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## **Deronda and the Tigress: Judaism, Buddhism, and Universal Compassion In George Eliot's Daniel Deronda**

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Joshua Frank Moats entitled "Deronda and the Tigress: Judaism, Buddhism, and Universal Compassion In George Eliot's Daniel Deronda." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Nancy Henry, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Allen Dunn, Dawn Coleman

Accepted for the Council:

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**Deronda and the Tigress:  
Judaism, Buddhism, and Universal Compassion  
In George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda***

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Joshua Frank Moats

August 2012

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## ABSTRACT

Many scholars have discussed Judaism and the ethics of George Eliot in *Daniel Deronda*, but few have explored the impact of Buddhism upon the novel. This thesis is the first study to demonstrate the influence of Buddhism upon George Eliot's fiction. By tracing Eliot's interest in the emerging field of comparative religion, I argue that Buddhism offered Eliot a unique religion that was compatible with her secular humanism. Although Buddhism appears explicitly in *Deronda* in only a few instances, I contend that Eliot uses the tradition of Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalism as the predominate theology in *Deronda* because it contains many affinities with Buddhism, most notably the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. Mordecai interprets the transmigration of souls as a teleological justification for Jewish nationalism, but I assert that for Eliot, the transmigration of souls challenges national boundaries and instead promotes a universal compassion that extends to all cultures. I argue that Eliot employs many voices of Jewish dissent in *Deronda* to illustrate the difficulty of reconciling cultural heritage with universal compassion strictly in terms of Judaism, and then I draw upon a metaphor in which Eliot compares Deronda to the Buddha to suggest that Deronda and his mission to re-establish Israel are antithetical to Eliot's vision of universal compassion.

Chapter one reviews *Deronda* scholarship about Judaism, including work by Edward Said, Amanda Anderson, and Nancy Henry. This chapter reads these scholars in terms of particular Eliot letters, notes, and moments in *Deronda* and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* and asserts that Jewish nationalism in *Deronda* precludes universal compassion. Chapter two chronicles Eliot's adoption of secular humanism and then argues that Buddhism offers both the cultural solidarity that Eliot prizes in Judaism as well as the universal compassion inherent in Eliot's secular humanism. The conclusion of this thesis asserts that the renunciation of the ego in Buddhism attracts Eliot, and it proposes that contextualizing *Deronda* in terms of Eliot's conceptions of Buddhism helps resolve some of the tension between Judaism and compassion in the novel.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

John Lord once wrote in *Beacon Lights of History* (1883) that George Eliot “writes almost like a follower of the Buddha. The individual soul is absorbed into the universal whole... the great problems of existence are invested with gloom as well as mystery” (Lord 4: 388-89).<sup>1</sup> Lord’s comments at first seem eccentric. After all, Eliot never professed herself to be a Buddhist, and by all accounts, she never corresponded with any Buddhists. Lord, however, claims that his basis for associating Eliot with Buddhism lies in Eliot’s ethics of compassion and renunciation. He observes that Maggie Tulliver in *Mill on the Floss* (1860) “is only rescued by a supreme effort of self-renunciation—a principle which runs through all of George Eliot’s novels in which we see the doctrines of Buddha rather than those of Paul, although at times they seem to run into each other” (Lord 4: 369). Lord specifically categorizes Eliot’s ideas about renunciation as Buddhist, but he also observes that Buddhism shares some affinities with Christianity. Thus, Buddhism for Lord is not simply an exotic superstition practiced in the Far East; it is a religious system congruent with some aspects of Western theology. A couple of crucial questions thus arise from Lord’s comments: how do Buddhist ethics of compassion intersect with Western religions during the Victorian era, and why did George Eliot integrate Buddhism into the ethical paradigms of her fiction?

Compassion and renunciation are not unique to Buddhism. All major world religions incorporate compassion and renunciation into their mythologies. Lord,

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<sup>1</sup> Lord was an American historian and theologian who graduated from Dartmouth in 1833. His *Beacon Lights of History* consists of fourteen volumes that attempt to analyze the influence of numerous intellectuals throughout history. In volume four, he analyzes Eliot’s contributions to literature.

however, asserts that Buddhism offers a unique, non-theistic paradigm of compassion that complements Eliot's agnostic humanism: "In [Middlemarch] is brought out the blended stoicism, humanitarianism, Buddhism, and agnosticism of the author. She paints "the struggle of noble natures, struggling vainly against the currents of a poor kind of world, without trust in an invisible Rock higher than themselves" (Lord 381). According to Lord, Buddhism therefore contains an ethical system that emphasizes compassion and renunciation *without* any necessary presumption of a deity. Eliot endorses this humanistic version of God in an 1874 letter to Mrs. Frederick Ponsonby:

But I fear that any such limited considerations as I could put before you... could hardly have much more efficacy than what you have found in my books, which have for their main bearing a conclusion the opposite of that in which your studies seem to have painfully imprisoned you—a conclusion without which I could not have cared to write any representation of life—namely, that the fellowship between man and man which has been the principle of development, social and moral, is not dependent on conceptions of what is not man: and that the idea of God, so far as it has been a high spiritual influence, is the ideal of a goodness entirely human (i.e., an exaltation of the human). (*GEL* 6: 98)

According to Eliot, the entire purpose of her literature is to foster universal compassion between all men and to eradicate any notion of the Divine that does not derive from the Goodness of men. Buddhism, according to Lord, therefore offers Eliot a religious system purged of God that grounds its ethics upon human compassion and the renunciation of the ego rather than divine edict.



Eliot first incorporates Buddhism into her fiction in *Middlemarch* when the narrator compares Celia's baby (Arthur) to the Buddha: "We should not grieve, should we, baby?" said Celia confidently to the unconscious centre and poise of the world, who had the most remarkable fists... and hair enough, really, when you took his cap off, to make—you didn't know what—in short, he was Bouddha in Western form" (*Middlemarch* 468). Eliot then wrote of the passage to Mrs. Congreve in 1872: "Four or five months ago it happens that I was writing some *playfulness* [my emphasis] about a baby and a baby's hair, which is now in print" (*GEL* 5: 288). Eliot's facetious tone in the *Middlemarch* passage and her admission to playfulness in the letter appear to distance her from any serious engagement with Buddhist ethics, but nevertheless, Eliot refers to Arthur twice more as the Buddha in *Middlemarch* with less playful intonations. In chapter fifty-four, Dorothea is unable to recognize Arthur as the "Bouddha" (508), and in chapter eighty-four, Arthur "was being drawn in his chariot, and, as became the infantine Bouddha, was sheltered by his sacred umbrella" (775). Eliot's comparison of Arthur with the Buddha in *Middlemarch* does not seem to indicate any significant impact on the ethics of Eliot, but the passages with Arthur and the Buddha do reveal that Eliot is familiar with Buddhist lore. Arthur's ride in a chariot with the sacred umbrella shows that Eliot knows the Buddha was a prince, and her choice of the word "poise" to connect Arthur with the Buddha demonstrates that she is familiar with the Buddhist virtue of equanimity. Thus, she only invokes Buddhism as a playful way to characterize Arthur in *Middlemarch*, but her implicit interest in Buddhist lore portends the substantial role that Buddhism will play in the ethical framework of her final novel: *Daniel Deronda*.

Eliot engages with Buddhism in *Deronda* most explicitly in chapter thirty-seven when Mirah compares Deronda to the Buddha: “Mr. Hans said yesterday that you thought so much of others you hardly wanted anything for yourself. He told us a wonderful story of Bouddha giving himself to the famished tigress to save her and her little ones from starving. And he said you were like Bouddha. That is what we all imagine of you” (*Deronda* 399). Eliot draws her inspiration for this passage from a Buddhist legend in Eugene Burnouf’s *Introduction to Indian Buddhism* (1844):

A young Brahman who has retired into the depths of a forest to give himself over, in the interest of living beings... gives his body as food to a starving tigress that just gave birth to cubs. At the moment of committing this heroic sacrifice, he exclaims: ‘How true it is that I do not abandon life for kingship, or for the enjoyments of pleasure, or for the rank of Sakra, or for that of sovereign monarch, but rather to reach the supreme state of a perfectly accomplished buddha.

(Burnouf 185-186)

The Brahman’s driving desire is not the political aspirations of an exclusive culture but rather the enactment of a universal compassion for all living things—a perfectly accomplished Buddha. Mirah attributes these qualities of renunciation and compassion to Deronda, but Deronda rejects the analogy. He contends that the Buddhist legend underestimates personal desire and that the myth “is like a passionate word... the exaggeration is a flash of fervor. It is an extreme image of what is happening every day—the transmutation of self,” (*Deronda* 400). Eliot’s decision to juxtapose the Buddha with Deronda suggests that Buddhism plays a crucial role in understanding the ethical message of *Deronda*, since Deronda participates in many of the major ethical

decisions in the novel. His refusal to compare himself with the Buddha creates tension between the ethics of Deronda and Buddhism, and given the Buddha's status as a supremely ethical man, Eliot's decision to juxtapose the two figures most likely critiques Deronda's compassion.

This essay argues that Eliot uses the explicit Buddhist metaphor in chapter thirty-seven of *Deronda* and the implicit Buddhism in Mordecai's Kabbalism to denounce the exclusivist ethics of Jewish Nationalism. Buddhism alleviates the tension between universal compassion, cosmopolitanism, and cultural heritage in Eliot's vision of Jewish ethics by introducing renunciation as a technique to dissolve exclusivism while still cherishing cultural heritage. For Eliot, genuine compassion derives from renouncing personal desires in favor of an inclusive compassion for those least similar to oneself: "There is nothing I should care more to do... than rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs" (*GEL* 6: 302). An ethical person must remain, however, grounded in a specific cultural heritage and not succumb to a soulless cosmopolitanism. Judaism offers a religion that cherishes cultural heritage, but the exclusivism of Mordecai in *Deronda* celebrates compassion for those *most* similar to oneself and thus precludes universal compassion. Buddhism for Eliot, on the other hand, presents a religion that renounces egoistic desires and extends compassion to all cultures by avoiding the concept of God and transcending cultural boundaries. Anyone may practice the universal compassion of Buddhism without sacrificing cultural heritage or encroaching upon the political autonomy of others.

This essay contends that Eliot presents Buddhism in *Deronda* not as a superior religion to Judaism but rather as a supplemental belief system to combat exclusivism and facilitate universal compassion. Chapter one explores Judaism in *Deronda* in terms of the tension between cultural heritage and exclusivism. It argues that Eliot endorses Judaism for its emphasis on cultural heritage, but she does not condone the exclusiveness of Mordecai and Deronda. Eliot applauds the Jewish ability to retain a cultural identity amid the cosmopolitanism of Victorian England, but Deronda's decision to abandon Gwendolen reflects for Eliot the dangers of a religious outlook that promotes exclusivism rather than universal compassion. Chapter two chronicles Eliot's progression into secular humanism, and it argues that Eliot chose Kabbalism as the paradigm for Judaism in *Deronda* because Kabbalism shares numerous affinities with Buddhism. Many Victorian scholars familiar to Eliot credit the historical origins of the Kaballah to Buddhism. Finally, the conclusion asserts that contextualizing Judaism in *Deronda* in terms of Buddhist influence helps resolve some of the conflicts in the novel between exclusivism and universal compassion.

