Daily News*, 8: 225–8, at 226.

[43]Quoted in Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism, and Nationhood*, 187.

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Chesterton's travelogue, *The New Jerusalem*, also contains some positive impressions of Islam. Chesterton visited the Holy Land with his wife at the beginning of 1920. He published his observations in the *Daily Telegraph* and then collected them together as a book which came out in November 1920. *The New Jerusalem* contains a defense of Chesterton's Zionism from the charges of anti-Semitism (originally not published in the *Daily Telegraph* because the newspaper took a different line on the question). It also, however, contains many interesting observations, both on ordinary Muslims and on the religion of Islam, based on Chesterton's personal interactions as well as his abstract theological views.[44] He wrote that "it has been one of the merits of the Moslem faith that it felt men as men, and was not incapable of welcoming men of many different races."[45] At least, he believed, Muslims did not suffer from believing in the "sham science about races." In this, he went on, the Muslim has "something like an intellectual advantage over the Jew, who is generally so much his intellectual superior; and even in some ways his spiritual superior. The Jew has far more moral imagination and sympathy with the subtler ideas of the soul." Jews, however, suffered from the "heavy calamity" of being a "Chosen Race."[46] As for the Muslim, "At the price of something like barbarism, he has at least been saved from ethnology."[47]

While Chesterton was critical of biological racism, however, sometimes his language of character and culture is essentializing to a similar degree. His complement on Muslim equality, for example, is accompanied by the comment that "in the Moslem character" there is "also a deep and most dangerous potentiality of fanaticism."[48] More seriously, Chesterton's descriptions of Islam and Englishness can draw on images of landscape which mirrors the *völkisch* tendency of German nationalist writers, even if it never mixes with biological ideas of racism.[49] At numerous points in his writing, for example, he associates Islam with the emptiness of the desert. In his biography *Lord Kitchener* (1917), he writes that the "great creed born in the desert creates a kind of ecstasy out of the very emptiness of its own land, and even, one may say, out of the emptiness of its own theology."[50] This imagery is even more extreme in his famous and widely read Christian polemic *Orthodoxy* (1908), where "out of the desert, from the dry places and the dreadful suns, come the cruel children of the lonely God; the real Unitarians who with scimitar in hand have laid waste the world."[51] In *The New Jerusalem* he writes of the "monotony of deserts" which produces a spirit of "simplification": "Something of this

[44]Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, 416.

[45]Chesterton, *The New Jerusalem*, 28.

[46]Ibid., 29.

[47]Ibid., 30.

[48]Ibid., 28.

[49]On *völkisch* thought in Germany see the classic accounts by George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of Germany Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York, 1969); and Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology* (London and Berkeley, 1961). For Chesterton and landscape see Susie Byers, "'Nearer to the Roots of Things': Nature in the Ideological Imagination of G. K. Chesterton" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Western Australia, 2014), esp. 159–61 for nature in relation to Chesterton's views of Islam.

[50]G. K. Chesterton, *Lord Kitchener* (Lanham, 2014), at www.gutenberg.org/files/25795/25795-h/25795-h.htm, 7.

[51]G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London, 1957; first published 1908), 232.

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simplification appears, I think, in the religions of the desert, especially in the religion of Islam. It explains something of the superhuman hopes that fill the desert prophets concerning the future; it explains something also about their barbaric indifference to the past."[52] This is placed in opposition to the landscape which Chesterton sees as nurturing Western European—and particularly English—Christianity: "his religion [Islam], though true as far as it goes, has not the variety and vitality of the churches that were designed by men walking in the woods and orchards."[53] For Chesterton, the very soul of Englishness seems to be antipathetic to Islam.

IV

Presented like this, Chesterton's ideas seem to meet all the qualities of the most crude kind of orientalism which "others" the opposing civilization in order to dominate it. One complicating factor with regard to this reading of Chesterton, however, was his avowed and constant anti-imperialism. Imperialists were betraying the true nature of English patriotism. Writing in *The Nation* in 1911, Chesterton defended "dervishes" over "progressive" imperialists who would allow capitalists to "mow down men like grass in the Soudan, to steal their land and desecrate their tombs" because they were not considered "thinking human beings."[54] Indeed, Chesterton actually presented imperialism as an example of the very "orientalism" which he despised. In an article in the *Daily News*, he argued that imperialists such as Cecil Rhodes were effectively spreading "Eastern" ideas of tyranny and despotism rather than true "English" ideas of liberty and Christianity.[55] In a curious presaging of Said, he notes that "we have the cry for Imperialism in all our clubs at the very time when we have Orientalism in all our drawing rooms."[56] Rather than seeing this as an exploitation of Eastern culture as a way of dominating it, however, Chesterton sees it more simplistically as simply an expression of alien Eastern values: "the very governing class which urges Occidental Imperialism has been deeply discoloured with Oriental mysticism and cosmology."[57] One of the things which Chesterton saw as central to Western European Christianity was the idea of free will, something which in "Lepanto" he opposes to the Islamic embrace of "Kismet" or destiny. However, according to Chesterton, Cecil Rhodes's "one small genuine idea" was this idea of inevitable fate, and it was "an Oriental idea." The rest of this passage is worth quoting in full:

> Here we have evident all the ultimate idiocy of the present Imperial position. Rhodes and Kitchener are to conquer Moslem bedouins and barbarians, in order to teach them to believe only in inevitable fate. We are to wreck provinces and pour blood like Niagara, all in order to teach a Turk to say "Kismet": which he has said since his cradle. We are to deny Christian justice

[52]Chesterton, *The New Jerusalem*, 26.
[53]Ibid.
[54]Farmer, *Chesterton and the Jews*, 47.
[55]G. K. Chesterton, "The Orientalism of the Empire," *Daily News*, 11 June 1910, in *G. K. Chesterton at the Daily News*, 6: 262–5.
[56]Ibid., 262.
[57]Ibid., 263.

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> and destroy international equality, all in order to teach an Arab to believe he is "an agent of Fate", when he has never believed anything else. If Cecil Rhodes's vision could come true (which fortunately is increasingly improbable), such countries as Persia or Arabia would simply be filled with ugly and vulgar fatalists in billycocks, instead of with graceful and dignified fatalists in turbans. The best Western idea, the idea of spiritual liberty and danger, of a doubtful and romantic future in which all things may happen—this essential Western idea of Cecil Rhodes could not spread, because (as he says himself) he did not believe in it.
>
> We cannot, therefore, with our Rhodeses and Roosevelts, Kitcheners and Curzons, our modern Empire and Imperialists, spread European ideas in Asia. For our Imperialists believe chiefly in Asiatic ideas, such as Imperialism. We cannot Westernise the East. But we can, with cruel cost and violence, Easternise the East … if it is worth the trouble.[58]

Whatever else they are, therefore, Chesterton's views on Islam are not part of the structure of Western imperial dominance. Indeed, this passage suggests a major contradiction in his views on Islam. In many of the passages hitherto quoted, Chesterton presents Islam as an alien "other." However, in this passage it is also an enemy within. Indeed, Chesterton's more theologically motivated writings on Islam see it not as some exotic foreign religion but as a heresy within Christianity. This paradox helps resolve why Chesterton's polemics seem to go so unnoticed by his contemporaries and by later critics: the dominant view of Islam at the time was of a religion in decline which was no longer a threat to the West. For Chesterton, however, this was not the case. We have seen how in his articles on Turkish foreign affairs before 1914 he was desperate to hammer home to a largely unreceptive readership the importance of this struggle. His theological arguments about Islam see it as a Western heresy. In so classifying Islam, Chesterton follows the arguments of early Christian preachers such as John of Damascus, but also those of Catholic historian Hilaire Belloc. Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953), journalist and writer, was Chesterton's contemporary, friend and fellow religious controversialist. The two writers were often associated together ever since George Bernard Shaw's description of them as the "Chesterbelloc" in the pages of the *New Age* magazine in 1908.[59] Belloc's interpretation of Islam stood apart from the assumptions of the early twentieth century for two reasons: first, he does not see Islam as an alien idea but as part of the religious civil war of the West; and second, he sees it not as in permanent decline but as a present and future threat to Western civilization.[60]

Chesterton shared some of Belloc's theological views of Islam. As Chesterton saw Islam as a Christian heresy, its origins lay close to home:

> Islam, historically speaking, is the greatest of the Eastern heresies. It owed something to the quite isolated and unique individuality of Israel; but it

[58]Ibid., 263–4.
[59]George Bernard Shaw, "Belloc and Chesterton," *New Age*, 15 Feb. 1908, 310.
[60]Hilaire Belloc, *The Great Heresies* (London, 1938), 76–7, 92–3.

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> owed more to Byzantium and the theological enthusiasm of Christendom. It owed something even to the Crusades. It owed nothing whatever to Asia. It owed nothing to the atmosphere of the ancient and traditional world of Asia, with its immemorial etiquette and its bottomless or bewildering philosophies. All that ancient and actual Asia felt the entrance of Islam as something foreign and western and warlike, piercing it like a spear.[61]

This passage again questions the purely orientalist aspects of Chesterton's views of Islam. While the mysterious Orient is certainly referenced in this passage, it is not Islam with which it is associated. From a theological perspective, Chesterton saw Islam as being born of Christianity; it was, in his words, "a product of Christianity; even if it was a by-product; even if it was a bad product."[62] Chesterton sees this heresy as both paradoxical and terrifying:

