

100 Years of Orthodoxy: A Centenary Review of G. K. Chesterton's Classic

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There were, then, these two first feelings, indefensible and indisputable. The world was a shock, but it was not merely shocking; existence was a surprise, but it was a pleasant surprise.

– G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

Reading G. K. Chesterton is like climbing a long spiral staircase: after several hundred steps, you come to a door, which opens into a luxurious and well-maintained, but at the same time homey and familiar suite. Happy to rest your weary limbs, you relax on the plush chesterfield and heartily consume the tea and biscuits left on the sideboard. As you succumb to the blissful comfort of your surroundings, as your eyes droop and your thoughts begin to spin into dreams, the walls, hung with mediaeval tapestries and the portraits of long-dead regal ancestors creep into your wavering sight – you notice, far in the corner, beside the commode, a door. You rise in curiosity and walk towards it, in some trepidation...and lo! another staircase appears, just like the last; as soon as you step inside, the luxurious suite vanishes, and once again you must climb.

GK (as he is affectionately known by loyal followers – less in evidence now, perhaps, than in his own day, but ever faithful) lures people by his humor and his verve; he is, as he himself said of St. Francis of Assisi, “emphatically what we call a character; almost as we speak of a character in a good novel or a play” (*St. Francis* 83). Moreover, again as in his own characterization of the medieval saint, “[h]e was not only a humanist but a humourist; a humourist especially in the old English sense of a man always in his humour, going his own way and doing what nobody else would have done” (83). But if listeners come to GK for a laugh, they stay for a lesson. A man of fierce convictions, known to many as one half of the “Chesterbelloc” side of the academic (and public) debate involving four of the most esteemed literary figures of Edwardian England – himself, Hillaire Belloc and their opponent “Shawells,” G.B. Shaw and H.G. Wells – GK was idiosyncratic in his manner and method, if not in his conclusions, which were surprisingly orthodox. *Orthodoxy*, published in 1909, is a testament to his intellectual-spiritual journey; not theology, or even apologetics, it purports to be “an explanation, not of whether the Christian faith can be believed, but of how [one man] personally came to believe it” (*Orthodoxy* vii). A companion piece to his earlier *Heretics* (1905), it is the positive side of Chestertonianism, and is thus, he admits “unavoidably affirmative and unavoidably autobiographical” (vii).

True to Chesterton's style (he was, after all, at once a literary critic, social commentator, novelist, essayist, poet, and short-story writer) *Orthodoxy* is not a systematic justification of faith by deductions but a series of “mental pictures” which culminate in a grand photo-montage of belief. Essentially, it tells the story, in nine enthralling chapter-essays, of how a skeptical humanist saw the scales fall from his eyes – his realization that what he had long believed, by reason and by

intuition, was not as idiosyncratic or as novel as he had long thought, but was in fact contained, and contained much more beautifully and fully, in Christian “orthodoxy.” *Orthodoxy* is the tale not of a conversion but of an *awakening*.

The main problem of the book, says its author, is also the central question for all modern thinking persons: “How can we continue to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it?” In other words, how can we sing, with Whitman, of the world our home, while being wary, with Kafka, of the home that is frightening in being not really “ours.” This trope, of a sense of wonder that remains detached, is Chesterton's most persistent idea, which crops up in all of his books in some form or another: the attempt to preserve both fascination without anxiety, and comfort without apathy. *Orthodoxy* is one man's answer to this “double spiritual need”—but not just one man's, for GK is convinced that his vision coincides miraculously with the vision of the Christian Church through the ages.