## Chapter II: Judaism, Collective Memory, and Universal Compassion

Eliot's decision to feature Jewish characters in *Daniel Deronda* was not particularly bold. After all, many of her contemporaries, such as Trollope and Dickens, included Jewish characters. But as Amanda Anderson observes in "George Eliot and the Jewish Question" (1997), Eliot was the first popular novelist to portray Jews as the norm rather than the marginalized minority (Anderson 44). This reversal of cultural power mystified many of Eliot's readers because her sympathy for Judaism in *Deronda* finds little precedent in any of her previous novels. In fact, Eliot seemed antagonistic toward Jews earlier in her life, as evinced by an 1848 letter to John Sibree:

My Gentile nature kicks most resolutely against any assumption of superiority in the Jews... Their stock has produced a Moses and a Jesus, but Moses was impregnated with Egyptian philosophy and Jesus is venerated and adored by us only for that wherein he transcended or resisted Judaism... Everything *specifically* Jewish is of a low grade. (*GEL* 1: 246-247)

Eliot's letter to Mr. Sibree seems unequivocal in its contempt for Judaism, and yet twenty-eight years later in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe on October 29, 1876, Eliot seems to have completely reversed her position:

Towards the Hebrews we Western people... have a peculiar debt. Can there be anything more disgusting than to hear people called 'educated'... showing themselves empty of any real knowledge as to the relation of their own social and religious life to the history of [Judaism]? They hardly know Christ was a Jew.

And I find men educated at Rugby supposing that Christ spoke Greek.<sup>2</sup> (*GEL* 6: 302)

Eliot never explained the reasons behind her transition from antagonism toward Jews in the Sibree letter to sympathy for Jews in *Deronda*. In an 1870 letter to Frederick Harrison, however, Eliot reflects upon *why* she avoids making explicit statements regarding the Jews: “I shrink from decided ‘deliverances’ on momentous subjects, from the dread of coming to swear by my own ‘deliverances’ and sinking into an insistent echo of myself. That is a horrible destiny—and one cannot help seeing that many of the most powerful men fall into it” (*GEL* 5: 76). Eliot’s aversion to “decided deliverances” and her subsequent condemnation of those who swear by their own deliverances introduces egoism as vice in her ethical paradigm. To avoid egoistic deliverances about the Jews, Eliot defers to David Kaufmann and his work of criticism *George Eliot and Judaism* (1877) as “the perfect response to the artist’s intention” (*GEL* 6: 379). Eliot in particular applauds Kaufmann’s “Clear perception of the relation between the presentation of the Jewish element and those of English Social life” (*GEL* 6: 379). This relation between the Jews and the English gentiles mirrors the tension in *Deronda* between Deronda and Gwendolen, and thus, Kaufmann’s work offers a logical place to begin exploring compassion in terms of Eliot’s Judaism in *Deronda*.

In his criticism, Kaufmann describes the nineteenth century as a time of awakening for a collective Jewish spirit whose national consciousness will only find

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<sup>2</sup> Eliot’s condemnation of Rugby intellectuals who speculate that Christ spoke Greek situates her within the mid-nineteenth century debate about the origins and cultural heritage of Jesus. Many continental thinkers proposed non-Jewish narratives for Christ to marginalize the impact of Jews on European culture and to foster anti-Semitism. Buddhist influence upon Jesus was one of the most popular narratives. See Emile Burnouf’s *The Science of Religion* (1872) and Max Muller’s *Lectures on the Science of Religion* (1872).

satisfaction in the re-establishment of Israel. He recounts how the Jews lost their homeland to the Romans (Kaufmann 4), and he argues that centuries of Jewish dispersion eroded the “definite consciousness of national vocation” (9). He asserts that a quest for “Universal Humanity” had dominated European intellectual conversations in the eighteenth century and that nationality did not reemerge as a popular idea until the French Revolution (Kaufmann 10-11). He observes that many gentile Europeans in the early nineteenth century began to question the national allegiance of the Jews, who maintained a culture distinct from their host countries, and advancements in science and proto-genetics spawned theories of European racial superiority (12). This classification of the Jews by the gentiles as a separate nationality spurred the Jews to reflect on their own sense of national unity (13). Kaufmann contends that this longing for unity reignited religious passion in many Jews and transformed Palestine from a geographical location into the soul of the Jewish people (16), and he asserts that the Jewish people will only find satisfaction by reclaiming Israel (16-20)

Kaufmann commends several English writers for attempting to explore the complexities of Judaism, citing characters such as Shylock (*Merchant of Venice*), Rebecca (*Ivanhoe*), and Riah (*Our Mutual Friend*) (Kaufmann 21-22). He reserves the greatest encomium, however, for George Eliot and *Daniel Deronda*. Kaufmann praises Eliot for her poetic insight into Judaism, but he also adds that she “perceives with the prophetic eye of genius the proper *moment* [my emphasis] for answering the fundamental questions of Judaism” (20). A crucial term in Kaufmann’s compliment is “moment.” Given that Kaufmann believes that his Jewish contemporaries are on the verge of re-establishing Israel, Kaufmann’s attention to the “timing” of *Daniel Deronda* implies that

he perceives the novel to ally itself with Jewish Nationalism. Kaufmann makes this inference most explicit when he claims:

None but a poetess cunning to transform *convictions into motives, and thoughts into actions* would have ventured to animate her work with a sentiment so strange and even unintelligible to the majority of the cultivated as the longing of the Jews for the re-establishment of their kingdom. (Kaufmann 26)

Kaufmann views Mordecai as a prophet for the re-establishment of Israel (Kaufmann 56), despite Mordecai's death at the end of the novel, but he also adds, "Remembering the Jewish day begins in the evening, [Eliot] has chosen to delay her hero's sunrise, and has shown him to us first by the play of moonbeams" (Kaufmann 56). Thus, for Kaufmann, Deronda becomes the herald for a new Israel once Mordecai dies, and Eliot endorses this political movement.

Kaufmann makes a compelling case that Eliot sympathizes with Jewish culture in *Deronda*, but his inferences regarding Eliot's endorsement of the Jewish political movement to re-establish Israel contain several unrealistic assumptions. First, Kaufmann asserts that European interest in the concept of "Universal Humanity" waned at the end of the eighteenth century (Kaufmann 10). Nationalism did become popular in conjunction with early nineteenth-century theories of race, but several prominent thinkers whom Eliot revered (Arnold, Muller) still maintained the philosophical possibilities of a borderless, unified culture. Also, Eliot in her letter to Kaufmann commends the *relationship* between the "Jewish element" and English social life (*GEL* 6:379). Her juxtaposition of the Jews and the English in terms of a "relationship" suggests a common culture between the two groups rather than the innate separateness that Kaufmann's rhetoric for



nationalism seems to imply. In addition, Eliot mentions neither the re-establishment of Israel nor the political status of Jews in her letter to Kaufmann. She focuses most of her letter upon cross-cultural compassion and sympathy: “[Kaufmann’s essay] has affected me deeply, and though the prejudice and ignorant obtuseness which has met my effort to contribute something to the ennobling of Judaism in the conception of the Christian community and in the consciousness of the Jewish community, has never for a moment made me repent my choice” (379). Eliot emphasizes a compassion for Jewish heritage that transcends traditional cultural boundaries. Therefore, she has not “timed” her novel with a “prophetic eye” to endorse the political establishment of Israel but rather she seems to have written the novel to facilitate compassion between multiple cultures in a time of growing tension between the Europeans and the Jews.

Eliot undoubtedly valued both compassion and sympathy between cultures on an abstract level, but several critics have questioned whether she believed that such harmony between cultures was truly possible. After all, Eliot’s past anti-Semitism suggests that her views about Judaism were fluid if not at times paradoxical. Given these uncertainties regarding Eliot’s purpose in writing *Deronda*, some critics have asserted that scholars should look at what Eliot *does not* say in *Deronda* to find the limits of her compassion. They claim that Eliot’s omission of non-European cultures is indicative of a cultural bias perpetuated by her status as an affluent English woman. Thus, they conclude that regardless of her conscious intent, Eliot and *Deronda* are the products of colonial ideology, and this ideology precludes genuine universal compassion.

Edward Said spearheaded this ideological interpretation of *Deronda* in his famous 1979 work of criticism, *The Question of Palestine*. Similar to Kaufmann, Said interprets

Mordecai as a representative for Eliot's actual beliefs regarding Zionism, but he also concedes that Mordecai's mission to re-establish Israel in *Deronda* seems suspicious in the context of Eliot's previous work:

The unusual thing about [*Deronda*] is that its main subject is Zionism, although the novel's principal themes are recognizable to anyone who has read Eliot's earlier fiction... In her earlier books, Eliot had studied a variety of enthusiasms, all of them replacements for organized religion, all of them attractive to persons who would have been Saint Teresa had they lived during a period of coherent faith... [*Deronda* endeavors] toward a genuinely hopeful socioreligious project in which individual energies can be merged and identified with a collective national vision, the whole emanating out of Judaism. (Said 60-61)

The most important aspect of Said's opening remarks about *Deronda* is his concession that Eliot strives to craft the ethics of her fiction around minimizing the individual ego in favor of a more universal compassion. Said claims that in *Deronda* Eliot's ethic of greater compassion arises from Jewish nationalism, but in Eliot's earlier works, the foundation for compassion was an "enthusiasm" and *not* an organized religion. Thus, Said rightly becomes puzzled by what he perceives as Eliot's ostensible endorsement of Zionism—a political movement exclusive to Jews that necessarily prohibits egalitarianism and relies upon God, rather than humankind, for ultimate Truth. Said's observation reaffirms that "Universal Humanity" was not an antiquated notion, as Kaufmann asserted, but rather a proxy for the Good in Victorian ethical systems that spurned "organized religion." In addition, as Said implies, secularity and universal compassion are two themes that resonate through much of Eliot's previous fiction. The

crucial question for Said hence becomes: Why would Eliot endorse a political movement as controversial as Zionism to express her ideas of compassion?

Said theorizes that Eliot champions Zionism for its emphasis on cultural heritage. He identifies transience and alienation as two negative aspects of Victorian society that Eliot criticizes in *Deronda*:

The crucial thing about the way Zionism is presented in the novel is that its backdrop is a generalized condition of homelessness. Not only the Jews, but even the well-born Englishmen and women in the novel are portrayed as wandering and alienated beings... Thus Eliot uses the plight of the Jews to make a universal statement about the nineteenth-century's need for a home, given the spiritual and psychological rootlessness reflected in her characters' almost ontological physical restlessness. (61-62)

Said claims that the Jews maintain a unified culture better than any other people, despite the alienating atmosphere of nineteenth-century Europe (62). Therefore, Eliot naturally would select Zionism as a mouthpiece to voice her own reservations about cultural lethargy in England. This inference seems reasonable, given Eliot's praise for Jewish culture in her letter to Kaufmann. Mordecai's mission to re-establish Israel in *Deronda* provides a spiritual home for the Jews against the rootless cosmopolitanism of Victorian England.

There can be little doubt that Mordecai's vision of a new Israel significantly improves the spiritual outlook for many Jews in *Deronda*. Also, as Kaufmann noted, Eliot's masterful depiction of the heart of Judaism implies that she sympathizes with the Jewish people. But Eliot never equates sympathy with political action. As her letter to

Kaufmann illustrates, she frames her sympathy for Judaism as a means for fostering cultural unity, not creating political boundaries. Said, however, isolates a speech from Mordecai during the Hand and Banner section of *Deronda* to assert that Eliot endorses Zionism for its political ambitions:

Let [the re-establishment of Israel] come to pass, and the living warmth will spread to the weak extremities of Israel, and superstition will vanish, not in the lawlessness of the renegade, but in the illumination of great facts which widen feeling, and make all knowledge alive as the young offspring of beloved memories. (*Deronda* 454)

Said claims that Mordecai's phrase "in the illumination of great facts which widen feeling" typifies Eliot's rhetoric, and he concludes that "[Eliot's] approbation for her Zionists derives from her belief that they were a group almost exactly expressing her own grand ideas about an expanded life of feelings" (Said 63). Therefore, Said accuses Eliot of appropriating Judaism to propagate European ideology. Said notes that although Eliot markets Judaism as a tradition of the "East," she never gives voice to any actual characters from the East. All of the Jews in the novel are European (Said 63). Said also isolates more quotes from Mordecai during the Hand and Banner scene that depict the West as saving the East from "debauched and paupered conquerors" and "despotisms" (*Deronda* 456). Hence, the Zionist project is a means for the West to liberate the "despotic" East (Said 65). Said claims that Eliot's endorsement of Zionism is not a deviation from the Victorian intelligentsia but rather part of a greater European agenda to ally the Jews against the Palestinians (Said 66). Said acknowledges that Eliot believes Zionism will increase sympathy between East and West, but her refusal to give voice to

characters from the East demonstrates that European ideology limits the capacity of her compassion (Said 65).