> There is in Islam a paradox which is perhaps a permanent menace … It affirms, with no little sublimity, something that is not merely the singleness but rather the solitude of God. There is the same extreme simplification in the solitary figure of the Prophet; and yet this isolation perpetually reacts into its own opposite. A void is made in the heart of Islam which has to be filled up again and again by a mere repetition of the revolution that founded it. There are no sacraments; the only thing that can happen is a sort of apocalypse, as unique as the end of the world; so the apocalypse can only be repeated and the world end again and again.[63]

Chesterton associates what he sees as Islam's simplified monotheism with its rejection of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton defends his view of Christianity from heresies old and new:

> Unitarians (a sect never to be mentioned without a special respect for their distinguished intellectual dignity and high intellectual honour) are often reformers by the accident that throws so many small sects into such an attitude. But there is nothing in the least liberal or akin to reform in the substitution of pure monotheism for the Trinity. The complex God of the Athanasian Creed may be an enigma for the intellect; but He is far less likely to gather the mystery and cruelty of a Sultan than the lonely god of Omar or Mahomet. The god who is a mere awful unity is not only a king but an Eastern king. The *heart* of humanity, especially of European humanity, is certainly much more satisfied by the strange hints and symbols that gather round the Trinitarian idea, the image of a council at which mercy pleads as well as justice, the conception of a sort of liberty and variety existing even in the inmost chamber of the world. For Western religion has always felt keenly the idea "it is not well for man to be alone."[64]

[61]G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Mineloa, 2007), 228.
[62]Ibid., 233.
[63]Chesterton, *Kitchener*, 7–8.
[64]Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 230–31, original emphasis.

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The interesting implication here, that Protestant reformers such as Unitarians share something in common with Islam, is developed at greater length in Chesterton's widely read *A Short History of England*, first published in 1917. Indeed, in this book Chesterton goes as far as to suggest that the spirit of Islam is partly responsible for the destruction of the Reformation. Chesterton even defends this seeming incongruity openly to his reader to explain the amount of attention he seems to be paying to Islam:

> And if it be suggested that a note on such Oriental origins is rather remote from a history of England, the answer is that this book may, alas! contain many digressions, but that this is not a digression. It is quite peculiarly necessary to keep in mind that this Semite god haunted Christianity like a ghost; to remember it in every European corner, but especially in our corner. If any one doubts the necessity, let him take a walk to all the parish churches in England within a radius of thirty miles, and ask why this stone virgin is headless or that coloured glass is gone. He will soon learn that it was lately, and in his own lanes and homesteads, that the ecstasy of the deserts returned, and his bleak northern island was filled with the fury of the Iconoclasts.[65]

The striking things about this argument are, first, how incongruous it seems in the context of the early twentieth century, and, second, how few critics both at the time and afterwards have picked up on it.[66] Julia Stapleton, one of the few more recent critics who have analyzed Chesterton's views of Muslims at length, has pointed out how the reviews of the *Short History* did not mention his criticisms of Islam.[67] Stapleton also makes the astute point that Chesterton's views on Islam are connected to his views on English patriotism: he saw a connection between what he saw as Protestant and Islamic indifference to land and place.[68] Islam, therefore, becomes increasingly important to Chesterton not as an oriental "other" but as a real threat to the values he holds dear.[69] In that sense it becomes symbolically attached to all the other forces of modernity which he detests. Chesterton's defense of nationalism is one example of this. Writing about the importance to Serbia of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo in the *Daily News*, for example, he writes how so "awfully alive is that Christian thing called a nation that its very death is a living death. It is a living death which lasts a hundred times longer than any life of man; and of what it meant to the Serbians I know of no possible literary

[65]G. K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (London, 1917), 62–3.

[66]One exception is the unpublished lecture by Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, dean of the Cambridge Muslim College, "British Muslim Integration: The Perspectives of G. K. Chesterton and H. Belloc," Cambridge Muslim College Public Lecture, 2011, available on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCvq5Hh0ymc.

[67]Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism, and Nationhood*, 174.

[68]Ibid., 174.

[69]It is worth pointing out that this association that Chesterton makes between Islam and Protestantism is the opposite of the argument made about Islamophobia by Jo Carruthers. Carruthers suggests that in Islamophobic discourse, simple Protestant "Englishness" is contrasted with the elaborate and foreign nature of Islam. See Jo Carruthers, *England's Secular Scripture: Islamophobia and the Protestant Aesthetic* (London, 2011), 96–121.

