

IN DEFENCE OF HILAIRE BELLOC

***IN DEFENCE
OF HILAIRE BELLOC***

By

Dennis Barton



**The ChurchinHistory
Information Centre**

www.churchinhistory.org

CONTENTS

Page	CHAPTER	
2	1	INTRODUCTION
3	2	BELLOC' S EARLY LIFE
4	3	EXAGERATIONS AND LACK OF REFERENCE
5	4	MILITANCY
6	5	ALLEGED ANTI - SEMITISM
7	5a	His early writings
8	5b	The libel case
10	5c	Belloc's book 'The Jews'
17	5d	Why was his book condemned?
19	5e	Further aspects
22	6	A WIDE RANGE OF INTERESTS
22	7	EUROPE AND THE FAITH
24	8	COMMENT
24		REFERENCES

1. INTRODUCTION

Hilaire Belloc was born in 1870 and died in 1953. He is remembered for

promoting the Catholic Faith by books, articles and public controversy. He was highly regarded within the Catholic Community and wrote for organisations such as the Catholic Truth Society. It may be said that his views represented those of a major portion of English Catholics between the two world wars. Mr. Frank Sheed, one of the most respected Catholic lay leaders, wrote in 1953:

"More than any other man, Belloc made the English-speaking Catholic world in which all of us live. There was Chesterton, of course, but then Belloc had so much to do with the making of Chesterton, and Chesterton not much with the making of Belloc". ((JBM 122)).

Admirers of Chesterton may question this appreciation, but it does indicate the impact Belloc made on English Catholicism. J.B.Morton wrote that Belloc "...was destined to be the champion of the Catholic Church in this country". ((JBM 121)).

So criticism of Belloc's views is often a means of criticising the attitude of the Catholic Community of his time.

Belloc is accused of being a poor historian, too aggressive in argument, an extreme anti-Semite and narrow-minded with regard to non-European cultures. Reference is made to his sweeping and unreferenced depiction of historical events; his blunt militancy; his alleged anti-Jewish jibes and book, together with his statement: 'The Faith is Europe-Europe is The Faith'.

These alleged faults of Belloc are contrasted with the need for precision in history, the modern ecumenical spirit, efforts to increase Catholic-Jewish understanding and the need for the Faith to be expressed in non-European cultural forms.

ARE THESE ACCUSATIONS VALID, WITH THEIR IMPLIED CRITICISM OF THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY WHICH ADMIRED HIM ?

2. BELLOC'S EARLY LIFE

Hilaire Belloc was born near Paris but when his father died two years later

his English mother returned with him to Sussex. As Elizabeth Parks, she had been active in the campaign for women's rights and had been received into the Church during 1864. Although Belloc was educated in Victorian England, his summers were spent with relatives in republican France. At fifteen he joined a French patriotic group and from it absorbed the first germs of anti-Semitism ((RS 32 and 41)).

He became an anti-clerical republican ((RS 52)), and a devotee of anti-Catholic writers such as Rousseau, Danton and other heroes of the French Revolution ((ANW 70)). At eighteen he worked as a freelance reporter before spending a short period in the French navy. This was followed by a period in the army. He admired French culture and although he later travelled widely, this French influence greatly coloured his future attitude to history, culture, the Jews and religion.

He moved to England and in 1892 to enter Oxford University. Cardinal Manning had attended Oxford before his conversion, so was acutely aware of the anti-Catholic bias in its lectures. He therefore opposed young Catholics going to Oxford and Belloc found himself practically alone, with regard to his religion, in this anti-Catholic environment. He was older than most of the other students and this, together with his foreign education and experiences, made him aware of the narrowly 'British' and 'Protestant' nature of the history which was being taught ((HBE vi-x)).

A person who loses confidence in his professors may develop a critical frame of mind, which in turn provides an opportunity for creativity. But he is also in danger of accepting modes of thought purely because they reject the established point of view. The very openness of his mind makes it vulnerable to the acceptance and defence of unusual and possibly false ideas. So although his contemporaries admired Belloc, some were worried that he might become an eccentric extremist.

As a young man Belloc attended Mass, but was not pious ((RS 96)). Although he would never deny his religion, it was to a great degree a badge. It indicated his appreciation of the Church's service to mankind, to European life, to French culture and to the encouragement of rational thought. It took time for a deeper commitment towards his Faith to mature ((RS 96)). In 1901, he became a British citizen and five years later was elected to Parliament as a radical Liberal, advocating 'A Property Owning Democracy', the reform of the electoral system and the democratisation of the House of Lords.

He might have had a distinguished career but in 1910, disillusioned by political corruption, he left Parliament ((RS 269, 285 and 296)).

3. EXAGGERATIONS AND LACK OF REFERENCES

Belloc had been so appalled by the distorted history taught at Oxford that, in J.B.Morton's words; "Belloc saw his great function to be to restore the correct proportions of history..." It wasn't merely the narrow nationalistic rendering of specific historical events that irked him, but the whole neurotic cast of mind. It was the underlying assumptions; nationalistic, religious and psychological, which needed to be transformed. Belloc saw himself as challenging the brain washed English people to come out of their blinkered narrow-mindedness, and see Europe and the Catholic Church as they really were. For this purpose, he wrote in sweeping terms of Catholic and European history. He hoped that once the 300 year old emotional "spell" of anti-Catholic propaganda had been broken, specific stories, regarding the alleged crimes of Catholics and foreigners, could be examined with less prejudice.

His explanation for not giving references was that: "He wasn't an historian but a publicist" ((RS 392)). Belloc felt that the moment you began to worry too much about detail, you missed unity ((RS 411)). He was an extremely busy man writing for a living to support his family. He lacked the time for the carefully referenced history possible to a professional historian at a university, or to one possessing private means. "With sufficient leisure and incentive, he could have written some supremely great biographies". ((ANW 321)). Belloc, himself complained later in life: "Writing for one's living, and other people's, is an abomination" ((ANW 361)). He was under no illusions regarding his problems. In 1925 he wrote in a private letter:

"... at the end one is always sure that there are a hundred elementary errors. With official history that doesn't matter, but with opposition history the smallest mistake is a peril." ((RS 411)).

