

PART 2

Pickthall's Religious and Political Thought



Pickthall's Anti-Ottoman Dissent: The Politics of Religious Conversion

Mohammad Siddique Seddon

It is possibly because I care so much about the British Empire in the East, and from the circumstances of my life can see things from the Muslim point of view...I realised the terrible effect which such a policy [the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire by Britain and its allies], executed at the moment when the Turks sincerely aimed at progress, could have upon my Oriental fellow-subjects. And in my small way I have been trying to make England realise it.¹

Pickthall's journey to Islam was less to do with theological contentions within his original Protestant Christian faith, and more to do with the rise in anti-Ottomanism, a self-asserted British imperialism and the future of Europe and the Islamic world. This chapter explores the political motivations behind Pickthall's very public conversion to Islam and explores how such dissenters were seen, and "placed", in early-twentieth century, Imperial Britain. Pickthall was an odd rarity amongst his peers and fellow writers in that he appears not to have been motivated by the exoticism of the oriental "other", so often a feature of British high-imperial writings on the subject. Rather, he seems to have been spiritually and existentially drawn to the cultures and religion of the region. His novels bear much of the ethnographer about them, rich and informed in their intimate details of everyday, ordinary life in early-twentieth century Arabia. Peter Clark, Pickthall's most detailed biographer, has said that what was unique about him amongst his contemporaries was his empathetic and well-informed writing coupled with his Muslim faith, which produced a "mature and accomplished author writing the English Islamic novel".²

Pickthall was born in London, on 7 April 1875, into a middle-class family of Anglican clerics on his father's side. His urbane, comfortable religious family fully bought into the supremacy of British imperial, Church and State hegemony. Whilst both Pickthall's father and grandfather were Anglican vicars and a number of his step-sisters were nuns, he appears to have become increasingly

1 Marmaduke Pickthall, *Saturday Review*, 124, 3241 (December 1917), 461–62.

2 Peter Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall: British Muslim* (London: Quartet, 1986), 3.

disaffected with Church life and attitudes. Clark asserts that Pickthall regarded church missionaries as, “misguided menaces who, with spiritual arrogance and political ineptitude were alienating the Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire and undermining the Empire itself”.³ In many ways Pickthall’s life appeared to be conveniently mapped-out through a vocation within the church ministry. Fortuitously, it was to be his personal and family connections in the Anglican Church that provided him the opportunity to travel to the Middle-East in the first instance.

In Egypt Pickthall developed a paradoxical admiration for British imperial-rule which he found distinctly manifest in Cromer, who had been British Consul General for twenty years. Pickthall was staunchly in favour of British-rule in Egypt, believing that their presence had brought both order and tolerance to the country, two important facets he felt were sadly lacking elsewhere in the Middle East. His views ran contrary to the increasing nationalist sentiments of the Egyptian people, as did his conviction that the Ottoman Empire be more closely associated with British rule as a means of both reducing the power of the Egyptian Khedive and enamouring ordinary Egyptians towards their British colonial occupiers.⁴ But as events in the Ottoman provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina witnessed Austria’s annexation, shortly after the Young Turk revolution in Turkey, Pickthall became evermore empathetic towards the rapidly westernising Ottoman Empire and increasingly more frustrated at Britain and Europe’s betrayal of the 1878 Treaty of Berlin.

As Pickthall developed his academic writing in parallel with his increasingly popular fictional works, his pro-Ottoman affiliations became evermore focused and publicly committed along with other Turkophile contemporaries such as, *shaykh al-Islam*, Abdullah William Henry Quilliam, Robert “Rachid” Stanley, an outspoken Turkophile and anti-Armenian activist who was twice Lord Mayor of Stalybridge, Greater Manchester, and Lady Evelyn “Zeinab” Cobbold, who tried to convince Pickthall to accept Islam during one of their luncheon dates at Claridges, in 1914.⁵ A year before he wrote *With the Turk in Wartime* in which he furiously berated the British press and public for its blind fanaticism in responding to “the call of a crusade against the Turk” at which he retorted “the solidarity of Christendom against a Muslim power was reckoned a fine thing by many people, but it broke the heart of Englishmen who loved the East”.⁶ His informed articulations on political affairs in Ottoman Turkey

3 Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall*, 37.

4 *Ibid.*, 15.

