

G. K. Chesterton: An Introduction

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Gilbert Keith Chesterton (the most mellifluous name in English, someone has noted) is a figure worth knowing for several reasons, chiefly his moral vision and his Christian faith. The two, I shall seek to demonstrate, are not two sides of the same coin but the single and indivisible unity of this great man's life and work. And they are unified supremely in his humor. GKC is one of the most quotable of all authors, not merely because he was a clever wordsmith, but because his witty wisdom cuts to the very heart of life itself. Hence this brief introduction to his life, his politics, and his theology. My data is drawn (and thus my annotations) almost entirely from Alzina Stone Dale's *The Outline of Sanity: A Life of G. K. Chesterton* (Eerdmans, 1982).

I—Life

Chesterton's dates are 1874 to 1936—an era spanning 27 years of Queen Victoria's reign, the First War, and the makings of the Second. This means that he lived through two of the most significant epochs in all of Western history: the relatively placid and stable life of the late Victorian era, and then the tempestuous destruction of that confident century by means of a war from which the Western world still has not recovered—if only because it devastated Western self-confidence far more than did World War II. Yet for all of the cultural heaven and hell into which Chesterton both ascended and descended, his own life was relatively peaceful and undisturbed. There was nothing especially dramatic or interesting about it, and this was precisely as he wanted it. Like C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, Chesterton lived so vividly among his friends and in his work that he never had the need to do exciting things. In retrospect, we can now see that the Edwardian era (1901-10) was his real heyday, for it was during these years that he wrote some of his most important works: *The Defendant*, *Robert Browning*, *G.F. Watts*, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, *The Club of Queer Trades*, *Charles Dickens*, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, *Orthodoxy*, *The Ball and the Cross*, *What's Wrong with the World*, *The Innocence of Father Brown*, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, *Manalive*, *A Miscellany of Men*, etc.

Chesterton's parents were good Liberals in the 19th century sense of the word: believers in Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian idea of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, John Stuart's "harm" principle (individuals are at liberty to do as they wish, so long as they don't do physical harm to others), the laissez-faire-economics of Adam Smith, and human progress above all else. In fact, they held to what would later be called "the Whig interpretation of history"—namely, that history represents a steady progress from primitive times to the present. (It should be noted, parenthetically, that much of 19th century Liberalism has become 20th and 21st century Conservatism.) *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* sums up such Liberalism as follows: enlightened self-interest is "an approach to morality that treats pleasure or desire-satisfaction as the sole element in human good.... [A]cts are not right or obligatory because of their inherent character, their underlying motives, or their relation to divine or social dictates, but because of how much overall human or sentient well-being they produce."

Ed Chesterton operated a prosperous real estate business in what was then the London suburb of Kensington. Like all proper English babies, young Gilbert was baptized into the established state Church of England. But his parents were Unitarian in their theological sympathies, and they did not bring up their children to become devout Christians. GKC was taught, at most, to believe in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the universal kingdom of heaven that would perhaps soon come on earth. Their chief concerns were ethical and not theological. Chesterton's parents were convinced, like nearly everyone in the 19th century, that hard work, common sense, and education would create worldwide peace and prosperity for all. They believed that a nation like England, held together by common ethnic and racial

identity, should have a government that protected the freedom of the individual to realize his own potential and that protected the freedom of the country from foreign rule. They were confident that free trade and economic growth—built on the tools of science and technology that had so recently mastered the natural order—would ensure international cooperation, making everyone so wealthy and secure that all wars would cease. Because utopia was not far away in the future, all other ages were made to seem dark and backward by comparison to the present time.

Such faith in inevitable progress was accompanied by a concomitant decline in religious devotion. Nor was this something to be lamented, since religion was often regarded as a retrograde force in history. Chesterton was thus to observe of his father that “He was always subconsciously prepared for the next generation having less theology than he; and rather puzzled at its having more” (12). This hint that Chesterton would recover the faith that his parents had largely lost is also evident in the one story Chesterton liked to tell about his ancestors. He was fond of repeating his grandfather’s solemn declaration, as an old man, that he would affirm the Prayer Book’s General Thanksgiving (“We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life”) even if he knew that he was a lost soul. Such deep praise for the gift of life itself would sink deep into Chesterton, becoming almost a watchword for his work. He would speak later of the “mystical minimum of gratitude” (35), the unbought grace of our very existence that should prompt an immense thankfulness in everyone.