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expression."[70] Chesterton sees this laudable patriotism as being philosophically and politically attacked by a kind of global liberal cosmopolitanism. For example, in the same article he criticizes those in Britain who naively underplayed the significance of national and cultural differences in the Balkans: the

> sort of cosmopolitan expert who tests everything by the philosophy of a courier, a man to whose globe-trotting cynicism we have paid far more attention than his shallow experiences deserve, will often tell us that he can see little difference between Turk and Christian in the wilds of South Eastern Europe; he thinks they are much of a muchness, because they may both wear knives or what is worse, indulge in religious observances.[71]

In reality, according to Chesterton, Christianity has developed the idea of local affection: "the chief fruit of this philosophy is the national idea itself, the sacramental sense of boundary, the basis in an almost religious sense of agriculture, the idea of having a home upon this earth, which the Arab armies out of the deserts can hardly even be said to have violated, having never even begun to understand."[72] In *A Short History of England*, too, Chesterton claims that Christianity creates "local affections which found form in that system of fences which runs like a pattern through everything mediaeval, from heraldry to the holding of land. There was a shape and colour in all their customs and statutes which can be seen in all their tabards and escutcheons; something at once strict and gay."[73]

V

The idea of a society full of "local affections" based on landscape, culture and religion is at the very centre of Chesterton's political thinking, as numerous critics have pointed out.[74] It is a long-running theme not only in his journalism, but also in his best-known novels, especially *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, his 1904 book about an imaginary future London of colorfully independent boroughs.[75] His perception of Islam as the opposite of local and rooted means that he uses it both consciously and unconsciously as a symbol of everything which threatens his ideals. Chesterton had been tempted by the intellectual and moral scepticism of the *fin de siècle* decadents when he was studying at the Slade in 1893. In his *Autobiography* he describes his time here as a kind of mental and moral breakdown. On the one hand his crisis manifested itself as an extreme solipsism and a sense of unreality: he "did not very clearly distinguish between dreaming and waking; not only as a mood but as a metaphysical doubt, I felt as if everything might be a dream." However, Chesterton did not see this as a personal madness but rather as a symptom of

[70]G. K. Chesterton, "The Thing Called a Nation," *Daily News*, 28 June 1916, in *G. K. Chesterton at the Daily News*, 8: 240–43, at 240.
[71]Ibid., 241.
[72]Ibid., 242.
[73]Chesterton, *Short History*, 63.
[74]See especially Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism, and Nationhood*.
[75]G. K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (London, 1904).

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the zeitgeist: he "was simply carrying the scepticism of my time as far as it would go."[76] From this time forward, therefore, he saw all ideas which seemed detached from an external reality as being dangerously anarchic. His view of Christianity was as a religion rooted in the local and personal, symbolized above all by the divinity of the person of Jesus and the materiality of the Eucharist. The combination of his earlier breakdown with his Christianity allowed him to conflate Islam with an unlikely set of "modern" and "progressive" ideas in that they all seemed to celebrate the infinite and impersonal.[77]

Rather than being a "backward" religion, therefore, Islam is associated by Chesterton with the progressive politics and philosophies which he hates. In *The New Jerusalem* he suggests that both Islam and many modern philosophies were given to overemphasis of a central idea: "any modern Christian thus criticising the Moslem movement would do well to criticise himself and his world at the same time. For in truth most modern things are mere movements in the same sense as the Moslem movement. They are at best fashions, in which one thing is exaggerated because it has been neglected."[78] He uses feminism as an example: "the Suffragettes no more established a philosophy of the sexes by their feminism than the Arabs did by their anti-feminism. A woman can find her home on the hustings even less than in the harem."[79] Chesterton had been a long-standing opponent of the movement for female suffrage. Chesterton's hatred of the absence of boundaries is not purely political, however, but also key to his philosophy both in a more personal and a more general sense. Chesterton had a fear of infinity which was connected to his love for the close and personal. He described this in many places in his journalism. In one of his *Daily News* columns he wrote, "I am horribly afraid of height and space, of the vertigo of infinity."[80] In another article he described his hatred of a universe without lines: "the sea is the one hard straight line in Nature."[81] For Chesterton, much modern thought deliberately tried to muddy or transcend these lines, either with revolutionary zeal or with fake mysticism. Again, it is striking the extent to which Chesterton associates modern thinking with Islam, with varying degrees of coherence. He associates the popularity of Omar Khayyam (*c.*1034–*c.*1130), the Persian poet, mathematician and astronomer, translated by Edward Fitzgerald (1809–83), for example, with the decadence which he rejected so resoundingly in his youth. While Khayyam's "literary greatness is beyond cavil," according to Chesterton, "his influence has been worse than himself: his fatalism and contempt for the world, strengthening elements in the Eastern mind, are mere diseases in the Western. Omar is a good Persian, but a bad Englishman." The influence of such ideas on English culture is unwholesome: "when the English mind takes hold of Omar it is into this black and white

[76]G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (London, 1936), 94–5; quoted in Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, 32.

[77]John Coates labels the set of ideas that Chesterton was reacting against as the "Edwardian cultural crisis." See John D. Coates, *Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis* (Hull, 1984).