5 Sherif, *Brave Hearts*, 2–3.

6 Marmaduke Pickthall, *With the Turk in Wartime* (London: Dent, 1914).

and the Middle East found a regular home in a newly published weekly, *The New Age*, a periodical edited by the journalist, A.R. Orage and financially supported by George Bernard Shaw. *The New Age* was intended to be politically radical and ideologically socialist.

Pickthall contributed a number of articles covering events in Egypt, Palestine, Turkey and the Balkans. His dissenting voice and pro-Ottoman discourse was continuously published throughout the First World War, displaying an, at the time, astonishing tolerance by the British government who withheld any censorship of such, then, contentious sentiments. Whilst the groundwork for the First World War was being prepared in Britain and Europe, Pickthall's own political convictions became further polarised by the rise of anti-Muslim propaganda primarily legitimised by the Anglican (State) Church, which demonised the Ottoman Empire as "satanic" for its assumed suppression of eastern European, Christian *dhimma* (religious minority) within its dominions. In response to this stark Islamophobia, the New Age Press printed a series of articles by Pickthall collectively titled, "The Black Crusade", in which he spelt out the case for increased British-Ottoman alliances. His main arguments centred round the Turks' continued compliance with the Treaty of Berlin (1878), despite Austria's colonisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy's invasion of Tripoli and the Balkan Christian states invading European Turkey.⁷ He also argued that the progressive revolution of the Young Turk movement towards the establishment of a modern, secular nation-state based on a European model was a clear indication that Turkey did not represent a threat to Britain or Europe, to which it aspired to belong. In an effort to develop a greater informed view of the impending hostilities against the Turks, in 1913 Pickthall decided to visit Turkey on a fact finding mission.

Sherif asserts that it was only after his return from Turkey that Pickthall joined the Freemasons' Misercadia Lodge, "at the invitation of Dr Rosedale, DD", as a means of belonging to a fraternity that "at the time provided a fellowship that overcame barriers of race and class".⁸ However, for someone of Pickthall's middle-class background, becoming a Freemason would be an expectation as well as a means of forging important economic, political and social links and acquaintances that would facilitate any number of often-needed aid and assistance. Pickthall's views regarding imperialism and colonialism appear to be universally consistent in that, for him, both the British and Ottoman Empires were forces for global good and, again, in his considered opinion both should have allied economically, militarily and politically

⁷ Pickthall, *With the Turk*, 21.

⁸ Sherif, *Brave Hearts*, 8.

as a uniting force that could establish world peace, modernise and democratise the Ottoman *millet* provinces and the Middle East, and stabilise the global economy. Evidence pointing clearly towards Pickthall's absolute endorsement of imperial power and rule is best witnessed by his responses to two specific incidents that occurred under both British and Ottoman rule.

The first is the so-called Denshawi incident which happened under British colonial rule in Egypt in June 1906. A small group of colonial officers decided to undertake a pigeon shoot near the rural village of Denshawi. One of the British officers soon became embroiled in a dispute with local pigeon breeders, possibly over an agreed price for shooting the birds or, perhaps, for doing so without the breeders' consent. In the subsequent furor, a local Egyptian woman and four Arab men were peppered with shotgun pellets. The village *fellahin* responded with sticks and batons and in the milieu one British officer, Captain Bull, escaped to get help but is alleged to have subsequently died of sunstroke. When another local Egyptian tried to assist the ailing officer, the other British officers assumed that Bull had been murdered by the local. The officers in turn beat the man to death. Ironically, no British officers were charged with the man's murder but, however, four further local Egyptian men were hanged and other "offenders" were either lashed or jailed. Both Clark and Sherif agree that Pickthall's reaction to the British handling of the Denshawi incident was stock imperialist but he was overly harsh in his endorsement of the imperial justice handed out to the pigeon breeders, arguing that the punishment was even handed and that pigeon breeders were the most contemptible and turbulent amongst Egyptian villagers.⁹

Equally, Pickthall's outright support of the Ottoman Empire manifested itself in a particularly vitriolic lambast of Armenian *dhimma* in the Turkish provinces. Whilst Pickthall fully expected Britain to lend its support to the Ottoman reformers, he was somewhat aghast at his country's complicit silence when Austria invaded Turkey's eastern European provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. When a counter-coup sought to re-establish the deposed Sultan Abdul Hamid II, in April 1909, Armenian minorities in Adana revolted against Ottoman power, which was heavily suppressed by the Turks and virulently opposed by British politicians, Pickthall remarked later:

In the early spring of 1909, the arrogant and war-like attitude of the Armenian Revolutionaries in the *vilayet* [province] of Adana and a discovery of bombs enraged the Muslim population and made them listen

⁹ Sherif, *Brave Hearts*, 12; Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall*, 16–17.

to the preaching of reactionary agents, who failed in every other province of the empire to provoke disorders. The result was a panic struggle ending in massacre.¹⁰

In an earlier article he described the Armenians as a “race of traitors, liars, utterly devoid of shame or honour...to kill them is as good a deed as to kill scorpions. They defile the globe. It is not a pleasant thing to write, but it is true”.¹¹

Pickthall was adamant that Ottoman religious minorities were privileged in comparison with other, ordinary Muslim subjects, believing that European powers were encouraging the Armenians to revolt as means of weakening the might of the Ottomans. He noted that Europeans were never in danger from the Turks but, rather, that, “rumours current in the West are due to the reports of Armenians, Greeks and other Levantines”.¹² In 1914, Pickthall wrote, “a fine race is being hounded to its death by Europe because it is too proud to plead, and cannot beg”.¹³ Clark asserts that Pickthall was “never fair” to Ottoman Christians, whom he says, appeared to be “arrogant, insinuating and self-deluding”.¹⁴ For Pickthall it appears that a post-reformist, re-particularised Turkey was the only way forward for the Muslim umma. In a letter to his wife written during his fact finding visit to Turkey, he stated, “Turkey is the present head of a progressive movement extending throughout Asia and North Africa. She is also the one hope for the Islamic world”.¹⁵ Like the progressive *‘ulema*, Pickthall saw no conflict between modernisation and Islam, believing instead that Turks should embrace their Islamic heritage rather than sheepishly imitate their European counterparts.

Upon his return to England, Pickthall's highly politicised and pro-Turkish views became evermore vocal both through his writings and activities. In 1914, he became a founder and active official of the Anglo-Ottoman Society (AOS) which included a number of British establishment luminaries such as former British Ambassador to Constantinople, Sir Louis Mallet, Conservative MP, Aubrey Herbert, Cambridge Professor, E.G. Browne and *shaykh al-Islam*,

10 Marmaduke Pickthall, “Massacres and the Turk: The Other Side”, *Foreign Affairs*, Special Supplement II (1920), xiv–xvi.

11 Marmaduke Pickthall, “Asia and the Armenians”, *New Age*, xxv (29 May 1919), 91.

12 Muhammad Hanif Shahid, *Writings of Muhammad Marmaduke William Pickthall* (Lahore: Ashraf, 2003), 280.

13 Marmaduke Pickthall, *Athenaeum*, 4516 (16 May 1914), 678. Cited in, Clark, *British Muslim*, 22.

14 Clark, *British Muslim*, 25.

15 *Ibid.*, 28.

Abdullah William Henry Quilliam.¹⁶ What emerges from Pickthall's political and religious views during this particular pre-First World War period are a number of seemingly contradictory positions exhibited by the author. His association with the AOS brought him into contact with anti-colonialist activists through *The New Age* journal including the Pan-Africanist and part-Sudanese political activist, actor and author, Dusé Mohamed Ali, who, in 1913, collected funds in Britain to purchase arms for pro-Ottoman Arabs to fight in the Turco-Italian wars. Dusé's London offices were also conspicuously close to the Central Islamic Society (CIS), to which Pickthall was affiliated, both organisations based at 158 Fleet Street. Pickthall was an active official of the AOS throughout the war and, paradoxically, served his country whilst openly supporting the Ottoman cause.¹⁷ Pickthall's co-activist in the AOS, Dusé Mohamed Ali was decorated with the Order of the Imperial Ottoman Mejedie, in 1892, by Sultan Abdül Hamid II and was thereafter titled *bey* or *effendi* after his name in respect.¹⁸