Said is correct in his observation that Eliot does not provide an adequate Arab voice in *Deronda*, but his argument that Eliot perpetuates a colonialist ideology finds little grounding in her actual thought. In a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe on October 29, 1876, Eliot expresses her contempt for the imperialist agenda of Victorian England:

Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us. There is nothing I should care more to do... than rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs. (*GEL* 6: 302)

Eliot's letter to Stowe demonstrates her rejection of the colonialist ideology. Eliot does not offer a voice to the Palestinians in *Deronda*, but in her letter to Stowe, Eliot extends her compassion to *all* oriental peoples, including the Palestinians. Eliot expresses disdain for any ideology that precludes fellowship with other cultures, and she makes explicit her condemnation of exclusivism at the end of the same letter to Stowe: "This inability to find interest in any form of life that is not clad in the same coat-tails and flounces as our own lies very close to the worst kind of irreligion" (*GEL* 6: 302). Thus, Eliot's letter shows a clear regard for other cultures and emphasizes multiculturalism in her notion of compassion.

Nancy Henry in her book *George Eliot and the British Empire* (2002) further dismantles Said's accusation that Eliot is an imperialist. Henry acknowledges that indeed

many Europeans contemporaneous with Eliot, such as Moses Montefiore and Lawrence Oliphant, supported the ambition of many Jews to colonize Palestine (Henry 117), but when John Blackwood insinuated that Eliot would rejoice in the colonizing project of Oliphant (*GEL* 7: 192), Eliot remained silent. For Said, Eliot's silence in *Deronda* implies an imperialist agenda, but for Henry, Eliot's silence regarding the Jewish movement to re-establish Israel implies political distance. In addition, Henry suggests that Eliot's silence about the "East" reflects her respect for foreign cultures. *Deronda* does not include a post-script, unlike many of Eliot's previous works, such as *Middlemarch*, and Henry theorizes that Eliot does not describe the completion of *Deronda*'s mission because such a description would speak from ignorance, since Eliot herself never ventured to the East (Henry 119). Rex Gascoigne serves as a warning within *Deronda* itself of the dangers inherent in constructing ideas about other cultures without any actual experience of those cultures (119). Rex believes Canada to be an empty wilderness in which he can rebuild a new life, but his conflation of different colonies highlights the ignorance of speaking without experience (*Deronda* 71). Similarly, Henry adds that Rex and his ignorance find analogy in Casaubon from *Middlemarch* (Henry 120). Casaubon can never complete his "Key to All Mythologies" because he has little experience with foreign cultures to ground his scholarship. Thus, Eliot's refusal to depict the East in *Deronda* is not an unconscious product of colonial ideology but rather a deliberate gesture of respect for a culture with which Eliot has little experience.

Eliot seems to favor universal compassion in her letters and in some moments of *Deronda*, but nevertheless, both Kaufmann and Said acknowledge that Mordecai's

mission to re-establish Israel challenges universal compassion. Eliot graces Mordecai with the most poetic speeches and complex philosophy of any of the characters in the novel, but does the prominence of Mordecai imply that Eliot agrees with his agenda? The fictional nature of *Deronda* poses another formal challenge as well: how can we differentiate between Eliot and Mordecai, since Eliot created Mordecai? Eliot avoids “decided deliverances” about Jewish nationalism in her letters and essays, but as exemplified in *Deronda*, Eliot does encode traces of her ethics in her fictional characters. Henry implies in her critique of Said that we may find analogy for Eliot’s ethical paradigm in *Deronda* by examining Eliot’s contemporaneous works of fiction (Henry 120). For example, Rex Gascoigne’s parochial vision of Canadian colonies mimics Casaubon’s naïve “key to all mythologies.” Thus, one useful way to analyze Eliot’s relationship with the Jewish ambition to re-establish Israel lies in juxtaposing the ideas of Mordecai with the ideas of Theophrastus in Eliot’s other substantial meditation on Judaism—“The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” from Eliot’s final work of fiction, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879).

Eliot’s *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* presents a collection of interconnected meditations that critique various aspects of Victorian England. The protagonist, Theophrastus, poses as an English bachelor and neutral commentator, but his ideas share a high degree of correlation with Eliot’s own convictions as expressed in her letters and essays. Similarly, the expository voice of Theophrastus invites a more literal interpretation of his ideas than the eloquent metaphors of Mordecai in *Deronda*. Theophrastus does not speak directly on behalf of George Eliot, but his voice is closer to Eliot’s than any of the characters in *Deronda*.

Theophrastus tells his impressions as an outsider who has been integrated into English society, but he does not profess an allegiance to any single culture, unlike Mordecai, who expresses an unabashed bias for Judaism. Theophrastus seems to share the same rootlessness that afflicts many of Eliot's characters in *Deronda*. But if Theophrastus represents a voice of wisdom and if wisdom somehow involves cultural heritage, as Kaufmann and Said suggest, why would Eliot not ground Theophrastus in a single culture? Theophrastus seems to speak for both the ancient Greek and Victorian Englishman. His ostensible rootlessness could represent the cultural lethargy of Victorian England, but Eliot never provides any reason to read irony into the voice of Theophrastus. The amorphous nature of Theophrastus must therefore reflect an important aspect of Eliot's ethics. Perhaps Theophrastus is not rootless but rather pliable in his cultural convictions. This cultural mobility allows Theophrastus to assess his impressions without the ethnic bias of Mordecai or the ignorance of Rex Gascoigne. Theophrastus is able to express compassion for multiple cultures precisely because he does not bind himself to the "decided deliverances" of any single culture. He minimizes his egoism by broadening his compassion. Thus, Theophrastus adapts his cultural lens to judge each impression, and this mobility of conviction serves as the foundation for universal compassion George Eliot's ethics.

Theophrastus engages with universal compassion and Jewish nationalism most explicitly in his final impression: "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!". In "Hep!", Theophrastus appears to endorse the re-establishment of Israel with passages such as: "I share the spirit of the Zealots. I take the spectacle of the Jewish people... preferring death by starvation or sword... as a sublime type of steadfastness" ("Hep!" 150) and



“Every Jew should be conscious that he is one of a multitude... strong enough... to constitute a new beneficent individuality among the nations, and, by confuting the traditions of scorn [non-Jewish religions], nobly avenge the wrongs done to their Fathers” (“Hep!” 164). In fact, Theophrastus establishes nationalism as the core of all ethics when he claims: “The consciousness of having a native country... that sense of special belonging... is the root of human virtues, both public and private” (“Hep!” 156). Thus, human virtue for Theophrastus seems to require a nationalism that excludes other cultures. Theophrastus attests to this necessity of separateness when he compares cosmopolitanism to cynicism: “If [the Jews] drop that separateness which is made their reproach, they may be in danger of lapsing into a cosmopolitan indifference equivalent to cynicism, and of missing that inward identification with nationality... which might make some amends for their inherited privation” (“Hep!” 155). Cosmopolitanism for Theophrastus therefore nullifies the solidarity necessary for an ethical society and instead teaches a superstition that disregards the cultural history crucial for human identity (“Hep!” 165).

Theophrastus’ celebration of nationalism in “Hep!” seems to contradict Eliot’s endorsement of universal compassion. If the human Good derives from a cultural history distinct to a particular people, then an ethical person must necessarily exclude other cultures to avoid “cosmopolitan indifference.” But although Theophrastus describes nationalism as an exclusive cultural heritage shared by a particular group of people, he also asserts that the greatest Good transcends these particularities of nationality:

Affection, intelligence, duty, radiate from a centre, and nature has decided that for us English folk that centre can be neither China nor Peru. Most of us feel this

way unreflectingly... what is wanting is, that we should recognize a corresponding attachment to nationality as legitimate in every other people, and understand that its absence is a privation of the greatest good. ("Hep!" 147)

Thus, nationalism for Theophrastus does not presume a political nation at all but rather describes a unified culture, which, in the case of the Jews, overcomes national boundaries: "A people with oriental sunlight in their blood, yet capable of being everywhere acclimatized, [Jews] have a force and toughness which enables them to carry off the best prizes" ("Hep!" 157). A "nation" for Theophrastus is not a geographical location but rather a national consciousness among a group of people despite cultural differences. Therefore, political cosmopolitanism is the tragic loss of identity with this national consciousness, but universal compassion is the ability for compassion to transcend one's own culture and "rouse imagination for those whose customs differ most from our own." The Jews for Theophrastus are capable of balancing national consciousness and universal compassion by acclimatizing with other cultures while still maintaining their own "oriental sunlight." But the ethical consequences of national consciousness and universal compassion extend beyond the Jews. Eliot's choice of the phrasing "oriental sunlight" rather than "Jewish sunlight" also implies that Eliot believes other Asian belief systems, such as Buddhism, may share the same affinity for universal compassion.

Henry reflects upon this idea of nationalism as a consciousness in *George Eliot and the British Empire*. She asserts that Eliot with "Hep!" builds on the notion of collective memory that she began in *Deronda*, but in contrast to Said, Henry argues that

Eliot rejects imperialism by supporting a form of Judaism that redefines traditional political boundaries:

Just as she began to do in *Deronda*, in *Impressions* Eliot shows a state of continuity between past and present that makes possible new categories and identities for individuals and communities: the Jews are urged to form a modern nationality based on the memories of their collective history; the English are urged to scrutinize and remake their national character by recognizing a history of colonization, aggressive greed, and complacent superiority. In *Impressions*, we begin to see a critical awareness on Eliot's part of what might today be called "imperialist ideology". (Henry 129)

As we have seen in Eliot's letters and in the comments of her critics, Eliot extends her compassion beyond the cultural borders of English society. Henry theorizes that Eliot finds in Judaism the blueprint for a "modern nationality" where collective memory rather than political boundaries unifies a culture. Eliot anticipates and challenges Said's notion of political sovereignty in "Hep!" by depicting England as a country conquered and colonized by various cultures throughout history. By creating an analogue between the Jews and the English, Eliot illustrates that "sovereignty" is not a set of political boundaries but rather a perception of cultural cohesion.

Henry further proposes that Said's notion of sovereignty is ironically a product of Western ideology (Henry 118), and thus, Eliot's concept of a national consciousness without borders may be more congruent with the actual political atmosphere of the Middle East during the Victorian era. Henry observes that despite Said's descriptions of the West as insular, many Europeans gained an awareness of Middle Eastern culture

through colonial and travel literature (Henry 118). The majority of these accounts portray the Middle East as a hostile and inequitable place. C. W. M. van de Velde captures this pervasive theme of suffering in European literature about the Middle East in his book *Syria and Palestine in 1851 and 1852*: “Not a book do we find written upon Palestine that does not lament over the violence of its oppressors!” (Henry 118). Given the ubiquity of these accounts, Henry asserts that Eliot viewed the Turkish Empire as an imperialist regime that oppressed the indigenous cultures of the region (Judaism) in much the same way that the English subjugated their colonies (118). Thus, Henry proposes that *Deronda*’s quest is not an imperial project of domination but rather a compassionate quest to bring cultural cohesion and spiritual reprieve to an oppressed population (118).