A great fan of the twin kings of Victorian nonsense, Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, GK wants to evoke the wonder of Alice, who finds herself in a curious, yet fascinating world, one which she tries (with mixed success) to make her own. This reader cannot help but connect Chesterton with what is often called “magic realism” in literary or film circles – a recognition of the magic that is already contained in the world, and which only has to be *evoked*, not *invented*. Life, says GK, must be “active and imaginative... picturesque and full of poetical curiosity,” because the world is strange and absurd – this is its *reality*, its *truth*. Chesterton is spiritual brother to Spanish fabulist Miguel de Unamuno (his exact contemporary), and father (with Unamuno and Kafka) to Jorge Luis Borges, the greatest of the formidable band of twentieth century magic realists coming out of Latin America, in the tradition of that great Iberian tragic hero – Don Quixote. GK is a self-proclaimed Quixotist (“I am the man who with the utmost daring discovered what had been discovered before... I am the fool of this story” [18]). The following works as a credo for magic realism, one that suits not only these Hispanic writers but also much of modern Russian literature in the wake of Gogol:

It is one thing to describe an interview with a gorgon or a griffin, a creature who does not exist. It is another thing to discover that the rhinoceros does exist and then take pleasure in the fact that he looks as if he didn't. (*Orthodoxy* 19)

The most evocative and, I believe, central part of *Orthodoxy* is the chapter entitled “The Ethics of Elfland,” where GK puts forth his conviction that fairy-tales are storehouses of common-sense and practicable ethics and philosophy, and evoke more accurately the “real” world than do all of science and materialistic philosophies. The ethics of Elfland do not reject logic, but append *imagination* to reasonableness. Thus, though it is clearly illogical (i.e.

unimaginable) for 2 and 1 to equal 4; it is easy (and “fruitful”) to imagine trees growing, not fruit, but golden candlesticks or hanging tigers. GK: “We believe in bodily miracles, but not in mental impossibilities” (90). According to elfin ethics, all virtue is an “if,” all happiness is bright but brittle—such is “The Doctrine of Conditional Joy.” The step from elfland to Christianity is a short leap, according to Chesterton, for if we believe, as we do as children, that the world is *magical*, it is natural and logical to look for a *magician*. In summary, he gives four “conclusions”: 1) that this world does not explain itself; it is magic; 2) magic involves meaning, and thus a “meaner”; there is something personal in the world, as in a work of art; 3) this purpose, despite its defects, is beautiful; and 4) the proper form of thanks to it is praise, which is humility and restraint.

What does GK mean by “orthodoxy”? That is a question immediately raised in my mind while reading this wonderful little book. He proclaims, in chapter one (“Introduction in Defense Of Everything Else”) that what he means is “the Apostle’s Creed, as understood by everybody calling himself Christian until a very short time ago and the general historic conduct of those who held such a creed” (20). But when was this “very short time ago”? GK frequently makes disparaging remarks about the Reformation, especially Calvin; does he mean pre-Reformation only? Furthermore, what of this “general historic conduct”? While recognizing the failings of the historical Church, Chesterton does not attempt to apologize for the Crusades and the Inquisition, which, he says, for all their (obvious) evils, were done in the Christian spirit, to avoid the demise of order and stability which menaces us today. This, I think, for all my love for him, is a weakness in Chesterton: he is, in some ways, too “catholic” (thirteen years before becoming officially Catholic by joining the Roman Church); he is, in short, not able to adequately criticize other “orthodox” Christians who do not share his own (generally liberal) ideals. The case he makes against atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists is exciting and convincing, but one gets the sense, at times, that he dives too deeply into orthodoxy without bringing enough oxygen, and is left gasping for breath upon certain shoals. For instance, there remains an ugly blot upon his record, difficult to remove, though not unique, for we see it appear on the record of fellow giants T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, and Martin Heidegger, to name a few: that is his praise of Mussolini in the 1930s, and his acceptance of the infamous Concordat signed between the Church and *Il Duce*.