The one dark blot on Chesterton’s sunny childhood was the death of his older sister Beatrice when she was eight and Gilbert only three. Though but a toddler, he remembered the event vividly, later observing that “children feel with exactitude, without a word of explanation, the emotional tone of a house of mourning” (7). Gilbert’s grief was worsened by his father’s strange response to his daughter’s death. He turned Beatrice’s picture to the wall, removed all of her possessions from the house, and forbade any mention of her name. This terrible attempt to suppress grief backfired, of course, leading Chesterton to revere the memory of his sister all the more preciously. The disappearance of this older sister also left Gilbert with the terrible fear that his younger brother Cecil (pronounced “Sessil”) might one day vanish behind the curtain of mortality.

Chesterton’s mother Marie was a far more forceful personality than his father. She ran all the practical affairs of the household, thus helping her two sons to become permanent incompetents in the managing of money and other workaday affairs. Unlike those Victorian mothers who turned their children over to governesses and nurses in remote upstairs rooms, Mrs. Chesterton put her sons very much at the center of the household. Though they had their own rooms for making a mess with paints and clay, and for the freedom to read books and create their own fantasy worlds, the Chesterton boys were also brought into family discussions. Against the Victorian rule that children were to be seen but not heard, Gilbert and Cecil engaged their parents and family guests in vigorous debate about the leading questions of the day. Mrs. Chesterton wanted her sons to have a point of view because she was herself a thoughtful woman with her own tart opinions and ideas. Surely Chesterton was thinking of his own mother when he later declared (in *What’s Wrong with the World*) that there could be no higher vocation than motherhood, since a mother must possess the most varied competencies of all: running a household, managing financial details, dealing with all sorts of emergencies. Above all, she is tasked with teaching the most fundamental lessons of life—about the sun and the moon and the stars—i.e., the things most fundamental to both the human and natural order.

Yet it was Chesterton’s father, Mr. Ed, who was to have the shaping influence on his eldest son. Due to his own financial prosperity and a bad heart condition, he took early retirement and spent almost all of his time at home. He thus became his sons’ constant companion. Though his original ambition was to become a professional artist, he had been shunted into the family real estate business. As if to fulfill his

frustrated dream, Mr. Ed indulged his love for creation together with his boys. He was always building things for his sons' surprise and delight—especially a toy theater where they could stage imaginary plays with miniature characters, costumes, and scenery. This love of the dramatic and the creative—the world of the vivid image, where one can *see and enact* an idea rather than merely think it—would never leave Chesterton. On the contrary, it would make him the great writer he was later to become.

Chesterton the grown man compared his father to Dickens' Mr. Pickwick, the supreme Englishman in his evenness of temper, his good sense tinged with a certain wistful dreaminess, his loyalty to family and friends, his philosophical turn of mind, and above all his impish sense of humor. Though not especially religious himself, Mr. Ed gave his sons an inadvertent faith by reading aloud to them the great fairy-tales, especially George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*. From them Chesterton learned his most fundamental beliefs—namely, that the ordinary world is a wild and exciting place, that the price of enjoying this mysterious world is the keeping of promises, that human nature is not innately good but capable of the worst wickedness, that life is usually harsh before it is happy, and that we are immeasurably and intolerably lonely without the companionship of spouse and/or friends. When later the adult Chesterton was to discover orthodox Christian faith, he said that it confirmed and completed what he had already as a child learned from “the ethics of elfland”—namely, that every fairy story hinges on a single huge condition, the fulfillment of which enables it to come true. For GKC, the wondrous fairy story of human existence hangs on a similar condition: the returning of unstinted and everlasting gratitude for a blessing larger than we can possibly comprehend—the blessing of life itself. Such gratitude is the only antidote to both bitterness and self-righteousness.