Eliot seems to sympathize with Judaism in both *Deronda* and *Impressions*, and her sympathy most likely stems from a desire to spread compassion for a suffering people rather than to promote an imperialist agenda. We have noticed, however, that every critic thus far has attributed to Mordecai the imperial re-establishment of Israel and that Mordecai’s ideas receive more development in the novel than any other philosophy. Nevertheless, Bryan Cheyette in *Constructions of ‘the Jew’ in English Literature and Society* (1993) argues that Mordecai does not represent the totality of Judaism in *Deronda*. Cheyette notes that Eliot does not portray all Jews in *Deronda* with the same benevolence as Mordecai:

While Mordecai’s Jewish nationalism expresses a timeless ‘reconciliation’ of ‘East and West’, it also emphasizes the particularist need for the transfiguration of materialist Jews in the here and now... Throughout the novel Daniel (as well as Mrs. Meyrick, Hans, the Arrowpoints and Gwendolen) continually note the

‘ugly’, ‘vulgar’, ‘narrow’, ‘unpoetic’ or ‘unrefined’ nature of Jews and Judaism.  
(Cheyette 47)

Thus, Judaism is not a homogenous culture in *Deronda* but rather a complex set of ideas with conflicting representations and valuations by Eliot. As we have seen, Kaufmann and Mordecai believe that Jews must maintain a separate identity from the gentiles, and they should re-establish Israel as a means to guarantee their cultural solidarity. On the other hand, Eliot distances herself from imperialist movements and expresses disdain for any culture that aspires toward “a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness.” Thus, Mordecai remains the ostensible mouthpiece for Judaism during an initial reading of *Deronda*, but a closer examination reveals that Eliot includes many Jewish voices that complicate the dominance of Mordecai.

The most direct confrontation between Mordecai and other voices of Judaism in *Deronda* occurs in the Hand and Banner scene of chapter forty-two. During this scene, Mordecai and Gideon debate the merits of Jewish nationalism. Gideon begins the discussion by suggesting that Jews should revere their heritage while assimilating into gentile communities:

I’m a rational Jew myself. I stand by my people as a sort of family relations, and I am for keeping up our worship in a rational way... But I am for getting rid of all our superstitions and exclusiveness. There’s no reason now why we shouldn’t melt gradually into the populations we live among. That’s the order of the day in point of progress... And I’m for the old maxim, ‘A man’s country is where he’s well off.’ (*Deronda* 449-450)

Gideon's opening contains many of the ideas that Eliot champions in her letters and "Hep!". He endorses collective memory as a vehicle for fostering cultural cohesion without limiting compassion through exclusivism. This mirrors Eliot's desire to combat cosmopolitanism without compromising universal compassion. Gideon also explicitly states that he wishes to cleanse Judaism of its exclusivist boundaries (superstitions), and he defines this universalizing process as a hallmark of human progress. Therefore, Gideon reflects Eliot's ambition to foster an inclusive idea of nationality that allows every culture to celebrate its distinct heritage while "gradually melting" into other cultures. Eliot agrees with Gideon's acceptance of assimilation in her essay "Hep!":

The tendency of things is towards the quicker or slower fusion of the races. It is impossible to arrest this tendency: all we can do is to moderate its course so as to hinder it from degrading the moral status of societies by a too rapid effacement of those national traditions and customs which are the language of the national genius—the deep suckers of healthy sentiment. Such moderating and guidance of inevitable movement is worthy of all effort. And it is in this sense that the modern insistence on the idea of Nationalities has value. (*Impressions* 160)

For Theophrastus (and probably Eliot), nationality only has value as a moderating force against the alienating effects of cosmopolitanism. Nationalism is *not* a solution to the Victorian reality of increasing cultural exchanges between England and its trading partners. Thus, for Eliot nationalism should not be a political means to ossify the exclusivist qualities of a culture but rather it should serve as a stabilizing mechanism to help preserve cultural value in the wake of rapid social changes.

Bryan Cheyette, however, argues that Gideon's version of Judaism departs from Eliot's overall message in *Deronda*. Cheyette claims that the main plot of *Deronda* represents a form of Disraelian romanticism in which Deronda must find the hidden tokens of his birth to achieve fulfillment (Cheyette 46). The personal nature of this quest defines Judaism against rational discourse and instead invokes mystical apprehension as the font of true knowledge. Cheyette cites Mordecai's response to Gideon in the Hand and Banner scene as evidence that mysticism coalesces well with Eliot's ethical agenda in *Deronda* (Cheyette 46):

[Mordecai] too is a rational Jew. But what is it to be rational—what is it to feel the light of the divine reason growing stronger within and without? It is to see more and more of the hidden bonds that bind and consecrate change as a dependent growth—yea, consecrate it with kinship: the past becomes my parent, and the future stretches toward me the appealing arms of children. (*Deronda* 451)

Mordecai's vision of rationality as a "change" consecrated by the bonds of kinship indeed matches Eliot's interest in preserving culture in the face of growing cosmopolitan indifference, but on the surface, Mordecai's vision seems interchangeable with Gideon's notion of Judaism as a family bond rather than series of "superstitions." Both characters value collective memory and what appears to be universal compassion. Mordecai, however, insists on exclusivism as a necessary quality of true Judaism, despite the illusion of universal compassion that he sometimes offers:

When it is rational to say, "I know not my father or my mother, let my children be aliens to me, let no prayer of mine touch them," then it will be rational for the Jew to say, "I will seek to know no difference between me and the Gentile, I will not

cherish the prophetic consciousness of our nationality—let the Hebrew cease to be, and let all his memorials be antiquarian trifles, dead wall-paintings of a conjectured race.”<sup>3</sup> (*Deronda* 451)

Thus for Mordecai, cultural exchange between Jews and Gentiles becomes tantamount to the obliteration of Jewish national consciousness.

In the above quote, Mordecai also identifies race as a distinguishing quality of Jewish culture, and therefore any “filtering of the blood,” as Gideon proposes (*Deronda* 451), necessarily corrupts Jewish culture. Mordecai’s emphasis on racial purity is distinct from Eliot’s idea of an inclusive national consciousness, and it snuffs the possibility for universal compassion. Eliot’s ethic of national consciousness fosters cultural exchange by transcending political boundaries, but Mordecai’s racialized discourse necessarily confines genuine compassion to an exclusive clan.<sup>4</sup> Bryan Cheyette argues that this racialized hoarding of compassion reflects Eliot’s disavowal of “liberal progress”:

In rejecting the false universalism of a materialist rationalism—the “promised land” of liberal progress—Eliot constructs a spiritual Judeo-centric universalism which is “beyond the liberal imagination”. By associating a mystical transcendence with Jewish particularity, Eliot introduces a double narrative into her novel which both attempts to reach “beyond the modes of self-transcendence available in England at the time” and is, at the same time, confined by a racialized

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that Mordecai himself considers the Jews to be a conjectured race. He admits that the ten tribes of Israel are untraceable and that Jews have mixed with other races for millennia (*Deronda* 456).

<sup>4</sup> For more on Eliot’s condemnation of religion, exclusivism, and the “clan mentality,” see her essay “Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming” in *The Westminster Review* Vol. VIII, Oct. 1855. 436-462.



discourse. This split between cultural transcendence and racial fixity is at the heart of *Daniel Deronda*. (Cheyette 47)

Eliot in *Deronda* and *Impressions* critiques the alienation and cosmopolitan indifference afflicting Victorian England as a result of excessive rationality, but she also champions a form of cultural cohesion that extends compassion beyond the boundaries (race) of any given culture. Although Mordecai undoubtedly professes a vision of Judaism that is antithetical to Victorian “liberal progress,” anti-progressive narratives of racial determinism remain inconsistent with Eliot’s ethic of cultural exchange and universal compassion. Nevertheless, Mordecai does receive more substantial philosophical treatment by Eliot than other characters in the novel, and Gideon seems to serve more as a catalyst for advancing Mordecai’s argument than a legitimate interlocutor. As Cheyette notes, these seemingly conflicting representations create a paradoxical double narrative: Mordecai and his notion of racial determinism versus marginalized Jewish voices of assimilation and universal compassion. If Eliot truly champions nationality as an inclusive collective memory capable of extending compassion toward numerous cultures, why would she craft *Deronda* around Mordecai’s narrative of exclusivism rather than Gideon’s notion of inclusive assimilation?

Amanda Anderson argues that *Deronda*, *not* Mordecai, represents Eliot’s true ethical agenda in *Deronda*. Kaufmann, Said, and Cheyette all assume that Mordecai and *Deronda* share a common vision of Judaism, but Anderson identifies the two characters as harboring distinct versions Judaism. Anderson claims that Mordecai represents a Judaism predicated upon the subjugation of the individual to a racially-determined, national will:

For Mordecai, becoming self-conscious as a Jew means simply recognizing an identity that is fully underwritten by the bounds of the past and fully determined by a scenario of future nationalistic self-actualization... Thus, although both Deronda and Mordecai employ the term *choice*, their uses are dissimilar. For Mordecai, choice is the unified collective acceptance and enactment of racial destiny. (Anderson 48)

Anderson therefore joins Cheyette in asserting that Mordecai emphasizes a brand of Judaism exclusive to a particular race, but her concept of choice creates a distinction between Deronda and Mordecai. For Mordecai, choice is not an exercise in free will but rather a recognition that a larger purpose shapes individual choice into a determined, divine duty (Anderson 41). Mordecai makes explicit this notion of choice as duty during his Hand and Banner debate with Gideon:

I say that the strongest principle of growth lies in human choice. The sons of Judah have to choose that God may again choose them. The Messianic time is the time when Israel shall will the planting of the national ensign. The Nile overflowed and rushed onward: the Egyptian could not choose the overflow, but he chose to work and make channels for the fructifying waters, and Egypt became the land of corn. Shall man, whose soul is set in the royalty of discernment and resolve deny his rank and say, I am an onlooker, ask no choice or purpose of me? That is the blasphemy of this time. The divine principle of our race is action, choice, resolved memory. (*Deronda* 459)

Mordecai does assert the racial destiny that Anderson notes, but he also introduces “resolved memory” as an eschatological concept. Collective memory for Mordecai is not

just a stabilizing mechanism for a people to stem the cultural erosion of cosmopolitanism: memory becomes a divine teleology for heralding the apocalypse. Only the Jews have the choice to follow Divine Will, and Israel will only become a political presence during “Messianic time”—the end of the world. Mordecai appears egalitarian at the end of his speech by claiming the new Jewish nation will “carry into it a new brotherhood with the nations of the Gentiles” (*Deronda* 459), but the Gentiles are not able to participate in God’s purpose. Thus, “choice” for Mordecai creates cultural boundaries between Jews and Gentiles and undermines the universal compassion that Eliot champions in her notion of collective memory.

Anderson recognizes the difficulty in reconciling Eliot’s ethics with the exclusivism of Mordecai, but she insists that *Deronda* departs from Mordecai and champions a more inclusive version of Judaism. Anderson asserts that for *Deronda*, “choice” is a rational instrument for individuals to negotiate complex cultural interactions. *Deronda* thus distances himself from the deterministic mysticism of Mordecai and instead models his approach to Jewish nationalism on the principles of democratic debate (Anderson 41). Anderson cites the moment when *Deronda* informs Mordecai of his Jewish heritage as evidence of *Deronda*’s rational distance (Anderson 49):

‘It has begun already—the marriage of our souls. It waits but the passing away of this body, and then they who are betrothed shall unite in a stricter bond, and what is mine shall be thine. Call nothing mine that I have written, Daniel... For I have judged what I have written, and I desire the body that I gave my thought to pass

away as this fleshly body will pass; but let the thought be born again from the fuller soul which shall be called yours.’