I bring this up, not to defame GK so much as to temper my own enthusiasm, which in reading him knows no bounds. I shall conclude with an appraisal of the glory of *Orthodoxy*. “To accept everything is an exercise, to understand everything a strain” (29), he says, in words reminiscent of his hated precursor Friedrich Nietzsche. A fideist in the tradition of Pascal and Kierkegaard, Chesterton seeks, like these two, not to renounce reason so much as to dethrone its absolutist pretensions – to make it more reasonable by making it more human; more in tune with the world, and with the interpretation of the world given in Christian orthodoxy. “Materialists and madmen,” he proclaims, “never have doubts” – and doubts are essential to belief. Making a plea for perspectivism, the stereoscopic vision which is the perfectly ordinary mode of awareness, he avers that just as “the morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious, [so t]he mystic allows one things to be mysterious, and everything becomes lucid” (49). If the circle is the symbol of reason and madness, it is the

cross which is the ultimate hallmark of mystery and health, and of the strangeness of the world. The circle (central to Buddhism, which GK, sometimes unfairly, rebuts) is centrifugal; the cross, like Christianity, is centripetal – it extends out to infinity, and out of ourselves. The cross is imperfect, just as the God who came to earth was imperfect (“My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?”); but this imperfection makes it real and true, it is expansive and all-encompassing: “though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, [it] can extend its four arms forever without altering its shape” (50). Condemning the titans of modern thought, personified in their extremes by Tolstoy (Buddhistic interiority and Schopenhauerian pessimism) and Nietzsche (self-absorbed creativity and nihilistic excess), GK evokes the vision of the Maid of Orléans, Jeanne d’Arc, who was, he says, more peasant than Tolstoy and more warrior than Nietzsche, at one and the same time, while remaining a true Christian. In this way she resembles the Crucified, the ultimate paradox in a religion of enigmas and a world of mystery, whom moderns have had to tear into “silly strips” in order to understand, being “equally puzzled by his insane magnificence and his insane meekness” (80).

The crux? To take an interest in life—to take the oath of loyalty to life. Against a Christianity (or a Buddhism) of the Inner Light, GK’s orthodoxy must look outwards, to the world. By dividing God from the cosmos, he proclaims, Christianity relieved humankind from the curse of pantheism; in making the world, God separates, thus setting the world free. This is GK’s own awakening: his discovery that we must *love* the world without becoming absorbed by it; without becoming *worldly*; loving the world in the way St. Francis, the Poor Man of God, loved it, gratuitously, expecting nothing, and thereby receiving everything from the world. Christianity is an “eternal revolution,” for it practices reform with a fixed ideal; it attempts to change the real to suit its ideal, contra the modern reformists and revolutionaries who are constantly changing our ideals in the name of what is real. GK’s credo of reform: Not *consistency* do we require, but *constancy*: “Man must have just enough faith in himself to have adventures, and just enough doubt of himself to enjoy them” (210). The only defect of orthodoxy, says Chesterton, is that it is too much of an abstraction, and not enough of a way of life for Christians. Once you get beyond its rigid fortifications, the ramparts and barbicans of ethical abnegations and its Stentorian guards – the professional priests – it is “the only frame for pagan freedom” (261). Again (unconsciously) echoing Nietzsche, GK’s motto is “bound heart – free spirit”—but, the author of *Beyond Good and Evil* continues, in words that would frustrate the Englishman: “no one believes it is he does not already know it...”.

In short, we are left asking ourselves whether we need first to be converted (to Catholicism?) before we can sing with Chesterton the paean to “Conditional Joy.” When reading GK, one is liable to experience first hand the elevated mood of Nietzsche or of Wordsworth (“that serene and blessed mood...[in which] with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things.”) – but upon finishing *Orthodoxy*, one cannot, I think, help but feel somewhat let down, frustrated. We praise GK for provoking us to rise to new heights, for letting us see, with new eyes, the rooms in which we have become all-too-habituated; but we wonder if the climbing can ever end. In the plush halls of Orthodoxy, he invites us to settle down, while, out of the corner of our eye, we notice that he has (surreptitiously or unconsciously, we cannot say) kicked a

small serving-table in front of what appears to be a door, another door leading us to perhaps other rooms. Must we, like the tragic Don Quixote, forsake our inquisitive and magical quest for the often somber and stultifying comforts of Orthodoxy? It seems that Chesterton has forgotten what became of his beloved Maid of Orléans.