Belloc painted a rosy picture of the Catholic impact on history, and often ignored its blemishes. These were already well known and exaggerated. He was trying to right the balance. Belloc's attitude was that if you wished to straighten a bent piece of metal, it was no use knocking it straight, as it would retain some of its original bend. You had to bend it over in the opposite direction. It would then spring back into a straight position ((RS 392)).

Belloc did not print falsehoods, but at times he interpreted facts starkly without the nuances required for a definitive composition, or he omitted the negative aspects of one of his heroes.

His aim was to startle readers with a new view of history so as to provoke them to think critically and study sources instead of accepting the interpretations of their professors.

In 1953 Hugh Ross Williamson, the historian, wrote regarding Belloc, "Twenty years ago I found it difficult to read him without anger ... My mind was changed not by reading Belloc but by studying sources, which revealed ...the general rightness of Belloc ..." ((ANW 320)). Belloc was a pioneer in exposing 'The Whig view of history' ((ANW 320)). Like many pioneers he was accurate on the main issues, but sometimes inaccurate on the details.

4. MILITANCY

Belloc's bluntness became a source of embarrassment to many of his fellow Catholics. In reply he asserted that they "...had grown accustomed ... to being regarded as the adherents of a foreign sect, a little band of eccentric people who clung to a dying religion. They were permitted to practice that religion, and in return for a good-humoured tolerance they considered it their duty to go on their way quietly, without calling too much attention to themselves." ((JBM 121)). For Belloc it was either: 'The Faith or Atheism' - 'Outside is Night.' He admitted he wasn't blessed by a profound religious emotion. He found the mysticism of St. John of The Cross repulsive. He didn't say it was false, but he wasn't made for the "Union with God business." His faith was based not on feeling but on Will ((ANW 251-2)). Belloc was by temperament a fighter and felt frustrated by what he considered the timid manner of many of his contemporary Catholics. Although he had grown up in an England where Catholics had inherited a tradition of defensiveness, he had also experienced the more confident spirit of French Catholicism. He wrote:

"An ingrained habit of the defensive is the prime condition of defeat. There is no such thing as a defensive battle or a defensive campaign, save in the sense that we may begin on the defensive, but only with the fixed object of turning to the offensive at the right moment." ((JBM 13)).

Belloc believed that the enemies of the Church drew their strength not from the merits of their case, but from the state of mind of their Catholic opponents ((JBM 13)). He bemoaned this situation:

"The orthodox seem to feel, in approaching the sceptics, that they were dealing with superiors. It ought to be just the other way. The people who are in the tradition of Europe, who have behind them the whole momentum of civilisation, who have humour and common sense as the products of Faith, ought to approach their contradictors as inferiors." ((HBN 333)).

Some Catholics feared that his approach would make the Church more unpopular than it was already. If militancy becomes abusive, or is a substitute for listening or knowledge, it can do great harm to the cause it is attempting to promote. But Belloc was not abusive and did listen carefully to

other points of view. He was well grounded in Catholic beliefs and his militancy was that of calling 'a spade a spade', of telling his opponents where they were in error, and of a determination to follow a controversy to a conclusion. This attitude came from his strong faith, dedication and temperament. Examples to illustrate his style may be given. When discussing Anglo-Catholics not becoming Catholics, he wrote:

"There is all the difference in the world between enjoying military ideas and even joining the volunteers, and becoming a private soldier in a common regiment." ((ANW 248))

He could express himself just as bluntly when referring to his fellow Catholics. Writing about the presentation of the Faith:

"The difficulty just now is that English Catholics do not present it at all. They fiddle about with unimportant things of detail or fill the air with hymns of praise of Protestants for being allowed to live." ((ANW 243)).

His eagerness to express what he considered to be clear, unambiguous thinking and of urging people to 'face facts', and stop dithering, could be disconcerting to many, but he was not aiming to be offensive.

5. ALLEGED ANTI-SEMITISM

If by 'anti-Semitism' is meant a wish to harm the Jewish people, it is the name of a serious sin. So to accuse Belloc of this fault is far more serious than to criticise him for his opinions on historical questions. It is alleged that he included anti-Semitic jibes and stereotypes in his novels; that his paper 'The Witness' published libellous anti-Jewish articles; that he wrote an anti-Semitic book on the Jews and that he used anti-Semitic slang in his conversations. Yet in 1924 Belloc claimed that in all his writings he had never attacked a Jew as a Jew, or shown them dislike ((ANW 188)). So it is necessary to examine these charges with care.

5a. His early writings

Few would deny that as a teenager, while a supporter of French nationalist organisations and during his service in the French army, Belloc absorbed anti-Semitic attitudes. A vocal minority in France attacked rich Jews, who were accused of putting greed for money and loyalty to other Jews above their loyalty to France. For others this antagonism extended to the whole Jewish community. Such prejudice was not unusual in France, especially during the trial of Captain Dreyfus at the turn of the century. Anti-Semitism connected with the trial dominated political life for many years. But when Belloc repeated it in England, he was viewed as something of an oddity ((RS 97)), especially when he spoke of the 'Jewish Peril' ((ANW 81)).

His novel: 'Emmanuel Burden' and his biography 'Marie Antoinette', both published during the first decade of the century, were influenced by this background. The two rhymes, presented as evidence of his hatred of Jews, need to be examined before a judgement is made. The first was composed on the death of Samuel Montagu, a very rich Jew who was greatly distrusted and disliked by Belloc. Samuel Montagu had been ennobled as 'Baron Swaything' in 1907 by a Prime Minister, whom Belloc considered to be dishonest. Belloc considered Montagu to have been particularly guilty of corruption, and to Belloc symbolised all that was detestable in the political life at that time. It was soon after this that he left politics. Belloc was continuously composing rhymes and wrote one on this occasion:

Lord Swaythling whom we love and knew
On earth as Mr. Montagu,
Will probably be known in hell
As Mr Moses Samuel:
For though they do not sound the same,
The latter is his real name. ((ANW 173)).

It should be noted that this rhyme was directed against an individual rather than the whole Jewish race. But a second, inspired by a large Jewish owned house, did speak of Jews collectively.