‘You must not ask me to promise that,’ said Deronda, smiling. ‘I must be convinced first of special reasons for it in the writings themselves. And I am too backward a pupil yet. That blent transmission must go on without any choice of ours; but what we can’t hinder must not make our rule for what we ought to choose.’ (*Deronda* 643)

Anderson also marks Deronda’s encounter with Kalonymos as further evidence of his independent, rational approach to Judaism (Anderson 47):

‘I shall call myself a Jew,’ said Deronda, deliberately becoming slightly paler under the piercing eyes of his questioner. ‘But I will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed. Our fathers themselves changed the horizon of their belief and learned of other races. But I think I can maintain my grandfather’s notion of separateness with communication. I hold that my first duty is to my own people, and if there is anything to be done toward restoring or perfecting their common life, I shall make that my vocation.’ (*Deronda* 620)

As Anderson observes, Deronda distances himself somewhat from Mordecai and Kalonymos, but in neither case does he debate their exclusivism. In the above passage, Deronda at first hints that he will “change the horizon” of his beliefs in accordance with the wisdom of other races, but the piercing gaze of Kalonymos coerces Deronda into asserting the supremacy of the Jews. Similarly, Deronda smiles as he tells Mordecai that he will not follow him without rational investigation. This smile betrays that Deronda’s hesitation is a mere formality. He will not defy Mordecai. Thus, no “democratic debate”

occurs. Deronda may at times appear to reflect upon the consequences of the exclusivist vision of Judaism endorsed by Mordecai and Kalonymos, but Daniel never debates Mordecai with the same sincerity as Gideon. Deronda's reservations derive from his own inward struggle against exclusivism and its inherent constriction of compassion, but ultimately, Deronda adopts Mordecai's quest to reestablish Israel.

Anderson admits that Deronda obeys Mordecai and seeks to reestablish Israel, but she insists that Deronda's quest "will be enacted through an open-ended process of argumentation" (Anderson 48). Anderson cites the end of chapter sixty-nine as evidence of Deronda's inclusive approach to Judaism:

I am going to the East to become better acquainted with the condition of my race in various countries there... The idea that I am possessed with is that of restoring a political existence to my people, making them a nation again, giving them a national centre, such as the English have... That is a task which presents itself to me as a duty: I am resolved to begin it, however feebly... At the least, I may awaken a movement in other minds, such as has been awakened in my own.

*(Deronda 688)*

Anderson interprets Deronda's desire to awaken a movement in the minds of others as a democratic dialog between Judaism and other cultures (Anderson 48), but the prospects for Daniel's mission become ominous when Eliot describes the impact on Gwendolen of Deronda's decision to move East:

The world seemed getting larger round poor Gwendolen, and she the more solitary and helpless in the midst... There comes a terrible moment to many souls when the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind, which

have lain aloof in newspapers and other neglected reading, enter like an earthquake into their own lives—when the slow urgency of growing generations turns into the tread of an invading army or the dire clash of civil war, and grey fathers know nothing to seek for but the corpses of their blooming sons, and girls forget all vanity to make lint and bandages which may serve for the shattered limbs of their betrothed husbands. Then it is as if the Invisible Power that has been the object of lip-worship and lip-resignation became visible, according to the imagery of the Hebrew poet, making the flames his chariot and riding on the wings of the wind, till the mountains smoke and the plains shudder under the rolling, fiery visitation. Often the good cause seems to lie prostrate under the thunder of unrelenting force, the martyrs live reviled, they die, and no angel is seen holding forth the crown and the palm branch. Then it is that the submission of the soul to the Highest is tested, and even in the eyes of frivolity life looks out from the scene of human struggle with the awful face of duty, and a religion shows itself which is something else than a private consolation. (*Deronda* 689)

Many critics interpret the latter passage as a critique by Eliot of Gwendolen's solipsism. Kaufmann asserts that *Deronda* serves as a guiding star to Gwendolen's "harmless form of Egoism" (Kaufmann 60), and Anderson describes Gwendolen as an inconsequential spectator to *Deronda*'s great movement (Anderson 48). Henry, however, best captures the interpretation of the latter passage as an indictment of Gwendolen:

Gwendolen's awakening is likened to the violence of invasion, civil war, and social crisis that calls for sacrifice and an elevation above self. *Deronda* is not going to war, but his new-found connection to the "larger destinies of mankind"

makes him as remote to Gwendolen as the civil war in America or life in “the colonies.” (Henry 137)

Thus, Henry’s reading of the passage argues that Gwendolen becomes awestruck by Deronda’s quest to re-establish Israel, and the violent imagery is simply a metaphor for the shattering of her egoistic delusions. This interpretation finds additional justification in the paragraph proceeding Gwendolen’s vision:

That was the sort of crisis which was at this moment beginning in Gwendolen’s small life: she was for the first time being dislodged from her supremacy in her own world, and getting a sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving... But here had come a shock which went deeper than personal jealousy—something spiritual and vaguely tremendous that thrust her away, and yet quelled all anger into self-humiliation. (*Deronda* 689)

Thus, as Henry notes, Gwendolen’s vision does force her to re-evaluate her own solipsism, but Gwendolen never assents to this process. There is no democratic debate, as Anderson suggests. Gwendolen is “dislodged” from her worldview, and “something spiritual and vaguely tremendous” thrusts her away from Deronda and “quells” her resistance. This imagery of violence and domination in both Gwendolen’s vision and the subsequent paragraph invoke the imperialism that George Eliot abhors. Furthermore, Eliot states during Gwendolen’s vision that “many souls” suffer when larger destinies “enter like an earthquake into their lives.” Eliot is not making a simple statement about Gwendolen’s egoism but rather she uses Gwendolen during the “terrible moment” passage as a proxy for the greater dangers inherent in the blending of politics with

religion. Daniel's quest for a Jewish homeland transforms Judaism from a unifying, collective memory into an apocalyptic force in which even the "martyrs live reviled" and "no angel is seen holding forth the crown and the palm branch." There is no victor in the religious campaign of *Deronda*. Everyone suffers from the "awful face of duty," and indeed "religion shows itself which is something else than a private consolation": it shows itself as the antithesis to the universal compassion that Eliot champions.

We find precedent for the apocalyptic vision of Gwendolen during the Hand and Banner scene. Eliot leaves a subtle hint of the dire implications of Jewish nationalism when Mordecai proclaims his vision of a new Israel:

I say the effect of our separateness will not be completed and have its highest transformation unless our race takes on again the character of a nationality... What is it to me that the ten tribes are lost untraceably, or that the multitudes of the children of Judah have mixed themselves with the Gentile populations as a river with rivers? Behold our people still! Their skirts spread afar; they are torn and soiled and trodden on; but there is a *jewelled breastplate* [my emphasis]... let them say, 'we will lift up a standard, we will unite in a labor hard but glorious like that of Moses and Ezra.' (*Deronda* 456)

Both the "standard" and "breastplate" are images of war, and both Moses and Ezra led violent campaigns to assert the political will of the Jews; but the most revealing detail of this description is the "jeweled" breastplate.<sup>5</sup> Eliot throughout *Deronda* associates jewels

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of jewels and *Deronda*, see Katherine Osborne's "Inherited Emotions: George Eliot and the Politics of Heirlooms." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* Vol. 64.4. 465-493.



with greed and domination, and perhaps the greatest manifestation of this motif occurs when Gwendolen refuses to wear the diamonds of Lady Glasher:

‘Oblige me by telling me your reason for not wearing the diamonds when I desire it,’ said Grandcourt. His eyes were still fixed upon her, and she felt her own eyes narrowing under them as if to shut out an entering pain...

‘He delights in making dogs and horses quail: that is half his pleasure in calling them his,’ she said to herself... ‘It will come to be so with me; and I shall quail.

What else is there for me?’ (*Deronda* 366)

The “narrowing” of Gwendolen under the oppression of Grandcourt mirrors Gwendolen’s reduction to a mere speck during her apocalyptic vision (*Deronda* 689). *Deronda* of course does not subjugate Gwendolen as Grandcourt does, but *Deronda* is not the cause of Gwendolen’s “terrible moment”; the cause of her suffering is “something spiritual and vaguely tremendous that thrust her away [from *Deronda*]” (*Deronda* 689). Both *Deronda* and Gwendolen are therefore oppressed by these “greater destinies of mankind,” and both share similar ignominies: Gwendolen wears Grandcourt’s diamond necklace as a symbol of her trespasses against Glasher, and *Deronda* bears Mordecai’s jeweled breastplate as a mark of the suffering he will cause during his quest for a new Israel. Thus, the “terrible moment” scene is not just an indictment of Gwendolen’s solipsism but rather the scene is a meditation on the dangers inherent in a worldview where exclusivist ambitions subsume universal compassion.

Eliot commends Judaism for its emphasis on cultural cohesion through collective memory, but as Cheyette observes, Eliot does not treat all Jewish ideas and characters in the novel with equality. The ideas of Mordecai receive the most philosophical

development, but Eliot provides numerous voices of dissent that highlight the tension between cultural heritage and universal compassion. The “terrible moment” scene paints a dire outcome for the campaign of Deronda, but Eliot does not present an alternate Jewish narrative to compensate for the dearth of universal compassion inherent in exclusivity of Jewish nationalism. She does, however, hint that Buddhist renunciation of the ego may supplement Judaism to create an ethical system that fosters both cultural heritage and universal compassion.

### Chapter III: Kaballah, Renunciation, and Buddhism

The relationship between George Eliot and religion has always been a contested field of research. Some scholars, such as Edward Said, claim that Eliot substituted various theories of Humanism for religion, but others, such as Peter Hodgson, argue that Eliot retained a highly nuanced system of spirituality throughout her life.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of Eliot's personal religiosity, religion undoubtedly plays a prominent role in the ethical systems of her novels, particularly *Deronda*, since Judaism serves as the catalyst for much of the character development and plot. Thus, for a rigorous understanding of the ethical relationship between Jewish nationalism and universal compassion in *Deronda*, this chapter will explore Eliot's estrangement from Christianity and then examine why she chooses Jewish Kabbalism to form the theology of *Daniel Deronda*.

Avrom Fleishman traces Eliot's disillusionment with Evangelical Christianity in *George Eliot's Intellectual Life* (2010). Fleishman asserts that Eliot was a devout Evangelical for the first twenty-two years of her life, and he notes that during this period Eliot was particularly austere (Fleishman 13). During this phase, Eliot often denigrated plays, novels, and any other form of entertainment that diverted attention away from God and toward the secular (Fleishman 15). Fleishman argues, however, that Eliot betrayed subtle signs of dissent even during this evangelical period. He contends that the most revealing of Eliot's doubts was her lack of a personal relationship with God:

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<sup>6</sup> For more on Eliot and Theology, see Hodgson's *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot*. London: SCM Press, 2001.

But there would be some significance in her omitting certain important Christian convictions in these sustained and repeated testaments of faith... The most obvious omission is the doctrine of the atonement and its related doctrine of justification by faith... We may tentatively conclude that Christianity was not for the young believer a salvational or redemptive religion and that the figures of the Gospel narrative generated no intense personal love. (Fleishman 16)

Fleishman identifies an important aspect of Eliot's theology that will persist throughout her life and her fiction, including *Deronda*: God is distant from humanity. Most of Eliot's contemporary evangelicals established a personal relationship with God as a foundation of their religiosity, but for Eliot, humanity struggled through suffering with little reprieve from God. This skepticism during Eliot's evangelical years about the participation of God in human affairs laid the groundwork for her eventual departure from Evangelism and subsequent adoption of secular humanism.