[78]Chesterton, *The New Jerusalem*, 35.

[79]Ibid., 36.

[80]G. K. Chesterton, "Fear," *Daily News*, 6 Aug. 1910, in *G. K. Chesterton at the Daily News*, 6: 306–8, at 307.

[81]G. K. Chesterton, "The Garden of the Sea," *Daily News*, 20 Aug. 1910, in *G. K. Chesterton at the Daily News*, 6: 313–15, at 314.

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pessimism that it falls, not into the mellow agnosticism of the Eastern original."[82] Chesterton's real target here, then, is the various philosophies which he associates with corrosive modernity. His view of the desert, for example, already quoted, is a complete contrast with the opinions of those Westerners who seemed to see in Islam a kind of limitless spiritual transcendence. Take, for example, these lines of poetry by Lady Evelyn Cobbold, already mentioned as an upper-class convert to Islam and the first Western woman to make a pilgrimage to Mecca:

> And far in the East where desert and sky
> Seemed to meet to welcome the morn.
> Come slowly stealing across Abbassiyeh
> The radiantly beautiful Dawn
> Embracing all things in its tender light.
> And I had farewell to the silent night.[83]

Chesterton's lumping together of modernism with mysticism and the occult is not as eccentric as it might seem at first sight. He had amicable relationships with writers who combined both. A. R. Orage, for example, who as editor of the *New Age* had published Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound as well as Chesterton, was as the editor of the *New English Weekly* in the 1920s a proponent of the Armenian Russian mystic George Gurdjieff. For the critic Leon Surette, Orage's flirtation with Theosophy was not an eccentricity but an outgrowth of his Nietzscheanism: this was precisely the sort of mixture of modern philosophy with Eastern mysticism which Chesterton disliked.[84] Recent scholarship has paid serious attention to the occult views of seminal writers such as W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound.[85] Modernist syncretism in a more general sense drew on what John Bramble has called the "cultural backwash from empire," especially in relation to the "Buddhist" Schopenhauer cult and the mixture of neo-Vedanta with Nietzschean and Bergsonian ideas in Theosophy.[86]

It is when Chesterton is linking Islam to what he sees as the worst aspects of modern thought that his images can become most extreme. For example, in a section in his 1910 polemic *What's Wrong with the World* he rails against social Darwinism, state socialism and other ideologies which treat men merely as numbers or "insects" to be organized and analyzed. Much of his argument is a prescient critique of the eugenics and biological reductionism which was in vogue in intellectual circles. However, in order to strengthen his critique, he links it to the evil of the East. He uses the same dehumanizing language for which he criticizes modern science:

[82]G. K. Chesterton, "The Madness of the Omarites," *Daily News*, 7 March 1901, in *G. K. Chesterton at the Daily News*, 1: 44–7, at 45. This article is a part review of *The Book of Omar: The Book of Omar and Rubáiyát: Being a Book of Miscellanies, Biographical, Historical, Bibliographical and Pictorial Notes of Omar of Naishapur and his Inspired Quatrains* (New York, 1900).

[83]Cobbold, *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, 13.

[84]Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal and Kingston, 1993), 224.

[85]Ibid.

[86]John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult* (Basingstoke, 2015), 3.

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> The Eastern armies were indeed like insects; in their blind, busy destructiveness, in their black nihilism of their personal outlook, in their hateful indifference to individual life and love, in their base belief in mere numbers, in their pessimistic courage and their atheistic patriotism, the riders and raiders of the East are indeed like all the creeping things of the earth. But never before, I think, have Christians called a Turk a locust and meant it as a compliment.[87]

In this passage Chesterton might be defending individual freedom against collectivism of all kinds, but the freedom he defends includes the freedom to dehumanize the enemies of Christendom. While this freedom might make some sort of sense in a romantic history of the Crusades or a defense of Europe against the invading Turks, when voiced in 1910 it takes on the ominous undertones of the racism which it affects to dislike.

VI

The use of Islam as a shorthand for criticizing progressive modernity is most obvious in Chesterton's 1914 book *The Flying Inn*. This novel tells of an alliance between progressive politicians, led by the sinister Lord Ivywood, and the various forces of Islam represented in England by the mystical preacher Misysra Ammon. Together, they make an attempt to ban the public sale of alcohol in Britain. However, spotting a loophole in the law, an Irish adventurer named Patrick Dalroy and an English landlord called Humphrey Pump take an inn sign, a barrel of rum and a round of cheese round the countryside setting up a mobile pub (the "Flying Inn" of the title) and evade the law. At the end of the novel, there is a revolution against the new order which culminates in a battle with invading Turkish forces. On first reading, this novel seems little more than a comedic romp which contains lots of only half-serious celebrations of old English traditions (it is where Chesterton's famous line about how the "rolling English Drunkard made the rolling English Road" first appears). However, there is good reason to see it as either more serious or more sinister, depending on one's point of view.

