



“Saint” Chesterton

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In the early 1970s, David Lodge stated that following Vatican II, “the Chesterbelloc brand of Catholicism,” which he characterized as “triumphalist, proselytizing, and theologically conservative,” is no longer “congenial to the mood of the Church.”¹ This mood may be changing. A recent address by the Vatican prefect in charge of The Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples announced that “the world today needs Christian apologists, not apologisers.” The address named Chesterton and Belloc as worthy examples who “brilliantly expose the beauty of the Christian faith without blushing or compromise.”²

In the past ten years there has been a resurgence in Chesterton’s popularity. This renewed interest has been marked by a recent flurry of books examining Chesterton’s life, literature, theology, “prophetic insight,” and “holiness.”³ Sensing this change in mood, a small following of Chesterton’s

1. David Lodge, *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 145.

2. “Address of his Eminence Cardinal Ivan Dias, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, on the Occasion of the Anglican Conference of Lambeth,” July 22, 2008: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cevang/documents/rc_con_cevang_doc_20080722_dias-lambeth_en.html (downloaded July 9, 2011).

3. The following are just some examples: Dale Ahlquist’s *G. K. Chesterton: The Apostle of Common Sense* (2003), Aidan Mackey’s *G. K. Chesterton: A Prophet for the 21st Century* (2009), Aidan Nichol’s *G. K. Chesterton, Theologian* (2009), William Oddie’s *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy* (2008), William Oddie’s *The Holiness of G. K. Chesterton* (2010), and Ian Ker’s *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (2011).

most fervent admirers have raised the question of his beatification.⁴ A conference at Oxford to discuss the holiness of Chesterton proceeded in July 2009. Prayer cards with a prayer for the intercession of Chesterton have been created in multiple languages. These were distributed and well received at a one-day symposium at Beaconsfield in October 2010. The main focus of the symposium was Chesterton and Cardinal Newman. Newman was recently beatified by the pope, and one purpose of the symposium was to suggest that Chesterton was the natural successor of the Cardinal. A number of apologetics have been formulated by Chesterton's admirers concerning his discourse about Jews; their general intent is to refute the charge that he engaged in antisemitism. This short essay is intended as a critique of just a few of these apologetics.⁵

In a recent volume on the holiness of Chesterton, William Oddie did not merely defend Chesterton from the accusation of antisemitism; he argued that he was in fact a "philosemite."⁶ Oddie predominantly relies on material that dates back to the early 1890s. He quotes an entry from Chesterton's diary, dated 1891, in which Chesterton wrote that he felt so strongly about an incident in Russia where a Jewish girl was treated with great cruelty that he wanted to "knock some-body down."⁷ He also quotes a number of passages from Chesterton's school magazine, *The Debater*, also from 1891, in which Chesterton fantasized about traveling to Russia to fight on behalf of "the Hebrews" suffering in pogroms.⁸ Oddie cites a poem, "To a Certain Nation," published in 1900, to demonstrate that Chesterton was also appalled at the persecution of Dreyfus.⁹ These do indeed reflect Chesterton's early attitude toward the persecution of Jews, thereby demonstrat-

4. Chesterton has already been appointed Knight Commander of the Order of St. Gregory the Great (by Pius XI in 1934) and Defender of the Catholic Faith (in 1936).

5. In this essay I examine only those aspects of Chesterton's discourse that relate to the apologetics examined. This represents a tiny selection of his anti-Jewish discourse. For a scholarly introduction to Chesterton's literary discourse about Jews, I recommend Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of "The Jew" in English Literature and Society: Racial Representation, 1875-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

6. William Oddie, "The Philosemitism of G. K. Chesterton." In *The Holiness of G. K. Chesterton*, ed. William Oddie (Leominster: Gracewing, 2010), 124-137. This volume contains papers presented by scholars at the 2009 Oxford conference.

7. Diary entry, January 5, 1891, cited by Oddie, "The Philosemitism of G. K. Chesterton," 127.

8. *The Debater*, III, 1891, 11, 29, 71, cited by Oddie, "The Philosemitism of G. K. Chesterton," 128.

9. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *The Wild Knight*, 4th ed. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1914), 92-93.

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ing that Chesterton was by no means consistently antisemitic throughout his life.