Fleishman claims that Eliot began her transition to humanism in earnest in 1841 when she moved to Coventry and visited the family of Charles Bray (Fleishman 24). Eliot writes of the experience in an 1841 letter to Maria Lewis: "My whole soul has been engrossed in the most interesting of all enquiries for the last few days, and to what result my thoughts may lead I know not—possibly to one that will startle you, but my only desire is to know the truth, my only fear to cling to error" (*GEL* 1: 120-21). Fleishman speculates that the Bray family probably exposed Eliot to Unitarianism, phrenology, and rationalistic determinism, but the most influential text that Eliot read during the Bray visit was Charles Hennell's *An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838). Fleishman explains that *Inquiry* was a particularly important text for Eliot because it was

the first major work by an English author to perform the methods of Higher Criticism to the Bible (Fleishman 24). Eliot's exposure to Higher Criticism transformed the Bible from the infallible word of God into a historical collection of texts written by men. The emphasis of Higher Criticism on the human construction of the Bible redirected for Eliot the ethical power of Christianity away from God and toward humanity. Eliot explains her new outlook on Christianity to her father in an 1842 letter:

I regard [Christian and Jewish] writings as histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction, and while I admire and cherish much of what I believe to have been the moral teaching of Jesus himself, I consider the system of doctrines built upon the facts of his life and drawn as to its materials from Jewish notions to be most dishonourable to God and most pernicious in its influence on individual and social happiness. (*GEL* 1: 128)

Eliot's letter to her father revealed that by 1842 she had progressed from doubts about the Evangelical Church to animosity toward organized religion in general. For Eliot, God was no longer simply a distant ideal of perfection; God was a mystical set of moral teachings that the institution of the Church had exploited to perpetuate injustice.

Eliot best articulated her newfound hostility toward organized religion in a Westminster Review article entitled "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming" (1855). Eliot opens her essay with sarcastic praise for Cumming by applauding his rhetorical skills and his theological dexterity in preaching only Biblical teachings convenient to his own interests. She especially rebukes Cumming's distinction between morality and intellect. For Eliot, morality must derive from the intellect and not from emotion:

There is not a more pernicious fallacy afloat in common parlance, than the wide distinction made between intellect and morality. Amiable impulses without intellect, man may have in common with dogs and horses... All human beings who can be said to be in any degree moral have their impulses guided... In accordance with this we think it is found that, in proportion as religious sects exalt feeling above intellect... their sense of truthfulness is misty and confused.

(“Evangelical” 144-45)

Eliot’s idea of a morality congruent with the intellect parallels her earlier disparagement of personal relationships with God. Meaningful religious ethics derive from the teachings of God, *not* faith in God. This aversion to evangelism explains why Eliot admires much of the Jewish culture in *Deronda*. Judaism offers a strong sense of cultural heritage to combat Victorian rootlessness, and in addition, the Judaisms in *Deronda* also diminish the importance of a personal God and instead stress the teachings of Hebrew Scriptures as a guide for the Jews. Furthermore, Judaism does not often proselytize, and thus, unlike evangelical Christianity, the *basic* theology of Judaism does not encroach on the beliefs of others.

Despite this potential for Judaism to avoid proselytization, Mordecai in *Deronda* seeks to re-establish Israel, and his mission necessarily encroaches on the lives of the non-Jewish inhabitants of the Near East with an imperialist resolve that is antithetical to George Eliot’s ethic of universal compassion. Mordecai at times gestures toward harmony with the gentiles, but he never invites the gentiles to participate in his vision. In “Evangelical,” Eliot describes any exclusivist expression of religion as a “clan” mentality, and she argues that clan religions cannot express genuine compassion:

This leads us to mention another conspicuous characteristic of Dr. Cumming's teaching—the *absence of genuine charity* [Eliot's emphasis]. It is true that he makes large profession of tolerance and liberality within a certain circle... But the love thus taught is the love of the *clan* [her emphasis], which is the correlative of antagonism to the rest of mankind. ("Evangelical" 159)

Thus, the love of the clan in "Evangelical" mirrors the Jewish exclusivism of Mordecai and Deronda in *Deronda*, and this exclusivism is not compatible with Eliot's ethic of universal compassion.

Eliot's decision to center *Deronda* upon Judaism therefore appears paradoxical. If Eliot values universal compassion, why would she choose to write about a religion that often celebrates its separateness from other cultures, and if Eliot prizes human ethics over divine dispensation, why would she choose a religion with such a strong theological grounding in the commands of God? Eliot provides too many dissenting and conflicting voices of Judaism in *Deronda* to resolve these questions in terms of traditional understandings about Judaism. The key therefore to reconciling Eliot's Judaisms in *Deronda* lies in differentiating traditional understandings of Judaism from the particular version of Judaism that Eliot invokes in the novel: Kabbalism.<sup>7</sup>

Eliot most explicitly engages with Kabbalism during *Deronda* at the beginning of chapter forty-three when Mordecai explains to Deronda his theory about the transmigration of souls:

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<sup>7</sup> For more about Kabbalism and *Deronda*, see Saleel Nurbhai and K.M. Newton's *George Eliot, Judaism and the Novels: Jewish Myth and Mysticism*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

In the doctrine of the Cabbala, souls are born again and again in new bodies till they are perfected and purified, and a soul liberated from a worn-out body may join the fellow-soul that needs it, that they may be perfected together, and their earthly work accomplished. Then they will depart from the mortal region, and leave place for new souls to be born out of the store in the eternal bosom. It is the lingering imperfection of the souls already born into the mortal region that hinders the birth of new souls and the preparation of the Messianic time. (*Deronda* 461)

This passage demonstrates that Mordecai does not model his metaphysics upon traditional Jewish theology. He never mentions the paternal God of the Hebrew Bible, who councils the leaders of the Jews and often intervenes on their behalf. In fact, he effectively replaces the anthropomorphic Hebrew God with a monistic Force that perpetuates a cycle of birth and death with a system of merit similar to the concepts of Karma and Samsara in Buddhism. But though Mordecai's Kabbalism does not cohere with traditional Jewish theology, it does synergize well with Eliot's secular humanism. The progress of men and their souls derives from the consequences of human morality rather than Divine Judgment. Kabbalism therefore has the potential to resolve some of the paradoxical representations of Judaism in *Deronda*: the migration of souls seems to transcend exclusivist boundaries, and human ethics supersede divine command. But Mordecai and Deronda do not actualize these ideals and instead perpetuate exclusivism. Kabbalism for Eliot therefore offers a Jewish ethical paradigm that incorporates inclusivism and humanism, but Judaism in practice has difficulty in realizing these ideals. Thus, a crucial question arises: why would Eliot introduce Kabbalism as an ethical



system compatible with universal compassion and yet direct Mordecai and Deronda to pursue a quest to re-establish Israel that undermines compassion?

Mordecai and Deronda never materialize the potential in Kabbalism for universal compassion because they refuse to renounce their egoistic desires for Israel. Eliot denounces the *political* ramifications of Jewish nationalism during the “terrible moment” scene of *Deronda*, and she also asserts in an 1875 letter to Elma Stuart that the best *religiosity* derives from individual piety rather than the “Great movements of the world”:

I am very fond of that old Greek saying that the best state is that in which every man feels a wrong done to another as if it were done to himself... Caring for the just and loving deed of every day in your part of Dinan carries your heart strongly to every other part of the world which in its need of love and justice is just in the same predicament, and in this way you get a religion which is at once universal and private. (*GEL* 6: 112)

According to this letter, to realize universal compassion, Eliot insists that people must focus on helping their own neighbors rather than enacting grand-scale revolutionary movements. Eliot transitions her emphasis on the local into a reflection of the self during another letter to Oscar Browning in 1875: “Perhaps the most difficult heroism is that which consists in the daily conquests of our private demons, not in the slaying of world-notorious dragons,” (*GEL* 6: 126). Once again, Eliot trumpets the supremacy of individual piety over “great religious movements.” This emphasis on the micro rather than the macro matches Eliot’s approach to realism. Unlike many other realists, such as Trollope and Dickens, whose novels often address the macro concerns of a larger society, Eliot focuses her ethics on the complexities of local communities. But though Eliot

praises individual piety, she also warns in an 1869 letter to Sophia Hennell that religion should *not* serve as a consolation for the ego:

One cannot but feel tenderly towards the yearnings of individual sufferers, but theoretically speaking, it seems to me that the conception of religion as chiefly valuable for the personal consolations that may be extracted from it, is among the most active sources of falsity. The test of a higher religion might be, that it should enable the believer to do without the consolations which his egoism would demand. (*GEL* 5: 68-69)

Thus, Eliot's literary aesthetic, secular humanism, and anti-imperialist politics all designate individual piety and renunciation of the ego as the best approaches for recognizing the interconnectedness of the local with universal compassion.

Eliot's emphasis on universal compassion and the renunciation of the ego mirrors her secular humanism as expressed in "Dr. Cumming," and it is consistent with her aversion to imperialism. This critique of egoism appears most conspicuously in Eliot's later fiction as the denunciation of gambling—profiting from the loss of another. Both Rosamond in *Middlemarch* and Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda* serve as the most obvious case-studies against egoism, but Eliot does not exonerate her other characters from the corruption of egoism. Even Deronda—the most ostensibly moral character in *Deronda*—succumbs to egoism when Mirah compares him to the Buddha in chapter thirty-seven:

'Mr. Hans said yesterday that you thought so much of others you hardly wanted anything for yourself. He told us a wonderful story of Bouddha giving himself to the famished tigress to save her and her little ones from starving. And he said you were like Bouddha. That is what we all imagine of you.'

‘Pray don’t imagine that... Even if it were true that I thought so much of others, it would not follow that I had no wants for myself. When Bouddha let the tigrress eat him he might have been very hungry himself.’ (*Deronda* 399)

In *Middlemarch*, Eliot invokes the Buddha with a facetious tone to describe an inconsequential character (Celia’s baby). In the above passage from *Daniel Deronda*, however, Eliot juxtaposes the Buddha with the central moral force of the novel—Deronda—and Deronda challenges the ethical merits of the Buddha. This creates an explicit conflict between the ethics of the Buddha and Deronda at this point in the novel, and given that Eliot models the Buddha in *Deronda* on a Buddhist legend that emphasizes compassion over worldly ambition,<sup>8</sup> Eliot most likely invokes Buddhism as a subtle gauge to measure the true compassion of Deronda. Eliot further justifies this theory when she translates in her *Pforzheimer Notebooks* the Three Refuges of Buddhism (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) as the Human Ideal, Doctrine, and Social Authority, respectively (*Notebooks* 422). Thus, the Buddha for Eliot represents the human ideal, and since the Buddha sacrifices himself for universal compassion, even towards animals, Deronda’s dissent from the Buddha signals that he lacks universal compassion.

Many scholars have written about Judaism and George Eliot, but few have yet explored Buddhism and Eliot. Despite this dearth of contemporary scholarship, however, Buddhism has in fact been recognized as an important cultural phenomenon for centuries

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<sup>8</sup> Eliot draws the metaphor from Eugene Burnouf’s *Introduction to Indian Buddhism* (1844): “A young Brahman who has retired into the depths of a forest to give himself over, in the interest of living beings... gives his body as food to a starving tigrress that just gave birth to cubs. At the moment of committing this heroic sacrifice, he exclaims: ‘How true it is that I do not abandon life for kingship, or for the enjoyments of pleasure, or for the rank of Sakra, or for that of sovereign monarch, but rather to reach the supreme state of a perfectly accomplished Buddha.’” (Burnouf 185-186)

by European thinkers as diverse as Marco Polo, Pierre Bayle, and Hegel, but until the mid-nineteenth century, Europeans predominantly categorized Buddhism as an Oriental superstition synonymous with Taoism and Confucianism (Clarke 74). The advent of British imperialism, however, forced Europeans to interact with Buddhists in a more substantial capacity, and the linguistic study of Sinhalese and Tibetan languages revealed that Buddhism was not an amorphous superstition but rather a distinct engagement with an intricate religious system. This allure of exotic new languages and Buddhist culture drew Hungarian linguist Alexander Csoma to Tibet in 1823 (Lussier 101). Upon his arrival, Csoma befriended a venerated Buddhist monk named Sangye Puntsog and became the first European to access the entire Tibetan canon of Buddhist writings (Lussier 101). Csoma studied the Buddhist canon for a decade under the direction of Puntsog, and he began publishing in 1832 the first Tibetan-English dictionary as well as numerous translations of Tibetan works in the *Journal of the Asiatick Society of Bengal* (Lussier 103). The English imperial officer Brian Hodgson also published substantial translations of Buddhist texts in 1837 (Clarke 74). Eugene Burnouf then studied the writings of Csoma and Hodgson and wrote in 1844 *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*—a landmark work of scholarship that captivated many European intellectuals, including Schopenhauer and Wagner (Franklin 12). Schopenhauer then appended an extensive encomium for Buddhism in the supplement to the second edition of *The World as Will and Representation* in 1844 (Clarke 76). Several decades later, Wagner, inspired by Schopenhauer and Burnouf, described himself as a Buddhist and composed *Parsifal*—his final opera based on the Buddhist theme of renunciation that he explored in an unpublished opera (*The Victor*), which celebrated the life of the Buddha (Clarke 77).