Reviews at the time hardly mentioned Islam but saw it, to quote one example, as "an attack—brilliant, sustained, and relentless—on everything that its author most dislikes. Vegetarianism, teetotalism, Parliamentarianism, the higher criticism, model villages for model workmen, that fantastic fondness for the lower animals which is generally known as 'humanitarianism'—all these things, and the things that are like unto them, come in for their due share of castigation."[88] Even later critics of Chesterton either underplayed the obvious central role of Islam or simply saw it as odd. In an article otherwise politically hostile to Chesterton which complains about his nativism and anti-Semitism, Patrick Wright wrote, "The Flying Inn is still admired as a prescient comedy: an early assault on 'political correctness', the taste of pretentious elites, and the interfering mentality of the centralised state."[89] Ian Boyd did mention the Islamic theme but felt that the "formation of the Anglo-Turkish empire and the invasion of England first by Turkish customs and

[87]G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (London, 1910), 264.

[88]Review of *The Flying Inn*, *The Academy*, 7 Feb. 1914, 177–8, at 177.

[89]Patrick Wright, "Last Orders," *The Guardian*, 9 April 2005, at www.theguardian.com/books/2005/apr/09/britishidentity.society.

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finally by a Turkish army are events which are far-fetched even by the casual standards of verisimilitude Chesterton usually maintains in his novels."[90] Christopher Hollis, too, suggested that "the notion of a Turkish army invading Britain was so bizarre as to be hardly worth suggesting even as a joke."[91]

It seems wrong either to ignore the Islamic theme or to be too dismissive about the seriousness of Chesterton's targets.[92] Even a simple reading of the book as an anti-temperance polemic has to bear in mind the seriousness of this issue in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberalism. For Chesterton, restricting drink was associated with the excesses of Puritanism and, more recently, with what he saw as the increasing trend in liberalism towards state intervention and restricting personal liberty. Chesterton had been a fierce opponent of Asquith's 1908 Licencing Bill, which aimed to increase restrictions on the sale of alcohol.[93] Chesterton saw this bill in the context of a whole raft of policies which the Liberal government was enacting which were seen to limit personal freedom. Both Chesterton and Belloc, for example, were also fierce opponents of the 1911 Insurance Act because of its compulsory element: it seemed to be tying workers to the state. Belloc developed this argument in much more detail in his 1912 book *The Servile State*.[94] Chesterton also wrote *The Flying Inn* at the end of a period where he had become much more disillusioned with parliamentary government in general. His brother, Cecil Chesterton, for example, had recently been sued for libel for his role in the Marconi scandal, which for Chesterton and his circle seemed to illustrate the way in which corrupt liberal and Jewish plutocrats were undermining democracy.[95] Soon after publishing the book, Chesterton suffered a serious illness.[96]

The nightmare outlined in *The Flying Inn* is the cooption of aspects of Islam by progressive elements in British politics. Chesterton satirizes the idea that religions might learn from each other and share common truths. Lord Ivywood, for example, claims that Islam speaks eternal truths which might help the English problem with the curse of alcohol:

> Ours is an age when men come more and more to see that the creeds hold treasures for each other, that each religion has a secret for its neighbour, that faith unto faith uttereth speech and church unto church showeth knowledge. If it be true, and I claim again the indulgence of Oman Pasha when I say I think it is true, that we of the West have brought some light to Islam in the matter of the preciousness of peace and of civil order, may we not say that

[90]Ian Boyd, *The Novels of G. K. Chesterton: A Study in Art and Propaganda* (London, 1975), 67.

[91]Quoted in John Coates, *Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis* (Hull, 1984), 87–8.

[92]John Coates has argued convincingly for the themes of the novel to be taken seriously, although his reading of Chesterton's views on Islam differ from the one presented above. See John Coates, "Symbol and Structure in 'The Flying Inn'," *Chesterton Review* 4/2 (1978), 246–59; and Coates, "The Philosophy and Religious Background of 'The Flying Inn'," *Chesterton Review* 12/3 (1986), 303–28.

[93]This bill was not actually passed as it was rejected by the House of Lords.

[94]Hilaire Belloc, *The Servile State* (London and Edinburgh, 1912).

[95]For details on the Marconi scandal see Tom Villis, *Reaction and the Avant-Garde: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy in Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 2006), 80–82.

[96]Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, 355–8.