At the end of Piccadilly is a place
Of habitation for the Jewish race.
Awaiting their regained Jerusalem.
These little huts, they say, suffice for them.
Here Rothschild lives, chief of the tribe abhorred
who tried to put to death Our Blessed Lord.
But, on the third day, as the Gospel shows,
Cheating their machinations, He arose:
In whose commemoration, now and then,
We persecute these curly-headed men. ((ANW 258)).

The first was printed for limited circulation amongst Belloc's friends ((ANW 173)), while for the second all we have is an oral report of it ((ANW 258)). We do not know the circumstances or mood in which it was written. There is a difference between composing something on the back of an envelope after a hilarious meal with old friends, and sitting grim faced and alone in a study venting one's hatreds. It was likely to have been written to amuse his friends as a light-hearted commentary on Jewish-Gentile relations down the centuries. Some may feel the rhyme is in bad taste, but not too much should be read into these lines. When a few years later he expressed his seriously considered views on this subject, he called the theory that God used the Gentiles to punish the Jews for the crucifixion, "detestable".' ((HBJ 278)).

It is not possible for us to judge the inner feelings of Belloc at this time and how much he distinguished in his heart between certain financially powerful Jews and Jews as a race. But the satires, jibes and stereotyping in his books would have contributed to promoting anti-Jewish prejudice amongst his readers. Even so, the most significant fact about the two novels and two rhymes is that they were written during a short period of his early life. 'Emmanuel Burden' in 1904, 'Marie Antoinette' in 1909, 'Lord Swaythling' in 1911 and the other rhyme about the same time. ((ANW 258)).

During the next ten years his views matured greatly and he appears to have become more aware that his jibes at rich Jews were having a wider effect. His subsequent writings, while continuing to criticise certain Jews, stressed that most Jews were likeable and were normally poor. It would unjust to see the books and rhymes as being truly representative of his long life. Similarly it would be false to depict him as a life-long anti-Catholic because of his devotion to anti-Catholic authors and anti-clerical politics when in his teens.

In 1922 he published a whole book devoted to the Jews and it is this serious work, produced in more mature years, which must be the basis of any judgement on Belloc's attitude to Jewry. But first 'the libel case' needs to be considered.

5b. The Libel Case

Following his disillusionment with politics, Belloc established 'The Eye Witness'. It aimed to combat the distortion of news in the Press by its few rich owners and advertisers, and to expose corruption in high places. The basic view of those concerned with the paper was that the party political system, as represented by the then Conservative and Liberal parties, was a facade. Real power lay in the hands of a few rich and influential families ((MW 269)), who not only controlled the Press, but both political parties.

Belloc detested both international finance, which exploited and manipulated the ordinary working people, and Marxist socialism and communism which, by making the state the owner of all productive wealth, would be destructive of freedom of spirit. It was widely believed at the time that the leaders of both these forces were small groups of Jews. Because of this, a negative feeling developed towards them. Any increase in their power or influence was treated with suspicion, fear and antagonism.

A further cause of friction was the fact that Jewish families, and the Jewish Community in general, had strong international links through close relatives. This gave rise to the charge that Jews would place the interests of their relatives and trading profits above loyalty to the countries in which they lived. In this way Belloc's campaigning against corruption in high places became entwined with opposition to certain rich and politically influential Jews. Belloc recognised in 'The Eye Witness' that only a small proportion of Jews were involved, and he was not opposed to Jews on account of their race or religion ((RS 311)). 'The paper maintained an astonishingly high standard of intelligence and taste. Seldom reckless; serious but generally readable.' ((RS 307)). It printed contributions from well known authors such as H.G.Wells, Bernard Shaw and H.A.L.Fisher ((ANW 180)). The paper was a pioneer in what today would be known as 'investigatory journalism', aiming to challenge: 'The Establishment'.

During the early months of 1912, Belloc was rarely in the office and Cecil Chesterton, younger brother of G.K.Chesterton, ran the paper. In June Belloc was overworked so handed the paper to Cecil, who renamed it: 'The New Witness' ((RS 308)). Belloc then sold his few shares ((ANW 169)).

The paper had printed some letters from a former MP, Frank O'Donnell. But Belloc was careful in his handling of O'Donnell' ((CH 256)), and used the editorial to distance himself from O'Donnell's strong opinions ((CH 74-75)). Cecil, however, was impressed by O'Donnell's writing and appointed him as a regular columnist. Within a few months, a Jewish businessman was suing the paper for libel. Although Belloc tried to help his young friend, he considered that Cecil had been in the wrong. We have his views expressed in a private letter he wrote to another friend at the time:

"... the detestation of Jewish cosmopolitan influences, especially through finance, is one thing, and one may be right or wrong in feeling that detestation or in the degree to which one admits to it; but mere anti-Semitism and the mere attack on a Jew because he is a Jew is quite another matter, and I told him repeatedly that I thought the things he allowed O'Donnell to publish were unwise and deplorable ... The national term "Jew" had been used simply as a term of abuse, much as a Lower Middle-class American will use the term 'Irish'." ((RS 311)).

Because he had founded the paper, his name was firmly attached to it in the public mind. Out of loyalty to his friend, he couldn't say in public what he felt in private. It would have influenced the Jury. So although completely innocent of the offending article, a reputation of being anti-Semitic dogged him for the rest of his life. O'Donnell had been baptised a Catholic as a baby. But his views should not be accepted as representative of Catholic opinion. A radical Irish nationalist, he had rejected the pacific and moderating advice of the clergy regarding the manner of striving for justice in Ireland. When the majority of the Irish followed the clergy's advice, he became frustrated and ostentatiously flouted Church laws such as Friday abstinence ((KTH 274)). He wrote books accusing the hierarchy of having formed a conspiracy with the British government to the detriment of the Irish ((FHO Vol I and II FHOP)). He persisted with this view all his life and later became convinced that there was also a conspiracy of Jewish international financiers.

Although Cecil Chesterton later became a Catholic, he was an Anglican at the time of the article's publication ((ANW 200)). So the views expressed by these two men neither represented those of Hilaire Belloc nor the Catholic Community. Godfrey Isaacs, the man libelled by O'Donnell, does not appear to have held the Catholic Community guilty of anti-Semitism, as he later became a Catholic ((ANW 200)).