Though Chesterton attended the famous St. Paul's School, he was no budding genius. He did not learn to read well, in fact, until he was nine, and he was never an excellent student. One of his teachers wrote that Gilbert “has the knack of forgetting, is always in trouble, though his work is well done when he remembers to do it.” “He is a great blunderer with much intelligence,” the schoolmaster adds, and thus “he belongs in a studio, not a school” (24). Yet among his friends, especially Eric Bentley and Lucien Oldershaw, Chesterton blossomed intellectually. He began to write poems and essays for their private group called the Junior Debating Club. Already his sense of humor was evident in his ability to show that the word “good” has more than one meaning. For example, “if a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of 500 yards I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man” (26-7). Already Chesterton had discerned that humor depends upon a transcendent leaping of the gaps left by life's inevitable ambiguities. The one academic honor Chesterton won at St. Paul's School was the Milton Prize for the outstanding poem written by a student. His success instilled in him the ambition of becoming a poet, and indeed he was to write poetry for the rest of his life. Though he had fallen behind two years in his studies, Gilbert was suddenly promoted to the 8th form (senior class), and he seemed destined for academic greatness.

He was 18 years old and the year was 1892. His father took him on a European tour to mark his graduation but perhaps also to confirm Gilbert's decision not to return to St. Paul's (and thence to Cambridge or Oxford) but to attend art school instead. When GKC entered the Slade School of Art in 1893, it was part of the University of London, the first university in England to admit women and non-Anglicans, and to have a curriculum without theology at its center. This was clearly a decision that Mr. Ed—perhaps fulfilling his own ambitions—had made *for* Gilbert. Loving his father deeply and wanting to honor him, Chesterton enrolled at the Slade but was never happy there. In fact, he was at times profoundly depressed and in a severe crisis over his very identity. He may have even contemplated suicide. Here is what he later wrote about the fearful straits that many youths pass through: “A very large number of young men nearly go mad. But nearly all only nearly do it . . . You might say it is normal to have an abnormal period. The inside gets too big for the outside. In one way his own mind and self seem to be

colossal and cosmic In another . . . way the world is much too big for him Now . . . there's a dreadfully dangerous moment; when the first connexion is made . . . between the brain and real things" (33).

Chesterton's crisis was prompted in no small part by the vogue of Impressionist art. The 1890s were the Mauve Decade, an age of bruised lavender decadence in both religion and literature. Chesterton as a very young man sensed that Impressionism foreshadowed an eclipse of God that would darken everything. The dominant figures of the time were aesthetes who reveled in lush beauty for its own sake and who thus despised the *canaille*, the rabble, the crowd: Oscar Wilde, Max Beerbohm, Aubrey Beardsley, Lytton Strachey and their ilk—the Decadents they were called, almost all of them homosexuals. Chesterton was later to say that Edward FitzGerald's translation of the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám summed up the drowsy, over-ripe, self-indulgent spirit of the age. He also worried that the French Impressionists sought to reduce their subjects to mere surfaces. He believed, on the contrary, that art should at least hint at or suggest a deep background lying implicitly behind the painting. He wanted substances but they gave him appearances. In *The Man Who Was Thursday* we thus find the all-knowing narrator entering the mind of the protagonist:

Was not everything, after all, like this bewildering woodland, this dance of dark and light? Everything only a glimpse, the glimpse always unforeseen, and always forgotten. For Gabriel Syme had found in the heart of that sun-splashed wood what many modern painters had found there. He had found the thing which modern people call Impressionism, which is another name for that final scepticism which can find no floor to the universe.

Hence Chesterton's conviction that Impressionism was little more than a dancing of pirouettes over the Abyss. Not even Whistler or Monet stirred his imagination.

Chesterton recovered from the nightmare of nihilism by rebelling against the pessimism and dissipation of his time, in the confidence (as he was wittily to observe) that even decadence decays. He turned back to the very things that his age was rejecting—namely, to radical faith in God and radical faith in democracy. He was determined to fight the new fascination with Nothingness with all his vigor. Yet while GKC rejected the aesthetic subjectivism of the *fin-de-siècle* artists, he borrowed much from their method. At the Slade School, for example, he became fascinated with the power of light as J.M.W. Turner had used it. Even though Chesterton would eventually become a writer rather than an artist, he would fill his books with sunrises and sunsets, with foggy city streets and misty country lanes. He also learned the Impressionist technique of inversion—of seeing things in reverse of their normal perspective, especially from the rear. He admired the work of G.F. Watts because it so often depicted crucial moments in life *after* they had occurred or else from the side or the back of the subject. There is also a certain dandyism in Chesterton's penchant for paradox, even in his witty description of paradox as truth standing on its head and waving its legs in order to get our attention. Thus did he remain a man of his age, while at the same time repudiating its most fundamental values.