Thus, under the leadership of Burnouf and several titans of the European intelligentsia, Buddhism became a popular sensation by the end of the 1850s.

Victorians met the popularization of Buddhism with ambivalence. Many prominent scholars, such as Max Mueller, praised Buddhism for promoting universal compassion, but others, such as Marx, accused Buddhism of encouraging nihilism (Clarke 73). Despite the reservations of some critics, however, Buddhism found an attentive audience with the Victorians for several reasons. First, Buddhism appealed to many Victorians because the Buddhist split from Hinduism paralleled the Protestant split from the Catholic Church (Franklin 20). Both Protestants and Buddhists sought greater freedoms for impoverished social classes; both valued intent over doctrine; and both maintained less rigorous precepts for the laity and emphasized greater compatibility with different cultures. Many Victorians may have scoffed at the metaphysics of Buddhism, but they empathized with the religious politics of the Buddha. Similarly, the moral outlook of the historical Buddha enamored Victorians (Franklin 20). The Buddha emphasized the renunciation of individual desire and the cultivation of universal compassion. The Buddha's call for greater awareness of the social good, rather than private gain, would have appealed to many Victorians, as evidenced by the passage of numerous social reform acts in the mid-nineteenth century. Even outspoken critics of Buddhism, such as Jules Saint-Hilaire, who at one point denounces Buddhism as an anathema (Saint-Hilaire 17), extolled the historical Buddha as an exemplar of virtue surpassed only by Jesus (Saint-Hilaire 14).

The final and perhaps most important quality of Buddhism that captivated Victorians was the secular foundation of its ethical system (Franklin 21). Victorians in

the mid-nineteenth century emphasized the Buddha as a mortal man who discovered ideal morality through introspection rather than divine decree. Buddhism became for many Victorians a major world religion that practiced a respectable ethical system without necessitating a god as a source for those ethics. Asian Buddhists did often incorporate god(s) into their religious expression, but many Victorians purged the Asian gods from Buddhism and reduced Buddhism to familiar European philosophies, such as humanism (Franklin 21). Thus, Buddhism became another secular alternative to the Judeo-Christian worldview.

Buddhism intrigued Victorians with Protestant politics, universal compassion, and secular ethics, but many Europeans still considered Buddhism largely irrelevant to the modern intellectual landscape. A growing contingent of European intellectuals, however, began utilizing the new methods of Higher Criticism during the 1860s to speculate that Buddhism may have influenced the historical development of Christianity. For example, Louis Jacolliot claimed in *Bible dans l'Inde* (1868) that Jesus studied Buddhism in India during his unaccounted years and that the Cult of Christ mirrors the Indian Cult of Krishna (Clarke 81). Similarly, Emile Burnouf claimed in his *The Science of Religions* (1872) that the “Spirit of Christ” pre-dates Judaism (68) and that the concept of Christ may in fact originate from early Buddhist rituals regarding the god of the hearth—Agni (153). Some anti-Semitic intellectuals, such as Wagner and Friedrich Schlegel, used this possibility of Buddhism influencing Christianity to marginalize the impact of Judaism on the cultural history of Europe (Clarke 78). They reasoned that if Buddhism inspired Jesus to break from Jewish Law in the same way that the Buddha renounced Hinduism, then the Jews were an impediment to the ethical progress of humanity. Other proponents

of Higher Criticism, such as Max Mueller, claimed that “religion” is a mental faculty innate in all humans and that comparing religious expressions should help scholars understand connections in the human condition (Mueller 17). Mueller summarizes his call for inclusivism as “any one who knows *one* religion knows none” (Mueller 16). Mueller would claim that discovering parallels between Christianity and Buddhism does not obviate the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, but rather it increases our knowledge of all three religions. Thus, Buddhism in England transitioned during the 1860s from an irrelevant philosophy into a possible progenitor for Christianity and the cultural history of Europe.

Buddhism fascinated George Eliot for the same reasons that it captivated many Victorians. It offered an atheistic religion that exalted human compassion, and it also maintained a karmic cycle known as Samsara that interconnected all living things with a cultural memory similar to Mordecai’s Kabbalistic vision Judaism. It is important to remember, however, that many European commentators on Buddhism during the Victorian era paid little attention to the practices and beliefs of actual Buddhists—who often incorporated Buddhism into a syncretic spirituality. For example, it would not be unusual for a Tibetan Buddhist to also worship local gods or enact Taoist rituals. Eastern religiosity was still highly holistic, and Buddhism in practice did not often observe the regimented theology of its sacred texts, which were the basis for many European commentators on Buddhism, such as Eugene and Emile Burnouf. Nevertheless, though Europeans often overlooked the impact of local cultures on Buddhist expression, the ostensible atheism of Buddhism allowed Buddhism in the European imagination to blend well with other cultures and religions. Thus, many nineteenth-century intellectuals began

speculating that Buddhism may have contributed to Western culture in hitherto unexamined ways.

George Eliot did not adopt the anti-Semitism of Emile Burnouf and other Buddhist apologists who sought to replace the cultural significance of the Jews with new theories of Aryanism, but she did demonstrate an interest in the possibility that Buddhism influenced the development of Western culture. In the *Pforzheimer Notebooks*, for example, Eliot examines the apocryphal text *Barlaam and Josaphat* from Henry Yule's translation of the travel writings of Marco Polo: *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian* (1872). According to the narrative, Saint Thomas converts the people of India to Christianity, but a pagan king named Abbener rises to power and persecutes Christians, particularly the ascetics. Then Prince Josaphat, Abbener's son, is born, and during his early adulthood, he witnesses the suffering of a sick man and an old man (Yule 2: 306). Next, an ascetic monk named Baarlam infiltrates the palace and unfolds to Josaphat the transcendent power of Christianity. Josaphat converts and uses Christianity to spread prosperity across his kingdom (Yule 2: 307). After a successful reign, Josaphat renounces the royal throne and reunites with Baarlam in the wilderness. Josaphat and Baarlam devote the remainder of their lives to introspection and die in peace (Yule 2: 307).

The biography of Josaphat aligns well with the story of the Buddha. Both are princes, live in India, and renounce their political powers to search for enlightenment through introspection. Eliot acknowledges these similarities between the Buddha and Josaphat in her *Notebooks* (468). In addition, Yule notes in his translation that several other scholars have identified connections between Buddhism and *Barlaam and*



*Josaphat*, including Diego de Couto and Eduoard Laboulaye, and he insists that *Barlaam and Josaphat* is not an obscure text but rather an important work with historical consequence (Yule 2: 308). He claims that the tale originated from John of Damascus in the eighth century CE (Yule 2: 305), but it did not become popular with the Christian Church until Simeon the Metaphrast speculated around the eleventh-century CE that Barlaam and Josaphat were saints (Yule 2: 307). The tale then appears in the thirteenth-century history *Speculum Historiale* by Vincent of Beauvais, and it also plays a prominent role in the *Golden Legend* (Yule 2: 308). Furthermore, both Cardinal Baronius and Pope Gregory XIII of the sixteenth century comment on the story, and Barlaam and Josaphat are officially celebrated in Roman Martyrology on November twenty-seventh (Yule 2: 307). Yule even presents in his notes for the translation of *Marco Polo* a German drawing from 1477 that illustrates Josaphat as a Christian saint (Yule 2: 309). Yule concludes that the fascination of the Catholic Church with the story of the Buddha inspired several of the most influential writers of the later medieval and early modern periods, including Boccaccio, Shakespeare, and John Gower (Yule 2: 305). Thus, Eliot's reading of and extensive notes about Yule's account of *Barlaam and Josaphat* demonstrate her interest in narratives that incorporate Buddhism into the development of Western culture.

Yule's account of *Barlaam and Josaphat* establishes the presence of Buddhism in Christian thought beginning around the eighth-century CE, but did Eliot read any sources that would have convinced her that Buddhism influenced Western culture even earlier? Several such narratives existed, most of which attributed the origin of Buddhism in the West to cultural exchanges along trade routes between India and ancient Greece. Henry

Mansel in *The Gnostic Heresies of the First and Second Centuries* (1875) argues that Buddhist missionaries visited Egypt no later than two generations after Alexander the Great (Mansel 31),<sup>9</sup> and he cites historical accounts from Philo to contend that Buddhism appears most noticeably in the Therapeutae Jewish community in Alexandria in the form of contemplative meditation and asceticism.<sup>10</sup> Henry Milman, whom Eliot mentions in the *Notebooks* (508), agrees in *The History of Christianity* (1871) that Buddhism influenced early Gnostic communities, and he claims that the doctrine of the Sephiroth in the Kaballah derives from Buddhist ideas (Milman 37). Finally, Charles King asserts in *Gnostics and Their Remains* (1864) that a Babylonian trader named Scythius became inspired by Buddhist teachings while traveling in India, and he composed four texts delineating his new spiritual outlook (King 16).<sup>11</sup> Scythius presented his teachings to the original Christian apostles, but their answers did not satisfy him (King 17). He then blended his ideas with taboo beliefs about magic, and after Scythius died by “accidently” falling off his roof, his servant Terbinthus took possession of his teachings and renamed himself “Budda” after studying the texts (King 18).<sup>12</sup> King also speculates that Buddhism inspired the esoteric beliefs of Pythagoras (17), and he adds that the Edicts of Asoka confirm that Buddhists had visited Egypt before the third century BCE (King

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<sup>9</sup> J.B. Lightfoot composed the text version of *Gnostic Heresies* in 1875 from a collection of lectures delivered by Mansel in 1868 at St. Paul’s Cathedral (Mansel xxiii). Mansel was the Dean of St. Paul’s at the time, and although no explicit evidence exists to prove that Eliot attended his lectures, his notoriety in the theological community all but guarantees that his ideas would have penetrated into Eliot’s intellectual circle.

<sup>10</sup> Eliot undoubtedly read Philo, since Strauss and Feuerbach both discuss him in the two works that Eliot translated: *Life of Jesus* and *Essence of Christianity*.

<sup>11</sup> The four books are: “The Mysteries”, “The Summary”, “The Gospels”, and “The Treasures.” The original books appear to be lost, but Epiphanius mentions them in his *Life of Manes* (King 17).

<sup>12</sup> King insinuates that Terbinthus murdered Scythius.

23).<sup>13</sup> Thus, given the preponderance of Victorian theories and historical evidence that linked Buddhism with the formation of several Gnostic communities, it is extremely probable that Eliot credited the origins of at least some ideas in Kabbalism (a Gnostic rendition of Judaism) with Buddhism.