Dusé, the son of an Egyptian army officer and Sudanese mother, spent most of the early part of his life in Britain and after a distinguished career as an actor, touring with companies across Britain and America, he became an accomplished author and publisher. His book, *In the Land of the Pharaohs* (1911), launched his writing career and political activism and he went on to found the *African Times and Orient Review* (1912–1920) and the AOS, in 1914. Pickthall had strong associations with both Dusé's journal and the AOS, however, whilst Dusé and Pickthall agreed on Ottoman imperial supremacy as a Pan-Islamist vision for the Muslim world, they must have disagreed over Egypt. Pickthall believed that British colonial rule of Egypt was a force for good but, Dusé was an avid supporter of Mustafa Kemal Pasha and Sa'ad Zaghloul's Egyptian nationalist, Wafd Party.¹⁹ Abdulwahid claims that Dusé's book "is a fervent declaration in favor of the Egyptian nationalist movement and advocates liberation of Egypt from British occupation",²⁰ something Pickthall was clearly opposed to. Yet, Dusé and Pickthall appear to have worked closely together, with Dusé becoming vice-president of the CIS, in 1913.²¹ Dusé's contribution

16 Jamie Gilham, *Loyal Enemies: British Converts to Islam, 1850–1950*, (London: Hurst, 2014), 218.

17 Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall*, 27.

18 Khalil Mahmud (1968), Introduction to the Second Edition, Dusé Mohamed, *In the Land of the Pharaohs: A Short History of Egypt* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1911), xi.

19 *Ibid.*, xvii.

20 Mustafa Abdulwahid (Comp.), "Introduction" in, *Duse Mohamed Ali, 1886–1945: The Autobiography of a Pioneer Pan African and Afro-Asian Activist*, (The Red Sea Press: New Jersey, 2011), 7.

21 *Ibid.*, 16.

to Afro-Asian, Pan-African, Pan-Islamic, pro-Ottoman and anti-colonial activities cannot be underestimated and, like Pickthall, his associations brought him under the suspicion of the British intelligence services. In addition to allegedly collecting funds to arm pro-Ottoman forces against the Italians in Libya, it is claimed that in September 1914 Duse was in communication with both the Young Turks and National Socialists in Egypt.²² Whatever their political differences were regarding the future of Egypt, it would appear that both Duse and Pickthall, although supporters of modernist reforms across the Islamicate spaces, shared a Pan-Islamist view that the Muslim umma was still best served by the Ottomans.

When the war broke out in November 1914, a month later the offices of the CIS and AOS were raided by the police after a tip-off from MI5.²³ Around the same time Pickthall was suspected of being an enemy agent stemming from the time of his return from Turkey just before the war. Pickthall's Turcophile activities soon brought him personally within the radars of both a Foreign Office official, Sir Maurice de Bunsen, and the architect of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Sir Mark Sykes, the former saying Pickthall should be interned as an enemy alien and the latter responding to Pickthall's peace initiatives as something that "speak[s] in a distinctly hostile tone of your own government".²⁴ Refusing to be intimidated, the author continued relentlessly to push his pro-Turkish agenda and campaign for peace between Britain and the Ottomans. Ironically, in the last months of the war he was called up for military service and became a private, and eventually corporal, in the 17th Hampshires, where he was stationed at Southwold in his beloved Suffolk County.²⁵ Another seemingly contradiction was his support of the Young Turks' reformist movement via his association with the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), which ousted the Ottoman Sultan, and his staunch defence for a continued Ottoman Empire, forcing Clark to conclude, "[H]is short-term specific expectations were woefully fallible, but he was sounder in long-term assessments".²⁶ Pickthall appears to have resolved his dichotomous support for modernising reforms in Turkey whilst at the same time arguing for the continued integrity of the

22 Ian Duffield, "Duse Mohamed Ali, Afro-Asian Solidarity and Pan-Africanism in Early Twentieth-Century London", in S. Jagdish and Ian Gundara Duffield, eds., *Essays on the History of Blacks in Britain: From Roman Times to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992), 124.

23 Sherif, *Brave Hearts*, 17.

24 Gilham, *Loyal Enemies*, 251–52.

25 *Ibid.*, 32.

26 Clarke, *British Muslim*, 34.

Ottoman Empire by framing the Young Turks and CUP revolutionary coup as progressively Islamic, demanding education, social improvement and raising the status of women, as core teachings of the Prophet Muhammad himself.