The upshot of the matter is that, almost unawares, Chesterton found himself cured from his early encounter with depression. Later he would describe his conversion to Christian faith in similar terms: evil had come upon him slowly like the disease, but good had come quickly like the doctor. No longer was he the gloomy pessimist who expected the worst, but a surprising optimist who had discovered that "at the back of our brains . . . there was a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence . . . [a] submerged sunrise of wonder" (39). Yet there was no sudden and dramatic conversion. Rather did Chesterton find, in his mid-twenties, that he could regard himself as nothing other—neither more nor

less—than an orthodox Christian. In his fiction and essays, he also began to identify himself with Catholic Christianity, even though he would not enter the Church of Rome until 1922.

Hoping to make his way in the world as a writer, GKC had gone to work for a publisher in Fleet Street. There, in 1896, he was to meet a young lady with the unfortunate name of Frances Blogg. She was to become indispensable to Chesterton's personal and religious recovery. Unlike most other women of the late Victorian age, Francis worked in the public sphere as a secretary. She was a liberated woman in the sense that Chesterton wittily wisecracked about: "fifty million young women declared they would not be dictated to, then went out and became stenographers" (52). But she was also a woman who changed Chesterton's previously all-male world by way of a wonder far greater than mere existence itself—the wonder of self-surrendering love. Like Dante beholding Beatrice, Chesterton said that Frances convinced him immediately that "if I had anything to do with this girl she would never deceive me: if I depended on her she would never deny me: if I trusted her she would never go back on me: if I loved her she would never play with me: if I remembered her she would never forget me" (53).

Not least important of all was the fact of Frances' faith: she gave to Chesterton the most important thing in his life—his Christianity. They had a long courtship, carried on largely through letters, because neither family approved of their marriage. Mrs. Chesterton thought the Bloggs too avant-garde and trendy, while the Bloggs regarded Gilbert as too slovenly and unambitious. Not until nearly five years later were they finally married, on June 28, 1901, when he was 27 and she 25. Theirs was to be a happy though childless marriage of 35 years, in which Frances spent most of her time managing the disheveled life of this fat diamond of a man. Once he telegraphed her the following message: "In Liverpool, where am I supposed to be?" She telegraphed back: "At home, of course." Not everything was wine and roses, since Frances struggled with prolonged bouts of depression. Even so, she was such a gracious life-companion that Chesterton confessed that himself to be very decidedly a sexist. The two sexes are not the same but utterly different, he insisted, and the chief difference is that the female is generally the superior. GKC's marriage to Frances must also be the inspiration behind his splendid aphorism that, while four may be twice two, two is never twice one: two people living in charity and mutuality are two thousand times one. It should be added that, while the Chestertons had no children of their own, despite Frances' undergoing gynecological surgery, they came to adopt his recording secretary Dorothy Collins almost as if she were their daughter. GKC may have also waited until 1922 to be received into the Roman Catholic Church because he did not want to enter without Francis.

II—Politics

Chesterton's religious conversion was no less remarkable than his political turnabout: his remarkable refusal to embrace the optimistic progressivism of his age. Many others joined him after 1914, with the outbreak of the Great War, when 19th century Liberalism was shattered once and for all. Already before the turn of the century, GKC prophesied the coming collapse. Nearly everyone else believed that things were getting better and better, that poverty and illiteracy, homelessness and hunger, even war itself would soon be ended. And of course mighty social reforms had indeed been accomplished by way of the "muscular Christianity" of Charles Kingsley and other late 19th century Liberals—the prisons and insane asylums were made more humane, the dreadful working conditions in factories were improved, hospitals and schools were opened to the poor, etc. But there was a fundamental flaw in this Victorian faith that the 20th century would be the *Christian Century* through a wholesale Christianizing of the social order. It was a faith linked to the founding of the Boy Scouts and YMCA and YWCA and thus to an almost athletic understanding of Christians as people whose strong bodies mirrored their strong faith. Chesterton stood virtually alone in discerning that this now secularized faith was cracking up, though it looked to be ever so healthy.