5c. Belloc's Book 'The Jews'

Belloc believed that if the friction between Jew and Gentile in Europe was not resolved, it would lead to a catastrophe ((HBJ 141)). This book contained his analysis of the problem and a proposal for solving it. Much of it was based on ideas he had originally expressed in 'The Eye Witness' ((CH 211-2)). Reviewers, who knew of his earlier anti-Semitism and of his association with those involved in the libel case, jumped to the conclusion that the book would be anti-Jewish. It was therefore immediately labelled 'Anti-Semitic' and not read seriously by the thoughtful type of person for whom it was intended.

When considering this book, a distinction must be made between the many aspects of the complex relationship between Gentile and Jew. Belloc is concerned with the cultural differences. Even when he speaks loosely of "our race", he is obviously merely intending to signify European culture in general ((HBJ 119)). Far from adopting the racist notions fashionable in the 1920s, he mocked the eugenic theories of Gobineau, upon which much of the 20th century Aryan supremacist ideology was based.

Belloc wrote:

"Because an eccentric Frenchman of the name of Gobineau affirmed that the principal virtues derive from a certain stock which he called Germanic (and which, by the way, he found especially pure in the Spanish peasantry!), you cannot, even if this eccentric Frenchman were divinely inspired, make certain that the people living in Germany who did not happen to be Jews are of this peculiar and god-like sort. It is tomfoolery to pretend it. It is racial vanity gone mad." ((HBJ3 xiv)).

Nor is Belloc's thesis theological. Only once does he even mention a 'religious interpretation' of the historical relationship between the peoples of the Old and New Covenants. This was when discussing the Jewish sense of assurance and solidity:

"The religious interpreter of history might say that they had been specially endowed with this sense by Providence because Providence intended them to survive as a national unit miraculously, in the face of every disability; to remain themselves for 2000 years under conditions which would have destroyed any other people in perhaps a century." ((HBJ 115)).

He considered the problem was cultural and his study of history had led him to take a pessimistic view of the future for this persecuted people:

"Now these causes of friction permanently present tend to produce what I have called the tragic cycle: welcome of a Jewish colony, then ill-ease, followed by acute ill-ease, followed by persecution, exile and even massacre. This followed, naturally, by a reaction and the taking up of the process all over again." ((HBJ 141)).

He judged that the stage of ill-ease had been reached in Europe and that:

"Some now alive may live to see riots ...and worse ... in less settled states. Such a catastrophe is to be avoided by every effort in our power ..." ((HBJ141)).

Is it just to criticise Belloc for foreseeing what horrors were coming?

The book was written in 1922, just five years after the Jewish-led Bolshevik revolution in Russia. The future Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Winston S. Churchill, had observed in 1920:

"The part played in the creation of Bolshevism and in the actual bringing about of the Russian Revolution by these international and for the most part atheistical Jews ... is certainly a very great one: it probably out-weighs all others. With the notable exception of Lenin, the majority of the leading figures are Jews. Moreover, the principal inspiration and the driving power comes from Jewish leaders ... The same evil prominence was obtained by the Jews in Hungary and Germany, especially Bavaria ... Although in all these countries there are many non-Jews every whit as bad as the worst of the Jewish revolutionaries, the part played by the latter in proportion to their numbers in the population is astonishing. The fact that in many cases Jewish interests and Jewish places of worship are excepted by the Bolsheviks from their universal hostility has tended more and more to associate the Jewish race in Russia with the villainies which are now being perpetrated' ((WSC 1920)).

Jewish authorities today admit that the Communist revolution in Russia was largely led by Bolshevik and Menshevik Jews ((EJ Vol. 14, page 457)).

It is unjust to single out Belloc and accuse him of anti-Semitism when he was merely discussing facts, which anyone at that time could read in their daily paper. Belloc wrote his book precisely to restrain the anti-Semitic backlash the Communist revolution had caused throughout Europe:

"The Bolshevik Movement was a Jewish movement, but not a movement of the Jewish race as a whole. Most Jews were quite extraneous to it; very many indeed, and those of the most typical, abhor it; many actively combat it. The imputation of its evils to the Jews as a whole is a grave injustice and proceeds from a confusion of thought wherof I, at any rate, am free." ((HBJ 55)).

But he did consider there was an element of truth in the charge that the Jewish Bolsheviks saw, in their destruction of the old Russia, an act of revenge by an oppressed people ((HBJ 169)).

He denied the anti-Semite belief that the Jews were responsible for modern Capitalism ((HBJ 52)). He ridiculed 'The Protocols of The Elders of Sion', a book which was being treated like a 'Bible' by Anti-Semites.

He wrote:

"... these explanations of the Russian revolution are very good specimens of the way in which the European so misunderstands the Jew that he imputes to him powers which neither he nor any other poor mortal can ever exercise. Thus we are asked to believe that this political upheaval was part of one highly-organised plot centuries old, the agents of which were millions of human beings all pledged to the destruction of our society and their acting in complete discipline under a few leaders superhumanly wise! The thing is a nonsense..." ((HBJ 168)).

He wrote that the prejudices of the Anti-Semite become a mania in which he loses all vision. Belloc lampooned a whole range of accusations that had been made against the Jews:

"Thus I have heard on all sides in the last few years these strange assertions proceeding from the same source, yet obviously incompatible one with the other: That modern scepticism was Jewish in its origin; that modern superstition, our modern necromancy and crystal gazing and all the rest of it, was Jewish in its origin; that the evils of democracy are all Jewish in their origin; that the evil of tyrannical government, in Prussia, for instance, was Jewish in its origin; that the pagan perversions of bad modern art were Jewish in their origin; that the puerility of bad church furniture was due to Jewish dealers; that the Great War was the product of Jewish armament firms; that the antipatriotic appeals which weakened the allied armies came from Jewish sources, and so on ... to ascribe the whole boiling to the Jew, and to make him the conscious origin of all, is a contradiction in terms." ((HBJ 150)).