Conversely, he understood nationalism (*qawmiyyah*) as being distinctly un-Islamic and, unlike his modernising Turkish reformer allies, saw Islam, and not nationality, as the prime marker of Muslim identity. In this sense, the impact of the Ottoman Empire reached far beyond its own geo-political borders and shaped the political identities of Muslims in British India and sub-Saharan Africa. As Clark readily concedes, for Pickthall, “The collapse of the Turkish empire threatened the Caliphate, the *khilafa*, the political importance of which was upheld by Muslims far beyond the confines of the Sultan-Caliph’s political jurisdiction”.²⁷ Pickthall’s prediction for the proposed fate of a demolished Ottoman Empire was remarkably informed, if not somewhat prophetic:

Our unknown rulers seem so far as I can learn to contemplate a full partition of the Turkish empire [...] England will have southern Mesopotamia and probably all of the territory southwards roughly of a line drawn on the map from a point little north of Samara on the Tigris to a point a little south of Jaffa on the Coast of Palestine. The whole of the peninsula of Arabia would be included in her ‘sphere of influence’ for gradual absorption. France will have much of Syria.²⁸

Sherif states that Pickthall used his masonic connections to propel his forlorn proposed peace deal between Britain and the Ottomans, and as the pro-Zionist lobby feared that peace with Turkey would derail their plans for a Jewish state in Palestine, Pickthall was considered to be an Ottoman spy and an enemy agent.²⁹ Throughout this period Pickthall remained ever steadfast and unperturbed. The Central Islamic Society (CIS), under the leadership of the Indian Muslim advocate and author, Mushir Hosain Kidwai, even appointed Pickthall as its spokesperson for “Muslim Interests on Palestine”.³⁰ At a meeting of the CIS, in June 1917, the year in which Pickthall later publicly declared his Islamic faith, he said of plans of a Jewish state in Palestine:

²⁷ Ibid., 35.

²⁸ Jonathan Schneer, *The Balfour Declaration – The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 249.

²⁹ Sherif, *Brave Hearts*, 19.

³⁰ Ibid.

Among the recent Jewish immigrants to Palestine- the Jews of the Zionist movement as distinct from the native Jews – there is an extreme and narrow fanaticism which their enlightened co-religionists in Europe hardly, I think, realise...their avowed intention is to get possession of the Rock (the so-called Mosque of Omar [*al-qubbat as-sakhrah*]) and the Mosque El Aksa [*al-masjid al-aqsa*], which is the second Holy Place of Islam – because it was the site of their Temple.³¹

The British intelligence services kept a close monitor on Pickthall's activities and public addresses with one official, Ormsby-Gore, of the Foreign Office commenting on Pickthall's assertion that the disruption of the Young Turk Empire would do injustice to the Muslim population, "this is truly an amazing statement such as we might expect from Mr Marmaduke Pickthall and similar anti-Semitic pro-Turks".³² With regards to Pickthall's Turcophile, anti-Zionist and Pan-Islamist writing and activities, Gilham asserts that, "as the main voice of dissent within the British Muslim community, Pickthall was considered by the authorities to be the most troublesome [Muslim] convert in this period".³³ Often seen as an "enemy to Christendom" by the British establishment, Pickthall privately realised that his endeavours to bring peace between the British and Ottoman powers was a lost cause, admitting, "the great division in Islam today is that between Progressive and Reactionary; and we are at present supporting the reactionaries, who are bound to lose in the long run".³⁴

In November 1917, during a lecture at the Muslim Literary Society in London Pickthall publicly announced his conversion to Islam during an impassioned speech in support of peace between the British and Ottoman rulers. It is fair to assume that Pickthall viewed the world through the political vantage of an ordered imperialism that was finely balanced between the British and Ottoman Empires. His writings evidence his apocalyptic vision of a post-imperial world that he considered to be the result of British and Ottoman hostilities. Politically, he appears to have been a consistent imperialist whilst culturally and spiritually he was continuously pulled towards the East. His romantic orientalism, was clearly manifest in his obsession with Arabic language and culture. This obsession eventually forced his rejection of Christianity and his acceptance of Islam. Pickthall's very public profession of his Muslim

31 Ibid., 19–20.

32 PRO CAB 24/144, Eastern Report, No.31, August 29, 1917.

33 Gilham, *Loyal*, 222.

34 Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Worker Dreadnought*, 4:50 (1918), 964.