The Liberal creed became increasingly hard to uphold, not only for Chesterton but for many others as well. As William Butler Yeats was to declare in his apocalyptic poem of 1921, “The Second Coming”:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. . . .
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born.

Yet in his conversion to Catholicism and his rejection of 19th century Protestant Liberalism, Chesterton did not become a conservative, much less a reactionary. On the contrary, he retained his unswerving conviction that faith must always be communal and thus political: there is no such thing as a solitary and merely individual Christian. His own politics remained deeply rooted in the Liberal tradition of Gladstone and Dickens and, behind them, the French and American revolutions. He was vehemently anti-aristocratic, for example, believing that accumulated wealth by robber barons is one of the great evils of modern life. The medieval guilds had begun to give economic and political power to ordinary people—to cobblers and clothiers and other small property owners. But their rising influence was ruthlessly squelched in the 16th and 17th centuries, when the new Protestant gentry seized not only the monastic holdings but the Common Lands as well. Chesterton called it “the revolution of the rich.” The 18th century rebellions in France and America were waged in protest against this reduction of “the secret people” (as Chesterton called the submerged masses) to permanent poverty and servitude. The democratic premise, he declared with characteristic pungency, is that “the most terribly important things must be left to ordinary men themselves—the mating of the sexes, the rearing of the young, the laws of the state.” He thus rued the rise of professional politicians as a new breed.

For Chesterton, the old Liberal center broke apart into two equally unacceptable extremes: capitalist monopoly and socialist bureaucracy. Chesterton was opposed to them both because they swallow up, like some awful Behemoth, those small local communities wherein human freedom and solidarity truly thrive. On the one hand, gigantic capitalist industries and corporations require such specialized labor and hierarchical control that they reduce people to their jobs, their work, their wages. The benevolently despotic welfare state, on the other hand, grants its citizens economic security only at the expense of personal liberty, including the liberty to make a mess of one’s life.

Against these two freedom-devouring monsters, Chesterton advocates a political philosophy that he calls Distributism. It promotes the private ownership of small farms and shops and industries. Its aim is neither to concentrate wealth in the pockets of the few who would then “philanthropically” aid the poor, nor to level everyone down to a banal collectivist mediocrity in abject dependence on the state. Chesterton wants, instead, to make men and women free for the enjoyment of middle-class liberties—earning their own keep, owning their own homes, living their own lives. Rather than redistributing money, he wanted the state to redistribute land, providing every family a small plot whereon they might at least have a vegetable garden and perhaps a milk cow. Unable to find a political party willing to support such a program, Chesterton turned increasingly to journalism as a means of promoting his critique of modern culture. The happy irony of this political frustration is that, in writing merely for the day (*le jour*), GKC did not become a mere newspaper hack but rather a writer of the first order.

Critics have often lamented that Chesterton is a master who wrote no masterpiece, and that he thus wasted his literary talent on journalism. Nothing could be further from Chesterton's own estimate of his work. Journalism is a high calling, in his view; for the daily papers (and we would add: radio and television) shape most people's lives far more markedly than great books. In his time (as not in ours), newspapers were vehicles for the exchange of ideas and political debate, enabling ordinary people to be engaged about large public concerns. Thus was Chesterton not troubled that he wrote for the moment rather than for posterity. As a Christian, he believed that God's own incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth demonstrates that concrete and temporal things matter absolutely, and that to deal with them thoughtfully and critically is to grant them not merely temporal but eternal honor. Alzina Stone Dale observes that journalism made GKC the master of many things rather than the narrow specialist of a few: "Chesterton was always playing ombudsman [i.e., a collector and re-dresser of common grievances] to the world more than he was lobbying for a single cause." The fact that all of his work remains in print more than sixty years after his death (thanks largely to Ignatius Press) indicates that even posterity has dealt kindly with Chesterton, justifying the witticism of his friend Hilaire Belloc:

When I am dead, I hope it may be said:
'His sins were scarlet, but his books were read.'