Belloc spent a chapter warning of the power and danger of Anti-Semitism ((HBJ 145-163)), stating that anti-Semites were intellectually contemptible ((HBJ 126)). When Nazism was almost unknown outside Germany, he wrote with uncanny foresight:

"Time and again a hostile force has attempted to eliminate opposition, or even contrast, and eliminate it by every instrument, including massacre itself ... That is the danger which menaces from the phenomenon I have examined in this Chapter." ((HBJ 163)).

Jews were often accused of avarice, cowardice, treason, and the duplicity of assuming false names. Belloc rebutted these charges by asserting that he had found the Jews generous not avaricious ((HBJ 76-7)). They were hard working, only few were rich ((HBJ 84-5)), that drunkenness was rare ((HBJ 79)), and they were not traitorous ((HBJ 78)). He wrote:

"You examine their actions and you find innumerable instances of the highest courage, the greatest generosity and the most devoted loyalty ..." ((HBJ 73)).

He considered it was a mistake for them to use assumed names, but explained why they did so:

"A race scattered, persecuted, often despised, always suspected and nearly always hated by those among whom it moves, is constrained by something like physical force to the use of secret methods. Take the particular trick of false names. It seems to us particularly odious. We think when we show our contempt for those who use this subterfuge that we are giving them no more than they deserve. It is a meanness which we associate with criminals and vagabonds, a piece of crawling and sneaking. But the Jew has other and better motives." ((HBJ 100)).

He quoted a defence provided by a Jewish acquaintance, and was possibly making amends for his earlier 'Lord Swaything' rhyme:

"When we work under our own names you abuse us as Jews. When we work under your names you abuse us as forgers." ((HBJ 100)).

In blaming Gentiles for part of the friction, he lists disingenuousness ((HBJ 131)), unintelligence ((HBJ 134)) and lack of charity:

"The last of the main causes of friction between the Jews and ourselves is lack of charity, and that in the simplest form of refusing to go half way to meet the Jew, and refusing to put ourselves in the shoes of the Jew so as to understand his position in our society and his attitude towards it ((HBJ 138)).

He criticised the error of the anti-Dreyfus campaign, which he, as a young man, had supported. He attacked the extremism on both sides; those who had refused to look at the evidence against the officer and those who had refused to listen to the evidence in his favour, even after the chief prosecution witness had been found guilty of forgery ((HBJ 149)). But in 1925 he was still undecided which side was correct as he felt he didn't have all the facts ((HBN 98, 121 and 214)).

Belloc did sometimes criticise the Jews, as he might do other peoples, but said his purpose was diametrically opposed to that of anti-Semitism. This he made clear in his book:

"... there is a definite line which divides the Anti-Semite from the rest of those who are attempting to solve the Jewish problem. It is the line dividing those whose motive is peace from those whose motive is antagonism. It is the line dividing those whose object is action against the Jew, and those whose object is a settlement." ((HBJ 155)).

Belloc deplored the way in which a man might make the slightest reference to a Jew and then be labelled as an anti-Semite ((HBJ 161)). To speak of 'The Jewish Problem' did not imply that the speaker was anti-Jewish. A person may use the term 'The Irish Problem' without being anti-Irish.

In his book, Belloc next considered the ways normally proposed by Jew and Gentile for solving 'The Jewish Problem'.

A. To deny that it existed. Belloc considered that to refuse to talk about it, for fear of causing offence or of inflaming social harmony, was a short-sighted policy. He considered that it dammed up the latent force of anger against Jewish power, both real and imaginary, and accounts for the high pressure when once it is loosened ((HBJ 264)).

B. To support Zionism. Belloc judged that a Jewish state in Palestine, protected by British troops, would be unwise considering the violent hatreds which had already been aroused by the mere beginnings of the experiment ((HBJ 234)). He also feared that such a state would cause enmity between Christian and Moslem ((HBJ 244)). He described it as:

"... the building of the pyramid upwards from its apex. It is an experiment in the most unstable of unstable equilibriums." ((HBJ 242)).

In a later letter he expanded this simile by writing that it would:

"... only be prevented from falling if the natural effect of gravity is counteracted by someone holding up the sides... For hundreds of miles in every direction there is a Mahomedan world which regards the Zionist experiment as temporary and is determined to destroy it... The quarrel is not to be appeased: it is permanent: and that is why the Zionist experiment, in proportion to its success will be an increasing anxiety to this country." ((RS 445)).

But he didn't object to the principle of there being a Jewish state:

"But if a Jewish state was established, being inhabited wholly or mainly by men of the Jewish race, religion and culture, and defended by a Jewish army, then it might succeed." ((HBJ 242-4)).

He was probably thinking of a state in Argentina or Uganda, the possibility of which had been seriously considered within Zionist circles ((EJ 1044-6)). He was worried however, that the existence of a separate Jewish state would undermine the security of Jews remaining in other countries. He feared that its existence would encourage anti-Semites to urge the expulsion of all Jews to that state ((HBJ 238)).

C. To be assimilated into the Gentiles. He said that not all Jews wished to see the end of their identity, so this was not a practical option ((HBJ 291-4)).

D. To segregate within Gentile states. He said that this historically common 'solution' in the past, had been imposed by the Gentiles and its manner had been unjust to the Jew ((HBJ 109)). The Jews had not been given separate status but inferior status ((HBJ 110)).

He considered that the greatest responsibility for solving the problem fell on the Gentile majority, and it was in the main their fault if an equilibrium had rarely been reached over sixty generations ((HBJ 249-50)). Unless a just solution was found, the Jew would continue to be driven from country to country ((HBJ 251-2)). He proposed, for discussion amongst Jews and Gentiles, a new way of providing a secure and permanent settlement. He expressed an outline of this in a private letter written in January 1916. It serves as a summary of the proposals he later put forward in his book;

"My own attitude is quite clear. The Jewish nation ought to be recognised as a nation in some way or another, with all the advantages and disadvantages that follow from the recognition of any truth. I express that policy in the word privilege. Where there is conscription the obvious bargain would be not to submit Jews to military service. In England, where there is no conscription, I would have a registration and charters, Jewish Courts and so on. But all that is mere Utopia. The wretched misunderstanding will work its way fatally as it has worked its way twice before in European history.