faith, whatever his personal, spiritual reasons, was orchestrated to cause maximum political impact within the specific context of his faulted support for a British and Ottoman imperial alliance. It is clear from his own writings that Pickthall had converted to Islam for some time before his very public dissenting, political pronouncement. Clark affirms in the years preceding Pickthall's conversion to Islam, he was a faithful, practicing Christian who, even during his period in Turkey, in 1913, worshipped at the Crimean Memorial Church in Istanbul.³⁵ It was his personal disgust of the exploitation of Christian sentiment used as sympathy for the Christians under Ottoman rule, coupled with his political dissent of Britain's anti-Turkish foreign policy, which apparently so disaffected and alienated him from Christianity. Pickthall records his time serving in the British army, where his Muslim faith brought him both a sense of serenity and egalitarianism:

[O]ne of the greatest blessing which Islam brings to an Englishman is the deliverance from this [classist] insanity...irrespective of colour, race or creed, I have just been in the British army in the ranks- pitch-forked so to speak, at forty three, among all sorts of men – and I have found this Muslim point of view a godsend, making me content, where once I should have been extremely miserable.³⁶

After the war, in 1919, Pickthall was installed as *imam* of the Woking Mosque and as editor of the *Islamic Review* and lent his efforts to other leading Muslims who were arguing for the continuation of the Ottoman Empire, the destruction of which, they believed, would not be in the interests of British imperial rule and would add further troubles in Asia, and more importantly, British India.³⁷ Pickthall's post-war activities, operating openly as a pro-Ottoman Muslim, brought him even further under the scrutiny of the British intelligence services, who concluded that his association with the newly published, pro-Turkish bulletin, *Muslim Outlook*, as "to some extent anti-British".³⁸ Pickthall and his alleged anti-British co-conspirators were collectively termed the "Woking Mosque gang" in several internal intelligence communications. Conversely, Scotland Yard officers, who had been monitoring Pickthall's activities for a while, asserted that, unlike his other "Bolshevik" agitators, "in all probability

35 Clark, *British Muslim*, 37.

36 Shahid, *Writings*, p. 171.

37 Gilham, *Loyal*, 226.

38 *Ibid*, 227.

at heart he is a loyal British subject".³⁹ Reflecting upon his time as a devout Christian, Pickthall openly acknowledged:

In the days when I supposed myself to be a Christian it used to me to seem disgraceful that a country so enlightened as my country claims to be should allow, and, even as it seemed in some instances, encourage Christian missionaries to annoy non-Christians by their attempts to proselytise within the boundaries of the British Empire, an Empire which I had been taught to regard the home or rather the school of civil and religious liberty.⁴⁰

It was in 1914, when Britain was finally at war with the Ottoman Empire, against the desires and expectations of Pickthall, that he finally rejected his Anglican faith and privately accepted Islam. Clark recalls a particular incident, according to Pickthall's own memories that was another catalyst for his rejection of Christianity. It occurred during congregational worship at which Pickthall was present when a hymn by Charles Wesley declared:

...save the souls by that imposter [Muhammad] led;
The Arab thief, as Satan bold,
Who quite destroyed thine Asian fold...⁴¹

Clark's detailed analysis of Pickthall's writings, both fictional and journalistic, traces the subtle shift from an empathetic, pro-Ottoman Turcophile to an openly, manifest pious Muslim preacher. During this period, Sherif writes that Pickthall was employed by the London-based Islamic Information Bureau, formerly the Islamic Defence League, which was supported by two prominent Indian Muslims; Mushir Hosein Kidwai and Haji M. Hashim Ispahani, which brought him once again under the suspicion and watchful eye of the British intelligence services. Pickthall's Pan-Islamism was equated with the Bolshevik "People's Russian Information Bureau" and when added to Pickthall's other associations; The Anglo-Ottoman Society, the League of Justice for Asia and Africa and the Islamic Society, he was placed high on the list of anti-British undesirables by the British intelligence.⁴² According to Sherif the Islamic Information Bureau "served as the Khilafatist movement's [London] base,

