

Considering Honor for G.K. Chesterton

by Michael Curtis



We would all like to be, or to be considered, saints. When the saints go marching in, yes I want to be in that number. Since saints are so few it's best to string along with good people who have faults. This is pertinent to a new case of possible canonization, the first British individual for centuries, that is now the subject of controversy in Britain.

The last British subjects to be canonized were Sir Thomas More, councillor to Henry VIII and Lord High Chancellor, and John Fisher, Cardinal and Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, both executed in 1535 and canonized by Pope Pius XI in May 1935. Credentials of a new candidate are now being examined.

This will result from the report to be issued in July 2018 by Canon John Udris, former pastor and now director of a seminary. He was asked in 2013 by Peter Doyle, Bishop of Northampton to compile a report on the famous writer G. K Chesterton who had answered the prayers of infertile Catholic

couples who wanted “miracle” children. Udris disarmingly sees Chesterton as a model for the Catholic Church who broke the mold of conventional holiness, a married man who liked beer and Burgundy, a fierce debater, and author of brilliant works of Catholic apologetics. After early years as a High Church Anglican, Chesterton converted to Catholicism in 1922.

Udris has preempted his report by commenting that it would be timely for Chesterton to be made a saint because of “his clarity of vision, and also his very particular respect for those who do not share his views.” He was a kind person, a witty and good literary critic, a friend to fellow writers like Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells. These are not the same credentials as those of Mother Theresa who was canonized in September 2016, credited with two healing miracles, and was termed by the Pope as the “emblematic figure of womanhood and of consecrated life.” Chesterton had good qualities, but was hardly Blessed or Venerable.

Pleas in favor of canonization of Chesterton have come from a number of quarters, including Pope Francis. When Francis was Cardinal Bergoglio, Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he had offered a prayer for canonization, and was honorary chair of a Chesterton conference in Argentina. Pius XI already made Chesterton a Knight Commander with Star of Papal Order of St. Gregory the Great .

Chesterton, 1874-1936, was a picturesque character, with distinctive dress, often with a cape, crumpled hat, and swordstick, tall, overweight at almost 300 pounds, and smoker of cigars. He was a major literary figure, prolific author of 80 books, journalism, essays, plays, and poems. He is best known, if indirectly, for creating the Catholic priest detective Father Brown who in 53 stories solves mysteries and crimes by a process of deduction, introspection, and intuition. In this, Catholic Brown is the opposite of secular Sherlock Holmes who relied on induction and scientific knowledge. But, religious or not, both detectives rout the

evil they confront.

Chesterton, the highly successful writer, and generous commentator on other writers including Ezra Pound, is not easy to summarize. His outlook in many ways was, if not evoking medieval romanticism, that of an ordered, organic society, one that was threatened by modern forces and dislike or fear of change, and aliens. He was equally opposed to monopoly capitalism and to state socialism, and also to Fabian intellectuals, bureaucracy and imperialism.

At times his writings appear not simply patriotic but xenophobic, as shown by passages in his version of British identity in his poem, *The Secret People*. One passage is a couplet, "Smile at us, pay us, but do not forget. For we are the people of England, that never have spoken yet." Even more pointed and foreboding is his attack on rulers, "Lords without anger and honor, who do not carry thir swords, they fight by shuffling papers, they have bright, dead alien eyes." Among them is the "staggering lawyer," and the "cringing Jew."

In general Chesterton was critical of eugenics, and opposed to the idea of racial superiority. Yet, the "cringing Jew," evokes accusations of antisemitism, which he denied when accused. He said he had the highest regard for Jews and for Zionism. Regarding the latter, he suggested that Jews would be happy in a country of their own. It would be better for all parties if "Israel" had the dignity and distinctive responsibility for a separate nation, a national home, but was not clear where this would be.

It is said that for a short time he seemed to be friendly with the Jewish British writer Israel Zangwill, cultural Zionist and associate of Theodor Herzl. Whether this was true or not, Chesterton was never a virulent antisemite as was his friend, the writer Hillaire Belloc.

Nevertheless, a close study of Chesterton's writings, both

fiction and nonfiction, reveal frequent examples of his implicit use of stereotypes of Jews as greedy, disloyal, unpatriotic, cowards, outsiders, and in curious fashion as both capitalists and Bolsheviks. He argued that after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Jews were transformed from persecuted victims in Russia to persecutors of Russians. On the ruins of Russia had arisen a Jewish servile state. Chesterton attacked plutocracy in general, but its representatives were Jews: the cleverest men in big business and Bolshevism were Jews. Indicating that Jews were not patriotic, he pointed out that Disraeli "may have lived for England, but he would not have died for her."

In reevaluating the case for canonization of Chesterton three experiences may be considered: Dreyfus Affair, Marconi scandal, and Hitler and the Nazi regime.

Chesterton was ambivalent or uncertain about Dreyfus. In 1899 in a poem, *To a Certain Nation* he criticised France for the injustice to Dreyfus, but within a few years he had changed his position. He then complained of the acrid and irrational unanimity of the British press in a favor of Dreyfus, and its omission of the evidence against him. He believed the British press had not recorded what really happened, and that since 1911 Dreyfus had become a traitor in France.

Chesterton saw the Marconi scandal, in summer 1912 as a turning point for British citizens. For him it became personal as well as political. The case, became the occasion for antisemitism, since it concerned allegations of inside trading involving senior members of the Liberal government led by Prime Minister H.H. Asquith, including two prominent Jews, Sir Rufus Isaacs, Attorney-General and Herbert Samuel Postmaster-General, who were said to have profited by using information about government plans concerning the British Marconi company. They had bought shares in the American Marconi, subsidiary company that was going to get a government contract. The managing director of Marconi was Godfrey Isaacs, the brother

of Rufus. The principle accuser of the affair was Cecil Chesterton, brother of G.K.. He was sued by Godfrey Isaacs for criminal libel, and the court ruled against Cecil and fined him.

Chesterton was not a correct political prophet. He had peculiar views of Adolf Hitler whom he criticised but in a sense excused at the same time. In September 1934 he asserted that in "certain aspects and under certain limitations I do not believe that Hitler is altogether a bad fellow... He is certainly a much better fellow than the men who are going to use him." Bizarrely in March 1936, he remarked he had always said "there were healthy elements in Hitlerism and even in Hitler, and that Hitler was one of the healthy elements in Hitlerism.

More disconcerting, Chesterton saw Hitlerism as a form of Judaism, and that Hitlerism was almost entirely of Jewish origin. If there was one outstanding quality in Hitlerism it was Hebraism. Alluding to Nazism, Chesterton wrote "the new Nordic man has all the worst faults of the worst Jews; jealousy, greed, the mania of conspiracy, and above all, the belief in a Chosen Race."

The proponents of canonisation for Chesterton have to respond to allegations against him. On one hand, Chesterton in his 1920 work *The New Jerusalem* spoke of Jews as "a sensitive and highly civilized people," and understood that in hard times Christian rulers had given up Jews to the fury of the poor. He also was aware of the case for Zionism and wrote in 1920 a fair and sympathetic appraisal of Chaim Weizmann.

Yet he also wrote of the colossal cosmopolitan financial power of Jews and their forms of national political power, At various times he wrote of the "reality of the Jewish problem," that Jewish culture separated it from European nationalities, and that the Jewish family was generally divided among the nations. Always foreigners, they were unlikely to be

patriotic. Jews holding high political office should dress in oriental clothes to remind people of their origin.

In an interesting passage Chesterton wrote of the controversy, the different views of the character of Shakespeare's Shylock. Similar controversy exists over the character of G.K. Chesterton.