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> Islam, in answer, shall give us peace in a thousand homes, and encourage us to cut down that curse that has done so much to thwart and madden the virtues of Western Christendom?[97]

From Chesterton's point of view, it is his character's reasonableness which is intended to be chilling. Another target is the way the elite slavishly follow exotic foreign fashions with a credulousness which the people would never countenance. The eccentric Islam preacher, for example, Misysra Ammon or the "Prophet of the Moon," is at the beginning of the book preaching to no one on Brighton Pier about the commonalities between Islamic and English culture (for example the preponderance of "Crescents" in street names). As the book develops, however, he is brought under the wing of the establishment. Lord Ivywood speaks about the "progressive" nature of the Mohammedan religion as a way of civilizing the English:

> I have long been increasingly convinced that underneath a certain mask of stiffness which the Mahomedan religion has worn through certain centuries, as a somewhat similar mask has been worn by the religion of the Jews, Islam has in it the potentialities of being the most progressive of all religions; so that a century or two to come we may see the cause of peace, of science, and of reform everywhere supported by Islam as it is everywhere supported by Israel.[98]

As intellectuals and aristocrats increasingly get persuaded by this mix of progressivism and Islam, they start dressing differently—in a way which Chesterton suggests "looked rather like the funeral procession of Aubrey Beardsley."[99] Throughout the novel, the humor gives way to flashes of genuine menace. When Lord Ivywood presides over the smashing of beer barrels, he was "feeding on fanatical pleasure: the pleasure which his strange, cold, courageous nature could not get from food or wine or woman."[100] When Ivywood, through wire-pulling and manipulation, finally manages to completely outlaw drink, Chesterton uses this to express disillusionment with parliamentary democracy. Chesterton describes the moment when he leaves the House of Commons tea room to address the chamber:

> He … left behind an unlighted cigarette and his honour and all the England of his fathers—everything that could really distinguish that high house beside the river from any tavern for the hocussing of sailors. He went upstairs and did his business in twenty minutes in the only speech he had ever delivered without any trace of eloquence. And from that hour forth he was the naked fanatic; and could feed on nothing but the future.[101]

[97]G. K. Chesterton, *The Flying Inn* (London, 1915), 17.
[98]Ibid., 65.
[99]Ibid., 107.
[100]Ibid., 38.
[101]Ibid., 202.

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The final part of the book initially expresses Chesterton's ultimate nightmare, where, as his character Dalroy suggests, "the English oligarchy is run by an Englishman who hasn't got an English mind."[102] English institutions and traditions are taken over by alien influences: Ivywood talks about Islamic students soon becoming a majority in British universities,[103] the London police are made to wear fezes, voters have to make a mark on the ballot paper with a crescent rather than a cross,[104] and children are encouraged to play "Noughts and Crescents."[105] All that is rooted and bounded gives way to a society and a culture without edges. In a key exchange, Lord Ivywood celebrates this "going beyond" with Lady Joan, who is more skeptical:

> "I see the breaking of barriers," he answered; "beyond that I see nothing."
>
> She looked at the floor for a little time and traced patterns with her parasol, like one who has really received food for thought. Then she said suddenly:
>
> "But perhaps the breaking of barriers might be the breaking of everything."
>
> The clear and colourless eyes looked at her quite steadily.
>
> "Perhaps," said Lord Ivywood.[106]

Pitted against this progressive fanaticism is the common sense of the English people. Dalroy gives voice to the feeling that the "people" have been ignored for too long, that "rulers have come to count on the bare bodily cowardice of a mass of Englishmen as a sheep-dog counts on the cowardice of a flock of sheep."[107] However, passion for the old freedoms burns somewhere in the collective soul. When the heroes succeed in evading the law, on "the withered face" of an old man "there was a faint renewal of that laughter that has slept since the Middle Ages";[108] when an abused chauffeur is given some rum and looks up to see the sign of an old English inn, "he seemed, not so much to pluck up his courage, but rather to drag up some forgotten courage from the foundations of some unfathomable sea. It was indeed the forgotten courage of the people."[109] Eventually, however, the "storm-spirit or eagle of liberty which is the sudden soul in a crowd, had descended upon London after a foreign tour of some centuries in which it had commonly alighted upon other capitals."[110] A genuinely violent revolution kicks out the leaders and expels an invading Turkish army which had secretly gathered. The final section happens in a near dream sequence with no detail of how or what would be reinstated; Lady Joan even describes seeing the final battle as like being in a "violent and revolving vision," as if the whole thing was scarcely more real than the surreal adventure which preceded it. However, what Chesterton is giving voice to here is

[102]Ibid.,170.
[103]Ibid., 260.
[104]Ibid., 260.
[105]Ibid., 263.
[106]Ibid., 237.
[107]Ibid., 276.
[108]Ibid., 49.
[109]Ibid., 151.
[110]Ibid., 271.

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the submerged violence of his political vision. He is writing of the need and duty to fight, which he sees as so rarely expressed in modern Britain.

It is very tempting to see the use of Islam in *The Flying Inn* as merely exotic color, as many contemporaries did. The main target of Chesterton's abuse is clearly the progressive and rootless politicians who are colluding to take away the people's liberties. However, the views of Islam here presented, which are expressed in the rest of Chesterton's writing, suggest something different. Chesterton was genuinely engaged by its danger.