39 Ibid., p. 228.

40 Cited in Clark, *British Muslim*, 37.

41 Ibid., 38.

42 Sherif, *Brave Hearts*, 28–9.

providing support to the visiting Indian delegations led by Maulana Mohamed Ali Jauhar.⁴³ By the end of World War One, Pickthall and his pan-Islamist associates became aware that the post-war Peace Conferences were dismantling the Ottoman Empire and rendering it ineffectual as a world power. Added to this was his brave and continued confrontation with the Armenian lobby in Britain, from whom he demanded in an open letter to them on behalf of the Bureau that they prove their unfounded claim that Islam condoned the “killing at sight” of Christians. In December 1919, Pickthall resigned from the Bureau and added his signature, along with other Muslim dignitaries including, Lady Evelyn “Zeinab” Cobbold and the Agha Khan, to a letter to the Prime Minister urging for “a policy towards Turkey that would lead to appeasement”.⁴⁴

Sadly for Pickthall and his fellow British, pro-Ottoman associates, their efforts to create a peaceful *détente* between the then two great superpowers, Britain and Turkey, were fruitless, if not futile. Yet, had it not been for fear of massive unrest in imperial India, Britain and its allies may well have forced the Ottomans from Istanbul.⁴⁵ It is a strong possibility that after the war Pickthall came to realise that the end of the Ottoman Empire was actually a *fait accompli* and that his pro-Ottoman antagonism had made him a virtual *persona non grata* in Britain. Whatever the exact reasons for Pickthall’s apparently sudden emigration to India, what is clear is that by 1920 Pickthall had shifted his focus and energies from trying to save the flagging and defeated Ottomans to concentrating on the emerging Khilafat Movement which was rapidly gathering a great deal of support amongst the Muslim population of colonial India. Early in 1920, a Khilafat delegation led by Mohamed Ali Jauhar arrived at the Woking Mosque and was enthusiastically received by Pickthall. The delegation’s arrival coincided with the British and allied final draft of their peace terms with Turkey.⁴⁶ Jauhar was also critical of the Islamic Information Bureau’s performance but there is little evidence to suggest that he either advised or encouraged Pickthall to resign from the Bureau and leave Britain for India.⁴⁷

As Pickthall’s presence and importance grew immediately after the war, largely due to his post as acting *imam* at the Woking Mosque and Friday *Khateeb* [sermon-giver] at the London Muslim House, his writings and sermons display an acute sense of British, if not more particularly English, “Muslimness”. In a lecture given in Ramadan in 1920, he said, “[W]e English Muslims have

43 Ibid.

44 Gilham, *Loyal*, 228.

45 Ibid., 229.

46 Ibid.

47 Sherif, *Brave Hearts*, 32. See also K.K. Aziz, *The Indian Khilafat Movement, 1915–1933* (Karachi: Pak Publications, 1972).

a special need- I might call it a responsibility – this Ramadan, for our country for the last ten years, has dealt unjustly with Islam”.⁴⁸ He further described the British Muslim community, of which he had become an ardent spokesperson and representative, as “in a position of the early Muslims of Mecca [sic], in the days when they were looked upon as weak and negligible”. He advised them to, “make Islam respected and believed in your own circles, and give the lie to those who say false things about your faith”.⁴⁹ He warned all British Muslims, particularly those who had settled from abroad, that:

The temptations which assail newcomers from the East at every turn are inconceivable by Europeans. But the harm done to Islam by the misconduct of a Muslim here in England is inestimable. It gives English people an utterly false idea of Islamic notions of morality.⁵⁰

Clearly, Pickthall was nurturing the idea of British Islam and English Muslimness as a real and distinct possibility but it seems that his aspirations for a burgeoning community of Muslims within the heartland of imperial Britain were thwarted by the political realities of the First World War. Turkey's defeat, the reformist Young Turk revolution and the post-war dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire had all added to British establishment fears of a Turcophile, Pan-Islamist, fifth column group of indigenous Muslims who posed a threat to the country's political interests and national security. Pickthall was not the only suspected English Muslim subversive, anti-British activist. *Shaykh al-Islam*, Abdullah William Henry Quilliam, also a pro-Ottomanist who was decorated, along with his son, Ahmed, by the Ottoman Sultan, Abdul Hamid II, was a further subject of much scrutiny and monitoring by the British intelligence services. Quilliam, like Pickthall, who was an English *imam* of his own established Islamic Centre and community in Liverpool, also eventually fled Britain under much controversy and suspicion.⁵¹

*

Pickthall remained faithful to Islam until his death, just as he was faithful to Christianity until he was torn between his religious beliefs, fidelity to imperial

48 Ibid.

49 Cited in Clark, *British Muslim*, 43.

50 Ibid.

51 For a detailed work on Quilliam, see, Ron Geaves, *Islam in Victorian Britain: The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam* (Markfield: Kube, 2010).