The chief of Chesterton's concerns centers upon the dignity and glory of ordinary people, especially the poor. He believed that Christian faith is the ultimate democracy because it opens the Kingdom of God not to the rich or the intelligent or the powerful, but to everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord. The problem with most modern ideas, and especially with the intellectuals who espouse them, is that they want to solve the world's difficulty by means of abstract and absolute answers. Chesterton broke with the Fabian Socialists (those who wanted to keep socialism from becoming communist and collectivist) on exactly this score—they wanted equality for everybody except the intellectual elite, who instead would tell the poor what they needed. And of course it is the poor who wind up paying the price of these grand utopian schemes of social reform and correction. Though Chesterton never came to fathom the real horror that was World War I, he nonetheless saw what was demonic about the comic absolutist schemes (whether German or Russian or Chinese) that would make the 20th century the bloodiest in human history.

G.B. Shaw and H.G. Wells were two secular intellectuals with whom Chesterton did constant battle on these problems of social reform. These two great humanists both wanted to overcome Christian faith as a backward drag on the forward progress of history and the liberation of humankind. (It should be noted, parenthetically, that GKC had the greatest regard for his opponents, gladly and generously debating them, never scorning or despising them.) But unlike such modernists as Wells and Shaw, Chesterton believed that we are kept alive by breaking bread with the dead (to use W. H. Auden's fine phrase). "Tradition," the Christian historian of doctrine Jaroslav Pelikan once observed, in a sure echo of Chesterton, "is the living faith of the dead, while traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." GKC was steadfastly opposed to what C. S. Lewis would later call "chronological snobbery," the fatuous notion that latest is always the best. On the contrary, the oldest may well be the superior. Chesterton insisted, therefore, that we must enfranchise our ancestors in that universal "democracy of the dead" called Tradition. Above all, we must first love the world before we set out to reform it. The problem with such pseudo-worldlings as Shaw and Wells is that they despise the world. Hence Chesterton's determination to defend humanity against these vegetarian and teetotalist and non-smoking humanists who would inadvertently destroy it. Shaw's fondest desire, Chesterton quipped, was to require that everyone eat grass.

He described these sober-sided advocates of false egalitarianism as “heretics.” They commit apostasy not only against God but also against the miraculous fact that life does not give equal value to all things. Life is almost always surprisingly lavish, rarely predictable and niggardly. The grim egalitarians of both his time and ours lack what Chesterton calls “orthodoxy.” He means by this word not only correct theological belief but also a sure instinct for the sane center of things, a keen sense of coherence amidst chaos, an avoidance of life’s demonic extremes, and thus a steady commitment to moderation as a political ideal. Such sanity and balance are always linked with mirth and play. Far from being something stale and prim, life at the stable center is full of roaring earthiness and ribald fun. “A moderate,” Chesterton wrote, “is a man who wants children to be moderately clean, houses to be moderately sanitary, and their inhabitants to be moderately sober.”

III—Theology and Humor

Nowhere but in Christian faith could Chesterton find a life such happy sanity. He was drawn to it because it is a fighting faith, a religion that has survived the mad oscillations of history by holding to the sure Center who is the triune God incarnate in Christ and his Spirit-sustained Church. It is in his best book, *Orthodoxy*, that Chesterton tells of his gradual, almost imperceptible discovery that he was a Christian despite his age and despite himself. Knowing that the Gospel is always the staggering Good News that goes against the grain of our native expectations, he eventually grew weary of the complacency of the established Church of England faith and in 1922 converted to Roman Catholicism. He would surely have guffawed in agreement with the wit who declared, “Hands off the Church of England; it’s the only thing that stands between us and God”! Yet Chesterton remained an ecumenical Christian in the deepest sense—a “mere Christian” as C. S. Lewis would say: one who believes that the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ are the answer to the most pressing of questions: “How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet not at home in it?” How can we love life and yet not put our final trust in it?