Moreover, the use of Islam as a symbol of progressive modernity is highly unusual in the early twentieth century but similar to numerous tropes of anti-Semitism. There are differences as well as similarities between Chesterton's views of Jews and of Muslims. To the extent that Chesterton's Zionism might be deemed to be philo-Semitic, his views of Jews are more positive than those of Muslims: as discussed above, he was exercised by the extent to which Islam was an antinational religion which deliberately corroded local identity. His positive view of Zionism was that it would create a genuine Jewish cultural and religious nationalism. However, his ire was reserved for those Jews who wanted to assimilate. In this sense Chesterton's anti-Semitism could become personal. He saw some Jews as a threat because of their presence in the upper echelons of the British establishment. Elite fascination with Islam or other forms of Eastern exoticism did not extend to the welcoming of Muslims to real positions of power within Britain. G. K.'s sympathy for his brother Cecil's unabashed anti-Semitism at the time of the Marconi scandal, where Godfrey and Rufus Isaacs are singled out as examples of Jewish usury, does not have an equivalent with regard to Muslims.[111] However, the hatred of cosmopolitan rootlessness which underpins some of his anti-Semitic images also applies to Islam, even if the latter religion lends itself less easily to a caricature of the inequalities of global finance.[112] Most strikingly though, Islam seemed to symbolize a corrosive set of ideas more effectively than did Judaism. It was both a long-standing enemy of Christianity and seen to have something in common with the modern ideas which seemed to be undermining orthodoxy and common sense. Chesterton's occasional hostility to certain Jews and what he saw as Jewish behavior rarely extended to hostility to Judaism as a religion in the way it did sometimes to Islam.

Chesterton's views here suggest that there is more work to be done on both views of Islam and the interaction between anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic images. Thomas Linehan, for example, suggests that a major divergence between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia is that while Jews are associated with the negative aspects of modernity, Muslims are normally presented as backward and as holding pre-Enlightenment views.[113] However true this may be for Islamophobia in the twenty-first century, Chesterton does see Islam as reflecting some of the ills of modernity. This suggests

[111]Mayers, *Chesterton's Jews*, 25–6.

[112]In one article, for example, Chesterton accuses Jews of an "obscure conspiracy against Christendom," of having "fattened on the worst forms of Capitalism" and of taking refuge in Communism. G. K. Chesterton, "The Judaism of Hitler," *G. K.'s Weekly*, 20 July 1933, 311, quoted in Mayers, *Chesterton's Jews*, 82.

[113]Thomas Linehan, "Comparing Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and Asylophobia: The British Case," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12/2 (2012), 366–86, at 380.

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that negative views of Islam are more complex and less monolithic than is sometimes assumed, and that the relationship between anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic prejudice can be fluid.

* * *

The work which needs to be done on uncovering these and other connections can be best done by a careful historical contextualization. Chesterton's views might on the surface suggest that there is a tradition of anti-Islamic prejudice hidden in plain sight in English literary culture, or that modern Islamophobia has a long history. They also might be used as superficial evidence that prejudice against Muslims is endemic in Western culture. This article has tried to show, however, that as well as looking forward and backward, it is important to trace the intellectual context of the time in which these writings were produced. Chesterton's views of Islam are uncomfortably contradictory and mixed with ideas which found broad support amongst his readers and in British society more widely. His arguments are detailed and occasionally sophisticated. On the one hand his ideas reflect stereotypical and populist images of the exotic or dangerous East which might rightly be described as orientalist. On the other hand, criticizing "Eastern" ideas is a way of criticizing imperialism, elitism and racism. Similarly, Chesterton's views reference old ideas of Islam as a heresy, images which go back to Anglo-Saxon England, let alone the Crusades. On the other hand, Islam is linked to a broader force within English culture against Trinitarianism and Catholicism. Chesterton associates the religion of Mohammed with the Reformation and with Puritanism. Islam in this sense becomes a much broader enemy of the Christian orthodoxy he tried to defend. From yet another perspective, Chesterton's views of Islam fit within a liberal (and Liberal) tradition of humanitarian intervention, expressed trenchantly in both his anti-Ottoman polemics of the period before the First World War and his criticism of the Turkish alliance with Germany during it. His criticism of Islam as an "international" movement also links to a view of nationhood which owes something to liberal radicalism as well as culturally reactionary nativism. Finally, much of his work presents Islam as being in league with the most noxious aspects of modernity, in much the same way as the logic of anti-Semitism worked in the same period. Chesterton's views also suggest the need for further study of the images of Islam in British culture in order to create a historically sensitive genealogy which is not solely motivated by the political concerns of the present.

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