Britain, admiration for the Ottoman Empire and a romantic obsession with the East. These tensions appear to have caused Pickthall some considerable angst, with which he struggled until his death to resolve. Although Pickthall's political views appear to contemporary observers as often quite contradictory; a progressive modernist who admired the Young Turk reformist revolution in Turkey whilst arguing for the continuation of the Ottoman Empire, and an ardent British imperialist who supported the post-colonial independence of Muslim India, his views need to be understood both within their particular political and historical contexts of his time, and within the personal evolution of his own political and religious development. While we may disagree with much of Pickthall's convictions, we cannot deny his undying strength of commitment to his beliefs. These beliefs often made him the subject of both public ridicule and British establishment suspicion but his loyalty and steadfastness to them is something to be admired. What was not understood by many regarding Pickthall's pessimistic visions of a post-Ottoman Middle East and a post-colonial India; a chaotic, divided and hostile geo-religious polity, seem to be quite prophetic in current times. Pickthall clearly believed that religion – not just his own professed conversion to Islam – but, all the universal faiths, could offer political and spiritual solutions to the global crises he witnessed evolving around him. Unfortunately for Pickthall, too few people were able to decouple their religious and politico-national identities and allegiances. It would seem that as he became more disillusioned by the unfolding political realities he fought so hard to redress, he sought comfort and tranquillity from his Muslim faith. His wonderful rendition of the Quran into English is a clear testament to Pickthall's firm belief that Islam and Christianity, the religion of his fellow countrymen, can be reconciled. His attempts to forge a "British Islam" through a manifest "English Muslimness" were realised for a short period before the First World War, but global politics drew a veil of mockery and suspicion over its burgeoning presence. Pickthall sought solace through migration to Muslim India, a place where he consolidated his religious and political ideologies through a deeply informed articulation of scholarly writings culminating in his English translation of the Quran, by far his greatest achievement and lasting legacy.

References

- Ali, Dusé Mohamed. *In the Land of the Pharaohs: A Short History of Egypt*, London: Frank Cass, 1911.

- Ali, Duse Mohamed. *The Autobiography of a Pioneer Pan African and Afro-Asian Activist*. Compiled and introduced by Mustafa Abdulwahid. New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, 2011.
- Aziz, K.K. *The Indian Khilafat Movement, 1915–1933*. Karachi: Pak Publications, 1972.
- Clark, Peter. *Marmaduke Pickthall: British Muslim*. London: Quartet, 1986.
- Geaves, Ron. *Islam in Victorian Britain: The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam*. Markfield: Kube, 2010.
- Gilham, Jamie. *Loyal Enemies: British Converts to Islam, 1850–1950*. London: Hurst, 2014.
- Jagdish, S., and Duffield, Ian Gundara, eds., *Essays on the History of Blacks in Britain: From Roman Times to the Mid-Twentieth Century*. Aldershot: Avebury, 1992.
- Pickthall, Marmaduke. *Athenaeum* 16 May, 1914, 4516, 678.
- Pickthall, Marmaduke. *With the Turk in Wartime*. Dent, 1914
- Pickthall, Marmaduke. *Saturday Review* 1917, 124, 3241, 461–62.
- Pickthall, Marmaduke. *Oriental Encounters*. London: Collins, 1918.
- Pickthall, Marmaduke. *The Workers' Dreadnought* 4, 50 (1918), 964.
- Pickthall, Marmaduke. *New Age*, XXV (29 May 1919), 91.
- Pickthall, Marmaduke. "Massacres and the Turk: The Other Side", *Foreign Affairs*, Special Supplement II (1920), xiv–xvi.
- Schneer, J. *The Balfour Declaration – The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. London: Bloomsbury, 2010.
- Shahid, M.H. *Writings of Muhammad Marmaduke William Pickthall*. Lahore: Ashraf, 2003.
- Sherif, M.A. *Brave Hearts: Pickthall and Philby two English Muslims in a changing world*. Selangor: Islamic Book Trust, 2011.