The Fact that God has entered the human sphere and acted to redeem the whole of reality is the ultimate affirmation. It enables us to live our lives with joy and wonder. Chesterton’s detective stories thus locate the thrill of mystery not in faraway and exotic places, but just around the corner of any ordinary street. Father Brown is a detective who understands crime, not in spite of being a priest but precisely *because* he is a priest—a man who knows with St. Paul that he is himself the chief of sinners. Brown can detect the source of evil in others because he has first detected it in himself. Original Sin is a doctrine that does not convey bad news but glad, for it specifies not only our sickness but also our cure. Whereas worldly wisdom tells us merely that we are miserable because we refuse to behave rightly, the doctrine of sin reveals that we are unhappy because we have violated the love and goodness of God. We know that we are “miserable offenders” and that “there is no health in us” (to quote the Book of Common Prayer) because God has dealt with us not according to our merits but according to his mercy. It is this bracing doctrine of redemption that led Chesterton to have a high rather than low view of human nature. Hence his early and courageous opposition to the practice of eugenics—the sterilizing of the retarded and crippled and otherwise “unfit”—a practice advocated by many “enlightened” and “progressive” Christians. GKC was early to discern that, in fact, they were proto-Hitlerians, though he did not die until 1936, just as the Nazis were rising to power.

Ours is at once the silliest and saddest of all ages, Chesterton believed, because it has turned its back on the gladdest of all tidings. Yet Chesterton is sometimes himself in danger of over-reacting to our stupidity by becoming as cranky and unbalanced as the age itself. He can indeed sound at times like a real reactionary—opposing women’s suffrage, divorce on all grounds, contraception in all its forms, and machinery of most kinds. Chesterton remains blind, moreover, to the significance of the Protestant

Reformation. Calvinism and Puritanism are among the dirtiest words in his vocabulary. He sees the Reformation as having given rise to modern commercial culture, when in fact Calvin (like Luther) looked backward to the Middle Ages more than forward to the Renaissance. For GKC, the doctrine of double predestination (God's having consigned, before the foundation of the world, some people to Hell and others to Heaven) belongs to a deterministic and freedom-denying faith in a monstrously sovereign God. The sad irony is that Chesterton remained blind to the real teaching (not only of Luther and Calvin, but also of Augustine and Romans 8) about election and foreknowledge, predestination and calling. These complex concepts do not envision God as having time-bound knowledge of the future—as if He were mapping out and maneuvering our lives like pawns on a chessboard. Rather do they affirm what Chesterton himself affirmed: that God acts by means of what our forebears, both Catholic and Protestant, called “prevenient grace.” As the original Latin *praevenire* (to come before) makes evident, this is the one Gift that goes ahead of us and thus makes possible our very acceptance of it. At every point in our lives, God *prevenes*—enabling us to do the good that, as Paul confesses in Romans 7, we could not and would not do on our own.

Chesterton's anti-Protestantism also blinded him to the hard realities of international politics. He believed that Catholic nations (France, Austria, Poland) were to be trusted as Protestant countries (Prussia, Holland) were not. Fearing Prussian militarism as the greatest menace to world peace, GKC grossly misread Hitler's rise to power in 1933 as a Prussian phenomenon. As W.H. Auden observes, in an otherwise sympathetic essay on Chesterton, it was the German-speaking minority in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy that had always been racist and anti-Semitic. “Aside from the economic conditions which enabled it to succeed,” W.H. Auden writes, “the National Socialist Movement was essentially the revenge of Catholic Bavaria and Austria for their previous subordination to Protestant Bismarckian Prussia. It was not an accident that Hitler was a lapsed Catholic.” Thus did Chesterton also neglect to question his own (albeit rather mild) anti-Semitism. He also assumes, in conformity to his time, the inherent inferiority of blacks, whom he calls by their then common but still ugly name. His almost wholly negative regard for Islam is harder to assess. For Chesterton, Mohammed was simply the False Prophet—the one who had taken up the sword to create a religion that would be hostile to all strangers and murderous toward all enemies.

It is important not to commit the heresy of anachronism by judging Chesterton against the standards of our epoch, as if our own beliefs will not look equally benighted a hundred years from now. Yet it seems altogether fair to question Chesterton's virtual opacity to the real horror of World War I. (See, for example, his poem “The English Graves.”) From Robert Graves to Edmund Blunden, from Siegfried Sassoon to Rupert Brooke and especially to Wilfred Owen, the major poets of the War offered their unrelenting witness against its unprecedented brutality. Chesterton could not see what his fellow Catholic J.R.R. Tolkien would later make ever so clear—that this most massive blood-letting in human history was not a noble English and American triumph over the forces of darkness and depravity. Rather was it the dread launching of what John Paul the Great would later call “the culture of death,” an age of unprecedented killing—roughly 190 million souls having been slaughtered in the 20th century alone, not counting the multiplied millions of abortions. Chesterton believed, almost to the end, that there was enough residual Christianity remaining in the masses that modern secular culture could still recover its moral life if the people could be freed from the evils of both capitalism and collectivism. He also hoped that, by returning to its religious resources, the West might again re-establish the grand union of Christianity and civilization that was once called Christendom, the glorious marriage of throne and altar that prevailed throughout the Middle Ages. Yet it is worth noticing that GKC would gradually lose this faith in the inherent ability of most people to seek the good when they are given the liberty to define it for themselves. He learned--on the contrary, and to his great consternation—that unleashed human desire will most often seek, not the common good, but material comfort and pleasure and convenience. Hence