The simple solution of absorption neither has nor can succeed. There is some fate against it. After every great period of financial power in the hands of a few Jews (the mass of the nation is absurdly poor) that power wanes and then there is no check upon the bad passions which the friction between the races allows. Not one educated man in a hundred has any appreciation of the past history of all this and that is why it is so difficult to give an effective warning. Most to blame in my opinion are those, especially in England and France, who say the vilest things about the Jews behind their backs, never make a real friend of a Jew, gloat over their misfortunes, and yet accept their hospitality and pretend to mix with them as though there were no racial or cultural problem at all." ((RS 453-4)).

5d. Why was Belloc's book condemned?

Any answer to this question must be one of speculation rather than fact. In the early part of this century the migration of millions of Jews, from Russia to America and Western Europe, was still under way. Their oriental characteristics, language, customs, dress, food, politics, habits, and education, as well as religion, made them very distinctive amongst the urban western Gentiles. This led to friction. Most Jews favoured a policy of deliberate assimilation, which involved becoming as much like the host community as possible. They felt the need to prove to their new countrymen that they were loyal citizens, as being essential for the defeat of discrimination and anti-Semitism. Orthodox Jews, feeling bound to retain their traditional religious practices, and avoid complete assimilation, were also keen to stress their loyalty as citizens. But Zionist Jews, who were mainly non-religious, saw Judaism as a race rather than a religion. They rejected assimilation and, while calling for a national home in Palestine, also advocated a distinct Jewish identity in their host countries. A summary of German Zionist views will indicate how closely they were in agreement with Belloc's diagnosis of the problem.

Zionists saw assimilation as the chief enemy of the Jews because it threatened to disfigure and perhaps smother Jewish life. Zionists had 'come to believe that the preservation of Jewishness depended on abolishing all but formal ties with Germany.' ((DLN 126)). A Zionist publication explained; 'The more intensively the Jew assimilates himself, the more deeply and rapidly he interferes with a nation's spiritual life; his role in poetry, politics, and the arts is widely acknowledged.

Since the Jew has fulfilled his obligations to the state, even to the point of sacrificing his life for it, propriety dictates that these tensions remain unstated and, in good times, tolerated. But in times of distress, they come to light on every side... Then only the incitement of hateful agitation is required for these tensions to be converted into rage: the catastrophic release is found.' ((DLN 127)). 'As German Zionists saw it, anti-Jewish prejudices were deeply implanted in primitive instincts and emotions and hence constituted permanent fixtures of life in the Diaspora'. ((DLN 127)). '...emancipation could only be a passing phase, a superficial facade hiding eternal hostility.' ((DLN 128)). Zionism claimed that: 'Its establishment of an independent, self-reliant Jewry separated from the rest of society would win the respect and even sympathy of non-Jews, the best of whom instinctively sensed that Jews did not belong with them.' ((DLN 128)).

A leading Zionist wrote: "When the Jews have nothing more to hide and actually step forward as Jews, the greater part of anti-Semitism will disappear, especially the abnormal and least supportable part of it. Proclaiming: 'unswerving cultivation of German sentiment' does nothing to counteract Judeophobia; on the contrary, it only makes non-Jews even more suspicious. A decent non-Jew cannot understand why the Jew, whose specific characteristics are obvious ...wants to compensate with such loud assertions of German nationality." ((DLN 128-9)). Jews were a pure race and intermarriage was a threat to the 'racial purity of stock' ((DLN 129)).

Zionists did not repudiate the duties of Jews as citizens since they distinguished between nationality and state ((DLN 142)). They said the German constitution should acknowledge the special rights of ethnic groups like the Jews. The Jewish division of nationality and state would make the Jews better citizens ((DLN 142)). Some Zionists considered that Jews should immediately abstain from voting in German elections ((DLN 143)).

Disputes between assimilationist and Zionist Jews could be very bitter. Those who were assimilationists became extremely sensitive to the slightest hint that they were not as 'German' or 'French' or as loyal and patriotic as anyone else. Yet the Zionists were making public statements, which the Gentiles could hear, that Jews could never be true Germans or French etc. and should give their first loyalty to their own Jewish race and culture.

The close similarity between Belloc's diagnosis of the situation and its cure, and that of some Zionists is very obvious. So many assimilationist Jews in England and America were infuriated when Belloc touched so bluntly on this highly sensitive issue within the Jewish community. At the same time, Belloc's lack of confidence in the practicality of a Palestinian Jewish state prevented him from receiving sympathy from the Zionists.

Many anti-Semites were promoting hatred towards Jews under the cloak of using Zionist arguments. And because Belloc had an unjustly deserved reputation for anti-Semitism, he was condemned as one of these.

Belloc had analysed the deep psychological fear and dislike, often unexpressed, of Gentiles towards Jews, but seems to have been blind to the emotional pressures within American and British Jewry. This accounts for his being completely unprepared for the way in which the book was received. 'Belloc was saddened when a Jewish friend said his people would not read it.' ((RS 455)). Belloc's book, as was his norm for this type of composition, was written in a cold, factual, blunt and rational manner, while aiming at a long-term solution. His potential assimilationist readers, newly arrived as immigrants, were living in an atmosphere of immediate emotional anxiety and tension. Belloc had blundered into an area where there were

many raw nerves. Unfortunately, in the emotionally charged atmosphere of the times, few people were willing to read the book in a reflective manner.

"'The Jews' was a desperate appeal to Christians ... not to fall prey to the anti-Semitic hysteria that threatened to consume Europe and actually did consume Germany and part of France." ((KGL 237)). Historians may question Belloc's interpretation of events. They will certainly dispute as to whether his ideas for a possible, solution, were wise or not. Catholics are certainly not tied to his approach. But for one of the few Gentile authors who had produced a book to combat anti-Semitism, to be labeled as being anti-Semitic, is most ironic.

5e. Further aspects

Belloc dedicated his book about the Jews to Miss Ruby Goldsmith. She was a Jewess who became his full-time secretary in late 1908 ((RS 241)). As he dictated books and articles continually, Ruby became part of his household and accompanied him as he travelled around the country ((RS 242)). She stayed with him for 14 years ((HVT 196)) until she emigrated to America. When Belloc's wife died, it was natural for Ruby to accompany the children for a holiday ((ANW 213)). They continued to keep in touch with one another ((ANW 272)).