Many Eliot scholars underestimate the impact that these conversations about Buddhism and Western culture had on the formation of Eliot's notion of the Kaballah in *Deronda*. Avrom Fleishman claims that Eliot drew her inspiration for the Kaballah in *Deronda* from Emmanuel Deutsch and Leopold Zunz (Fleishman 191). Deutsch and Zunz believed that Kabbalism began in the thirteenth century from the teachings of Rabbi Moses de Leon, who derived his theology from an ancient manuscript known as the Zohar, which was written by Simon ben Jochai around 70 CE. Eliot indeed read Deutsche and Zunz, but she also read other Jewish theologians who debated the origins and authenticity of the Kaballah. Christian Ginsburg in *The Kaballah: Its Doctrines Development and Literature* (1865) argues that Moses de Leon composed the *Zohar* in the thirteenth-century, despite claims within the *Zohar* itself that the text was written by Simon ben Jochai around the fall of the Second Jewish Temple in 70 CE (Ginsburg 84).<sup>14</sup> Ginsburg lists several reasons for attributing authorship of the *Zohar* to Leon and not Jochai. First, the *Zohar* contains numerous anachronisms that refute the possibility that Jochai composed the text. For example, the *Zohar* contends that the "Mahommedans" would claim Israel for awhile before the children of Ishmael would rise to reclaim the holy land (Ginsburg 87). A first century Rabbi would have had no knowledge of these

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<sup>13</sup> Asoka was the first Indian King to officially endorse Buddhism. C.W. King here refers to edicts written upon a rock in Girnur, in Guzerat (King 23).

<sup>14</sup> Eliot read Ginsburg while preparing *Deronda*. See *Notebooks* 500.

allusions to the medieval crusades, and even if he predicted a future religious war, Muhammad as a name held no significance until the rise of Islam in the seventh-century. Furthermore, the *Zohar* incorporates complete quotations from previous literary works published well after Jochai, such as two complete verses from Ibn Gebirol's *The Royal Diadem* (1070) (Ginsburg 86). Finally, a wealthy merchant offered to pay a generous sum for the original *Zohar* manuscript upon the death of Moses de Leon, but Leon's widow admitted that Leon was the original composer of the *Zohar*. She confessed that Leon had fabricated Simon ben Jochai as the author in order to sell more copies of the text (Ginsburg 91). Thus, Ginsburg concludes that the Kaballah originated in the thirteenth-century and that Moses de Leon invented the concepts of *En Soph*, the *Sephiroth*, and the transmigration of souls (Ginsburg 89).

If Moses de Leon invented the Jewish concept of soul transmigration, then Buddhism played no discernible role in the formation of the Kaballah. Eliot, however, would likely doubt that Leon composed the entire *Zohar* without drawing on at least some ideas from the East, given the popularity of *Barlaam and Josaphat* during the Medieval era and given the Victorian theories of Buddhist cultural exchange with the West by authors such as Mansel, Milman, and King. Furthermore, as a student of Higher Criticism, Eliot understood the transcription process of ancient texts, and she knew that anachronisms and other forms of corruption inevitably contaminate the message of original manuscripts. Jochai could not have written about the crusades or Gebirol's poem, but scribes could have inserted these interpolations just as easily as Leon. In addition, Adolphe Franck in *The Kaballah: or Religious Philosophy of the Hebrews*

(1843) provides Eliot with several more reasons to doubt Ginsburg.<sup>15</sup> First, the *Zohar* is too complex to have been constructed by one man over a short period of time. The theosophy of the text would require a vast knowledge of multiple cultures—a luxury that would not have been available to a poor Jewish man in thirteenth-century Spain (Franck 107). Furthermore, Leon wrote his version of the *Zohar* in Aramaic, but Franck observes that the Arabians have no concept analogous to the Sephiroth. God only reveals himself in one way, and the concept of multiple emanations derives from Gnostic sources, not Arabian mystics (Franck 107). Franck therefore concludes that the *Zohar* must have originated from antiquity (Franck 307), and given the abundance weaknesses in Ginsburg’s argument, Eliot most likely agreed with Franck.

Franck speculates at the end of his work that the doctrines of Kabbalism probably derive from Babylonian mysticism, but he admits that the teachings of Philo share a great number of ideas with Kabbalism (Franck 306). This should not be surprising, since Philo was also a Jewish philosopher contemporaneous with the author of the *Zohar*, as stated by the text itself—Simon ben Jochai. Franck, however, claims that Alexandrian Jews (Philo) would have had little communication and cultural exchange with Palestinian Jews, such as Jochai (Franck 306), but this theory of isolationism is absurd. Rome was at the height of its imperialism in the first-century CE, and Palestine served as an epicenter for several prominent trade routes. King’s story of Scythius illustrates a scenario in which these trade routes helped facilitate cultural exchanges between different Jewish factions as well as introducing Buddhist ideas to the West. Egyptians and Palestinians therefore undoubtedly interacted with each other, particularly the Jewish communities,

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<sup>15</sup> Eliot read Franck while preparing *Deronda*. See *Notebooks* 500.

who shared similar beliefs and cultures, and therefore, the similarities between the teachings of Philo and Jochai indicate a common source of inspiration rather than mere coincidence, as Franck implies.

Arthur Lillie in *Buddhism in Christendom* (1887) argues that this common source was probably the Essenes. Lillie clarifies that within the diverse Essene community, the Therapeutae were the most likely influence upon Philo, and he lists several observations by Philo that designate elements of a common religiosity shared by both the Therapeutae and Buddhists. First, the Therapeutae abandoned their families for a life of pure contemplation (Lillie 78). Although some individual Jewish mystics pursued the ascetic lifestyle, no sect other than the Essenes condoned the permanent abandonment of the family, but this austere life of contemplation had existed in Indian Buddhism for centuries. Philo also noted that the Therapeutae enforced strict vegetarianism and refrained from any alcoholic beverages, including wine (Lillie 77). According to Lillie, these dietary restrictions were foreign to most Jews, but they were standard in Indian Buddhism. In addition to the accounts of Philo, Lillie also invokes Josephus as an additional ancient historian who observes Essene practices that resemble Buddhism. According to Josephus, the Essenes forbade slavery, war, revenge, and worldly longings (Lillie 78). The Jews waged many wars in the Hebrew Bible, but Buddhists were pacifists, at least in the Victorian construction of them. Josephus also observed that the Essenes often excommunicated troublesome monks rather than holding them accountable to punitive laws. This practice mirrors the Buddhist Sangha and diverges from strict Hebrew code of Law. Lillie wrote *Buddhism in Christendom* well after George Eliot died, but given Eliot's familiarity with Philo and Josephus, it is probable that she

reasoned at least some of the conclusions that he draws. Also, Eliot confirms in the *Notebooks* that the doctrine of the transmigration of souls in Judaism pre-dates Kabbalism, and she references both Philo and Josephus to claim that the Essenes were the first Jews to adopt the idea (*Notebooks* 455).

Eliot further reflects upon Buddhism in other sections of her *Notebooks* as well. She describes a “Bouddha” as wise and awakened, and she asserts that the title derives from “boudh,” which means “to know” (*Notebooks* 403). This emphasis on human wisdom rather than esoteric dispensation matches Eliot’s secular humanism. In addition, Eliot does not reserve the status of Buddhahood for a particular historical figure but rather imagines Buddhahood to be an attainable state of mind for anyone with proper training. Eliot makes this inclusivism of Buddhism explicit when she describes the Buddha as “he who walks in the paths of his predecessors, the former Bouddhas,” (*Notebooks* 403). The plurality of this description (paths, predecessors, Bouddhas) suggests that Buddhism is compatible with multiple cultures. This compatibility of Buddhism with multiple cultures fosters the universal compassion that Eliot prizes. Buddhism for Eliot also articulates an ethical system that renounces political nationalism. She captures these qualities of inclusivism and pacifism when she calls the Buddha “Sakyamouni.” Eliot’s spelling of “Bouddha” and “Sakyamouni” with an “ou” in her notebooks and *Deronda* itself situates her within French scholarship, and we know that Eliot read *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism* by Eugene Burnouf—a premier French scholar on Buddhism in the nineteenth century (*Notebooks* 276). Thus, Eliot most likely draws her translation of “Sakyamouni” from Burnouf, and he translates “Sakya” to mean the warrior caste of India and “mouni” to mean recluse (Burnouf 115).

Thus, the Buddha is the “recluse of the warrior class,” and this epithet implies a disassociation from any particular socio-political order. Eliot’s emphasis on the Buddha as a man who achieves supreme wisdom through his own volition distinguishes Buddhism from the Judeo-Christian traditions of Europe in which God serves as the source of wisdom. Buddhist compassion for Eliot requires no divine mediation. The Buddha is the “*human ideal*” (*Notebooks* 422), and his teachings about universal compassion are compatible with many other religious frameworks, including Judaism.



## Conclusion

As John Lord observed in *Beacon Lights of History*, George Eliot writes “almost like a follower of the Buddha” (4: 388-89). Eliot never declared herself a Buddhist, but she did admire the Buddhist ethic of universal compassion. Two qualities of Buddhism in particular attracted Eliot: the transmigration of souls, and a human basis for compassion. These attributes synergized well with her secular humanism and offered her a blueprint for a cultural heritage that transcends national politics.

Eliot centered *Daniel Deronda* upon Judaism, but she chose to model the Judaism in the novel on Kabbalism—an esoteric version of Judaism that shares many ideas with Buddhism. Most notably, Kabbalism painted a vision of Judaism in which Jews discover God through a teleological process of discovery and cultural inheritance. Traditional narratives of Judaism in the Hebrew Bible often portray the Jews as a chosen race that follows the explicit commands of God, but in Kabbalism, as represented by Mordecai in *Deronda*, Jews refine their knowledge about God through a process of the transmigration of souls and cultural inheritance. God does not command the Good, but rather Jews must discover the Good through relationships with other people. This emphasis on humanity rather than the Divine in Kabbalism did not necessarily derive from Buddhist trade routes around the first century CE, but given numerous Victorian narratives about the cultural exchanges between the Buddhists and the West around that time, Eliot would have attributed the transmigration of souls in Kabbalism to a Buddhist origin.

It is important to remember, however, that although Eliot endorsed the cultural inheritance modeled by Kabbalism, she did *not* condone the establishment of a modern

Jewish State. Numerous personal letters contemporaneous with *Deronda* confirm that she disapproved of any culture that attempts to encroach on the freedom of others. Furthermore, *Deronda* itself presents numerous warnings against Deronda's mission to re-establish Israel. The most prominent of these warnings occurs when Deronda informs Gwendolen that he will rally the Jews in the East. Immediately following his declaration, Eliot paints an apocalyptic vision in which humanity suffers under the oppression from his "wide stretching purpose" (689). In addition, Mordecai, Deronda, and Gideon all represent separate visions of Judaism, and Gwendolen, who is not Jewish at all, occupies roughly half of the narrative. Thus, Eliot does not endorse the political movement to create a Jewish State. She does, however, believe that a national *consciousness* is necessary to stave off cosmopolitan indifference. The Jews should cherish the teleology of cultural continuity presented by Kabbalism, but the apocalyptic scene when Deronda decides to pursue his mission suggests that an actual political movement to forge a Jewish State would be tantamount to other historical atrocities of religious fervor.

Eliot incorporates Buddhist ideas into *Deronda* to negotiate the tension between Jewish cultural heritage and the difficulty of realizing universal compassion while pursuing a political movement to establish a modern Jewish State. Judaism for Eliot represents a religion with a rich cultural heritage to combat Victorian cosmopolitanism, but traditional Judaism relies too much upon exclusivism to foster universal compassion. Conversely, secular humanism for Eliot offers a vision universal compassion similar to Buddhism, but without any grounding in a particular cultural heritage, secular humanism risks succumbing to cosmopolitanism. Buddhism in the Victorian imagination negotiates

this conflict by encouraging cultural heritage, the renunciation of egoism, and the admiration of other cultures.

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## **VITA**



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