Early into the 20th century, however, largely as a result of his friendship with Hilaire Belloc, Chesterton's attitude toward Dreyfus and Jews became increasingly unsympathetic. By the time of the second edition of *The Wild Knight*, published in 1905, he expressed suspicion at the acquittal of Dreyfus in a new preface for the volume. The preface stated that he was no longer convinced about the innocence of Dreyfus and that while “there may have been a fog of injustice in the French courts; I know that there was a fog of injustice in the English newspapers.” According to the preface, Chesterton was unable to reach a final “verdict on the individual,” which he came “largely to attribute” to the “acrid and irrational unanimity of the English Press.”¹⁰

In letters sent to a periodical in March and April 1911, he denounced the type of Jew who “is a traitor in France and a tyrant in England,”¹¹ and stated that in “the case of Dreyfus” he was quite certain that “the British public was systematically and despotically duped by some power—and I naturally wonder, what power.”¹² The following passage by the narrator of *Manalive* (1912) would seem to suggest that Chesterton's belief in the innocence of Jews suffering in Russian pogroms had also become somewhat ambivalent. The narrator stated: “Wherever there is conflict . . . any soul, personal or racial, unconsciously turns on the world the most hateful of its hundred faces.” In the case of Moses Gould, the Jew in the novel, it was “that smile of the Cynic Triumphant, which has been the tocsin for many a cruel riot in Russian villages or mediaeval towns.”¹³

Another popular defense has been that Chesterton and Israel Zangwill were friends.¹⁴ Michael Coren stated that Zangwill was a friend of Chesterton, describing them as a “noted literary combination of the time.”¹⁵ Joseph Pearce likewise stated that Israel Zangwill, “that most quintessential of Jewish writers,” was someone with whom Chesterton had “remained good

10. The British press almost universally condemned the Dreyfus trial. The second edition is difficult to locate, but the 1905 preface can be found in the fourth edition. Chesterton, *The Wild Knight*, 4th ed., xii.

11. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, “Letter to the Editor: The Jews in Modern Life,” *The Nation*, March 18, 1911, 1004.

12. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, “Letter to the Editor: The Jew in Modern Life,” *The Nation*, April 8, 1911, 58.

13. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Manalive* (1912; London: House of Stratus, 2001), 137-138.

14. Israel Zangwill was a prominent Anglo-Jewish author and playwright.

15. Michael Coren, *Gilbert: The Man Who was G. K. Chesterton* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), 209.

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friends from the early years of the century until Zangwill's death in 1926."¹⁶ Neither Coren nor Pearce provided sources with which to verify this friendship. This has not prevented the alleged friendship being used by many other admirers of Chesterton, including Ian Boyd from the Chesterton Institute, Aidan Mackey, and Stratford Caldecott, who cite Coren's book as if it were evidence.¹⁷ The strongest evidence of a friendship, circumstantial at best, is a photo of Chesterton and Zangwill walking side by side after leaving a meeting about government plans for the censorship of stage plays in 1909. As they both wrote plays, this is not a shocking revelation. This photo was reproduced in an issue of the *Chesterton Review* with a caption to suggest two friends together.¹⁸ The photo probably demonstrates little beyond their sharing an interest in government censorship.

In 2008, a special issue of *Gilbert Magazine*, the periodical of the American Chesterton Society, devoted sixty pages to "Chesterton & the Jews." Its aim was to refute the "mean and wretched lie"¹⁹ that Chesterton was an antisemite. It claimed that Zangwill and Chesterton admired each other; the same photo can be found on the front cover.²⁰

Prior to 1915, Chesterton had on occasion referred to Zangwill in positive terms, describing him as "a very earnest thinker" and the "nobler sort of Jew."²¹ During the first world war, however, he accused Zangwill of being "Pro-German; or at any rate very insufficiently Pro-Ally," "though he probably means at most to be Pro-Jew."²² Whatever the nature of their relationship, it did not prevent Zangwill from describing Chesterton as an antisemite. In *The War for the World* (1916), Zangwill referred to *The New*

16. Joseph Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G. K. Chesterton* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), 446.