On a visit to America in 1923, Belloc was met by calls for his deportation because of his alleged anti-Semitism. Yet a Jew, who knew Belloc well, gave him a public dinner ((RS 456)). In a letter home, Belloc reported:

"The Jew question is a fearful bore over here. People talk of it morning, noon and night.

Those who know I have written a book on it take it for granted that I am in approval of a general massacre, which is the usual extreme confusion the Americans reach when they have worked themselves up on the matter, while the very much smaller number who have actually read my book, disagree with its judicial tone; they want blood and thunder ...it makes the life of the mass of Jews here, who are poor, very hard. Magistrates are ... biased against them, they are insulted in public and refused entry to Clubs and even hotels and in general made to feel that they are enemies. What a life !" ((RS 455)).

Belloc frequently used the word 'Yid', and today such usage may imply anti-Semitism. But Belloc was writing in the early part of the century. The Jews immigrating to Western Europe and America spoke Yiddish, which was a thousand year old language ((EJ Vol. 16 790)), that had been formed from a blending of German and Hebrew and possessed a rich literature.

At least as early as 1874, this word was being used colloquially in England when referring to a person speaking Yiddish. It was not considered to be pejorative ((EP Vol I)). Jews themselves used the term very frequently ((TOED Vol XX 742)).

As anti-Semitism grew in the 1920s and 1930s the word came to be associated with people who hated Jews. Those not wishing to be associated with anti-Semitism found it prudent not to use the word. Belloc had always argued that those under attack should not hide their name, descent, culture or beliefs, but meet their detractors head-on. So he resisted pressure to cease using the word. Three years after his book was published, a song by J.Yellen entitled 'My Yiddishe Momma' became a popular 'hit' in America and Britain, without complaints from the Jewish Community.

Most people would consider Belloc's bluntness as being unwise, but it was Belloc's way, stubbornness was part of his nature. This may be illustrated by an incident in 1906, when he was standing for election as a Liberal in a closely fought Tory seat. The supporters of his opponent, knowing there was much anti-Catholic feeling in the town, chanted: "Don't vote for a Frenchman and a Catholic", and wrote similar slogans on walls. Just prior to a big meeting, the local Catholic clergy advised Belloc not to be too militantly Catholic and to avoid mentioning religion in his speech. Belloc on mounting the platform to address a packed audience spoke as follows:

"Gentlemen, I am a Catholic. As far as possible I go to Mass every day. This (taking a rosary from out of his pocket) is a rosary. As far as possible, I kneel down and tell these beads every day. If you reject me on account of my religion, I shall thank God that He has spared me the indignity of being your representative."

There was a hush of astonishment, followed by a thunderclap of applause ((RS 204)). So he was being consistent when he continued to use a word even though, in the minds of many, it was losing its innocent connotation.

He, like the Zionists, considered that the Jews should not hide their cultural identity, but proclaim it. Many considered he lacked prudence, but this was Belloc's way. Confirmation that he did not use the word 'Yid' in a derogatory manner, may be seen from his description of his book on the Jews. He referred to it as his 'admirable Yid book' ((ANW 188 and 259)). He was eager for Jews as well as responsible Gentiles to read it, so as to promote a friendly dialogue between the two Communities. He would therefore not have used the word with the intention of causing offence.

He has been accused of using the word 'parasite' to describe Jews. This sounds unforgiveable, until we read the context in which it appeared.

For over a thousand years the Jews provided the services of banking, accountancy and money lending to European society. The Jews needed to live within a large Gentile host community so as to be able to carry out these functions. The Gentiles needed the minute Community of Jews in their society because Gentiles did not specialise in this work. Christians were restricted to some extent by Church laws regarding the receipt of interest. In a serious piece of writing concerned with the historic social position held by Jews in Europe, he used the biological metaphor 'parasite' to describe this symbiotic economic relationship. As in nature, the relationship was of benefit to both Communities. Belloc was not using the term in a pejorative sense ((KGL 232)).

When a man lives for 83 years, publishes 156 books and publications on a very wide range of subjects, produces millions of words at high speed, for countless articles, composes hundreds of rhymes and is extremely forthright and blunt in his language, it is always possible to find the odd expression somewhere which may be quoted out of context.

In February 1924, he wrote to an American Jewish friend regarding an anti-Semitic book by Nesta Webster. She had rejected Christianity, studied eastern beliefs, accepted the Hindu concept of the equality of all religions and was fascinated by theories of reincarnation and ancestral memory ((NW 103 and 172-5)). Belloc expressed his views very clearly:

"In my opinion it is a lunatic book. She is one of those people who have got one cause on the brain. It is the good old Jewish revolutionary bogey. But there is a type of unstable mind which cannot rest without morbid imaginings, and the conception of a single cause simplifies thought. With this good woman it is the Jews, with some people it is the Jesuits, with others Freemasons and so on. The world is more complex than that." ((RS 456)).

Belloc praised Jewish schools, charities, institutions and other organisations. He considered the Jewish press 'an excellent thing' even though he had had to protest against the way it had treated his ideas ((HBJ 272-3)). He was invited to lecture to Jewish audiences ((ANW 188)). When the third edition of 'The Jews' was published in 1937, he took the opportunity to condemn Hitler's treatment of the Jews in Germany ((HBJ3, XL-XLI)).

I has been written elsewhere:

"If the charge of anti-Semitism is to be considered a grave one, and it should be, then it cannot be thrown around as freely as it now is." The charge ...should be restricted to those who truly deserve it, meaning those who sincerely and consistently wish to harm the Jewish people per se." ((DW 23)).

6. A WIDE RANGE OF INTERESTS

This publication is not a biography of Belloc, nor a review of his literary accomplishments. It is limited to the writings and events regarding which allegations have been made. It must be remembered, however, that he wrote 156 books, including 14 first class novels, 13 biographies and 38 historical works-including:

BIOGRAPHY: James II; Cranmar; Wolsey; Cromwell; Elizabeth I; William the Conqueror; The Last Rally (Charles II); etc.