Chesterton's increasing, though somewhat belated, regard for the Church as the sole locus of the Gospel that creates a radically alternative community of reconciliation, set over against even something as noble as democratic self-determination.

At his best Chesterton never collapses Christ and culture. When Hilaire Belloc declared that "Europe is the faith; the Faith is Europe," he was making a claim about the fate of Europe, not about the future of Christianity. The former will collapse without the latter also falling. For GKC, Christianity does not depend upon the survival of Western civilization. Chesterton knew, on the contrary, that the Gospel as it is enacted in the church is God's unique and incomparable gift to the world. It cannot be assimilated or accommodated to even the noblest of cultures. That Christian faith once survived the collapse of Greco-Roman civilization means that it will also outlive the dying West—precisely because it is *not* the culture-religion of the West: it is the radical identification of God himself with Christ and His people, against whose Kingdom not even the gates of Hell will prevail. Christian faith is not, therefore, something tame and manageable, says Chesterton, but something "unnatural, incongruous . . . [a] comic upheaval, as if the Great Sea Serpent had suddenly risen out of the Round Pond" in Kensington Gardens.

This gracious Event makes the Christian virtues utterly happy, Chesterton insists, while the pagan virtues (for all their glory) remain essentially sad. Belief in the Good News enables believers to go gaily into the dark, to fight gladly even when the battle is lost, in the happy assurance that the final war has already been won. Nothing less than this conviction can prompt the living of a transformed life that is being constantly reordered to the love of God. This Gospel is the ultimately liberating Word because it frees us both to give thanks and to laugh. And for Chesterton, the two things are very nearly the same. "It is the highest and holiest of paradoxes," he says in his book on Saint Francis of Assisi, "that the man who really knows he cannot pay his debt will be forever paying it. He will be forever giving back what he cannot give back, and cannot be expected to give back. He will always be throwing things away into a bottomless pit of unfathomable thanks."

Laughter is for Chesterton our chief expression of gratitude to God. For in our humor we refuse to regard our projects or ourselves too gravely. Seriousness is a vice, in Chesterton's theology, because it encourages the sin of being merely ourselves. "Solemnity," he declares in *Orthodoxy*, "flows out of men naturally"—like the seepage of a fetid pool; "but laughter is a leap. It is easy to be heavy: hard to be light. Satan fell by the force of gravity." Laughter is a theological virtue because it enables us figuratively to fly—to be as free as the unfallen angels who, says Chesterton, still soar because they take themselves so lightly. Far from being a source of easy comfort, Chestertonian humor cuts as sharply as a two-edged sword. "We make our friends; we make our enemies," he declares in one of his most incisive aphorisms; "but God makes our next—door neighbors." The reason why Scripture commands us to love both our neighbors and our enemies, he adds, "is that they are generally the same people."

Not long after Chesterton's death in 1936, Pope Leo XIII declared GKC *defensor Fidei*, a true defender of the Faith. This award was extraordinarily ironic, since it had not been conferred on an Englishman since Leo X had conferred the honor on the corrupt and adulterous Henry VIII in 1521. Yet there is a certain appropriateness about this linkage: two fat men being bound together in honor, both fed by their appetites, one for the City of Man and the other for the City of God. The difference is, of course, that Chesterton's rollicking Gospel realism kept him spiritually slender and sinewy. He could thus sport about like a merry tumbler of the Lord, a joshing fool for Christ, knowing well that the universe has a final floor, that Jesus is the solid rock, that all other ground is sinking sand. "We're all flies crawling on a ceiling," he wrote in one of his last stories, "and it's an everlasting mercy that we don't drop off."