17. For examples, see: <http://www.secondspring.co.uk/spring/semitism11.htm> (downloaded July 9, 2011); Aidan Mackey, "Chesterton: Case for the Defence," *The Jewish Chronicle*, December 19, 1997, 23; Ian Boyd, *Chesterton Review*, Vol. XXXII/3&4 (2006), 276. Ironically, Gerald Kaufmann, an Anglo-Jewish politician, wrote a hostile critique of Chesterton but accepted the claim that Zangwill and Chesterton were friends. Gerald Kaufmann, "Chesterton's Final Solution," *The Times Higher Education*, January 2, 1998, 14.

18. *Chesterton Review*, vol. XIII/2 (1987), 144-145.

19. Dale Ahlquist, *Gilbert Magazine*, Vol. 12/2&3 (November/December 2008), 20.

20. Sean P. Dailey, "Tremendous Trifles," *Gilbert Magazine*, Vol. 12/2&3 (November/December 2008), 4.

21. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (London: J.M.Dent & Sons, 1911), x-xi; and Gilbert Keith Chesterton, "Our Notebook," *Illustrated London News*, February 28, 1914, 322.

22. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, "Mr Zangwill on Patriotism," *The New Witness*, October 18, 1917, 586-587.

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Witness as the organ of “a band of Jew-baiters,” whose “antisemitism” is rooted in “ignorance, envy and mediaeval prejudice.” He stated that G. K. Chesterton provided the “intellectual side” of the paper, which was, he concluded, “not strong except in names.” He suggested that the “conductors” of *The New Witness* would “do better to call it *The False Witness*.”²³ In 1920, Zangwill stated: “In Mr. Chesterton’s own organ, *The New Witness*—the change of whose name to *The False Witness* I have already recommended—the most paradoxical accusations against the Jew find Christian hospitality.”²⁴

If Zangwill believed Chesterton was guiltless of antisemitism, then he had a strange way of showing it.

Another resilient but mendacious defense has been that Chesterton could not have been an antisemite because the Wiener Library, the UK’s key institute dedicated to researching antisemitism, has defended him from the charge. This defense has been recycled in a number of books, newspapers, and periodicals.²⁵ The resilience of this myth is demonstrated by the fact that at last count there were nineteen Web sites²⁶ that refer to it, despite the Wiener Library’s “efforts to have these false attributions removed.”²⁷ The exploitation of the Wiener Library’s name is discussed in the institute’s Winter 2010 newsletter.²⁸

This short essay presents just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to apologetics written to rehabilitate Chesterton’s reputation. They share in

23. Israel Zangwill, *The War for the World* (London: William Heinemann, 1916), 58-59. At this point, the paper was edited by Cecil Chesterton. G. K. Chesterton was a regular contributor who became editor in October 1916, when Cecil joined the army, and continued to run the paper when Cecil died in 1918.

24. Israel Zangwill, “The Jewish Bogey (July 1920),” in *Speeches, Articles and Letters of Israel Zangwill*, ed. Maurice Simon (London: The Soncino Press, 1937), 103.

25. For examples, see Coren, *Gilbert: The Man Who was G. K. Chesterton*, 209-210; Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence*, 448; Oddie, “The Philosemitism of G. K. Chesterton,” 130; Ian Boyd, *Chesterton Review*, Vol. XXXII/3&4 (2006): 276.

26. A few examples include knowledge Web sites Wikipedia and Answers.com, the antisemitic Web site Metapedia, and the Roman Catholic Web site Secondspring:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_K_Chesterton

<http://www.answers.com/topic/g-k-chesterton>

http://en.metapedia.org/wiki/GK_Chesterton

<http://www.secondspring.co.uk/economy/chesterton-anti-semitism.html>

27. Ben Barkow, “Director’s Letter,” *Wiener Library News*, 61, (Winter 2010): 2. Ben Barkow is the director of the Wiener Library.

28. Simon Mayers, “G. K. Chesterton and the Wiener Library Defence,” *Wiener Library News*, 61, (Winter 2010): 10.

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common a problematic use of sources. In some cases, such as the Zangwill and Wiener Library defenses, they cite little or no discernable evidence. Considering Chesterton's discourse about Jews, which was often offensive and mendacious, the wisdom of considering him a saint and a philosemite is, from the perspective of promoting understanding rather than misunderstanding between Catholics and Jews, at the very least questionable.

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