RELIGION: The Great Heresies; How the Reformation Happened; Survivals and New Arrivals; etc.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL: The Servile State (A political economy to free mankind from the slavery of Capitalism and Socialism); By the Mercy of Allah (An attack on Money-Power); etc.

Travel: The Path To Rome (A walk from northern France to Rome); The Cruise of The Nona (Around the Coast of England); etc.

General: The Bad Child's Book of Beasts; More Beasts (For Worse Children); three books of verse etc.

For a list see: 'The Life of Hilaire Belloc' ((RS 391-396)).

7. EUROPE AND THE FAITH

The 'Official History' taught at the Universities in Belloc's early years, might have been summarized by him as:

'The English people derive their character and their institutions from Saxon tribes settled in these islands during the fifth century A.D. In spite of being conquered and converted by the Romans, they retained only a small part of these foreign influences and it was not until they cast them off that they became a united and powerful people, and eventually a great imperial power. In throwing off the yoke of the Roman See [The Pope] they established the national character of their religion, and in getting rid of the Stuarts [James II] they laid the foundations of the Parliamentary and social democracy which is flourishing today, both in the British Commonwealth and in the United States' ((RS 412)).

In his book 'Europe and the Faith', published in 1920, Belloc set out a completely different version of England's history. He stated that English culture, including her legal system, administration, education and the roots of democracy, had been formed during the 1500 years she was an integral part of a united Catholic Europe (Christendom). While official history minimised the impact of Catholicism on European civilisation and treated it as an accidental item, Belloc stressed that it had built European civilisation and was its heart.

He asserted that this was not merely the adoption of Catholic forms of worship, theology and moral principles, but included the legal system of ancient Rome and the architecture and cultural heritage of ancient Greece, which the Church had accepted, absorbed, adapted and spread. He pointed out that parliaments did not originate in a dim and possibly barbaric past, but were certainly and plainly monastic in origin and originally arose in Spain ((HBE 15 and 150)). He said that the university, which was the fundamental institution of Europe, had developed in Italy, and via Paris spread to all Europe including England. He pointed out that the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain brought pagan destruction of a Catholic civilisation, which had to be rebuilt.

The Reformation of the 16th century was presented, in the officially sponsored state history, as a glorious and liberating step forward. Yet Belloc saw it as a monumental tragedy that had rent a united Europe apart for 300 years in fratricidal wars. It had been integral to the formation of isolated nationalistic states, ruled by a few greedy men. This disaster had now led to the collapse of Christian belief and civilisation throughout Europe.

Belloc asserted that Europe must return to that unity in the Faith, or European civilisation would perish ((HBE 186 and 192)). To emphasis this view, he coined a slogan: 'The Faith is Europe - Europe is The Faith'.

This was a strong and sweeping statement, composed by a publicist, perhaps better described as a propagandist and preacher. It was meant to awaken the people of England from their narrow view of the world and Christianity. To be understood it must be seen in this context. Some critics have condemned Belloc for this statement because they declare that the Catholic Faith is not to be tied to European culture. They say it should be a way of life for all mankind, and they point to the strenuous efforts being undertaken today, in Africa, Asia and elsewhere, to eliminate the European cultural appearance of the Church. But the fact that this is so necessary implicitly endorses Belloc's slogan. Up till the time he was writing, the Church had been wearing a European face. Belloc, himself, answered his critics on this matter in a letter to the Catholic Herald in 1936:

"I have never said that the Church was necessarily European. The Church will last for ever, and, on this earth, until the end of the world; and our remote descendants may find its chief membership to have passed to Africans or Asiatics in some civilisation yet unborn. What I have said is that the European thing is essentially a Catholic thing, and that European values would disappear with the disappearance of Catholicism." ((RS 387)).

8. COMMENT

A reading the books, articles and letters by Belloc, within the context, times and issues, of his day, always bearing in mind that he had little time to read over his works to make revisions prior to printing, shows him to have been a perceptive and refreshingly independent thinker. As a journalist he was a mould breaking non-professional historian. Accusations that Belloc saw the Church from a narrowly European viewpoint, or that he was a life-long fanatical anti-Semite, are unjustified. The open and militant profession and assertion of his Faith may not have suited those of other temperaments. His bluntness may not have made him popular in the ecumenical climate of today. But he would no doubt argue that his was a permissible form of expression in a civil society and church community, which pride themselves on being pluralistic and open to fresh ideas.

REFERENCES (Page numbers in text)

ANW Hilaire Belloc by A.N.Wilson,1984.

CH ... Anti-Semitism in British society 1876-1939, C. Holmes, 1979.

DLN The Jews In Weimar Germany by D.L.Niewyk, 1980.

DW Article in FIDELITY by David Wagner, July 1986.

EJ Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971.

EP A Dictionary of Slang by Eric Partridge, 1937.

FHO History of Irish Parliamentary Party by F.H.O'Donnell, 1910.

- FHOP** .. The Price of a Political Priesthood by F.H.O'Donnell. c1910.
- HBE** Europe and The Faith by Hilaire Belloc, 1920, 1962.
- HBJ** The Jews by Hilaire Belloc, 1922.
- HBJ3** The Jews (3rd Edition) by Hilaire Belloc, 1937.
- HBN** The Cruise Of The Nona by Hilaire Belloc, 1925.
- HVT** Hilaire Belloc by H. Van Thal, 1970.
- JMB** Hilaire Belloc by J.B.Morton (Catholic Book Club Edition).
- KGL** ... Article in Faith & Reason by K.G.Long, Vol XII, 1986.
- KTH** ... Elections, Politics & Society in Ireland by K.T.Hoppen, 1984.
- MW** Gilbert Keith Chesterton by Maisie Ward, 1944.
- NW** Spacious Days by Nesta Webster, 1950.
- RS** The Life Of Hilaire Belloc by R. Speaight, 1957.
- TOED** .. The Oxford English Dictionary, 1989.
- WSC** ... W. S. Churchill in Illustrated Sunday Herald 8th February 1920.

For free Downloads of books by Belloc and Chesterton see our left-hand column.

www.churchinhistory.org

This version: 23rd September 2014