

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 75: G.K. Chesterton: Prolific Writer & Apologist

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## G.K. Chesterton: Did You Know?

Interesting and unusual facts about G. K. Chesterton.

Elesha Coffman

### Man at play

Chesterton's love of theatrics began with childhood puppet shows and remained strong to the end of his life. Pictures of "Top Meadow Productions," the shows he staged at his cottage, depict guests of all ages dressed as eighteenth-century figures, wandering minstrels, and even a bishop.

Chesterton particularly liked dressing up as Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), a writer whose physical size and literary style invite many comparisons with Chesterton. The dialogue in Chesterton's play *The Judgment of Dr. Johnson* (1927) blends the wit of both authors seamlessly, and Chesterton's defense of Johnson in *What's Wrong with the World* (1910) sounds a lot like a defense of his own penchant for debate (see page 28): "The demeanour of Johnson, it is said, was 'harsh and despotic.' It was occasionally harsh, but it was never despotic. Johnson was not in the least a despot. John-son was a demagogue, he shouted against a shouting crowd. The very fact that he wrangled with other people is a proof that other people were allowed to wrangle with him. ... Johnson was an insolent equal, and therefore was loved by all who knew him."

### Artful dawdler

Though he made his career as a writer, Chesterton's only formal training was in art. His sketches appeared in his friend Edmund Clerihew Bentley's book *Biography for Beginners* and, periodically, in G.K.'s Weekly magazine. A sketch, with the caption "I am now ten years old," marked the magazine's tenth anniversary, in 1935. It depicts Chesterton at about the age he finally began to read—he was such a slow learner that his parents once took him to a brain specialist. His brainpower proved to be more than adequate.

### Lost love

Way back in 1894, 11 years before he published his first novel, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, Chesterton apparently wrote a semi-autobiographical romance about a character named Basil Howe. The manuscript never saw print, possibly because Chesterton's wife, whom he met in 1896, didn't like it. Nearly 100 years later, when hundreds of Chesterton's notebooks and papers were being transferred from his estate to the British Library, a Chesterton scholar discovered and reconstructed the novel. *Basil Howe* was recently published in the United Kingdom.

### Silent partner

Frances Chesterton faithfully critiqued her husband's work but did not write much of her own. Her only popular piece is the poem (often sung as a carol) "How Far Is It to Bethlehem?" which begins:

How far is it to Bethlehem? Not very far.  
Shall we find the stable-room lit by a star?

Can we see the little Child? Is he within?  
If we lift the wooden latch, may we go in?

### Fan for all seasons

Chesterton could wax rhapsodic about nearly anything. Essays in his first published collection, *The Defendant* (1901), celebrate skeletons, ugly things, nonsense, patriotism, babies, and a few more favorites. Later in his career, he wrote an entire "Sonnet to a Stilton Cheese." He confessed in the essay "A Piece of Chalk," "Once I planned to write a book of poems entirely about the things in my pockets. But I found it was too long and the age of great epics is past."

### Mind leading the minds

In addition to influencing many Christian writers of his era (see page 30), Chesterton inspired at least two political leaders. In a column published in the United States October 2, 1909, Chesterton complained that the nationalist movement in India was neither nationalist nor Indian, but merely a reaction against British imperialism. He thought that Indian sovereignty, which he supported, should be based on Indian culture and tradition instead. Mahatma Gandhi followed this advice. Back in the British Isles, cagey Irish nationalist Michael Collins took a cue from Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) and avoided capture by traveling in plain sight.

### From fiction to Truth

In 1954, young Alec Guinness starred as the title character in *Father Brown* (in America, *The Detective*), a loose adaptation of Chesterton's short story "The Blue Cross." The role strayed pretty far from the genuine Father Brown but helped lead Guinness toward Christianity.

In his autobiography, *Blessings in Disguise*, Guinness describes an encounter he had one day during filming:

"I hadn't gone far when I heard scampering footsteps and a piping voice calling, 'mon pere!' My hand was seized by a boy of seven or eight, who clutched it tightly, swung it and kept up a non-stop prattle. He was full of excitement, hops, skips and jumps, but never let go of me. I didn't dare speak in case my excruciating French should scare him. Although I was a total stranger he obviously took me for a priest and so to be trusted. Suddenly with a 'Bonsoir, mon pere,' and a hurried sideways sort of bow, he disappeared through a hole in a hedge. Continuing my walk I reflected that a church which could inspire such confidence in a child, making its priests, even when unknown, so easily approachable could not be as scheming and creepy as so often made out. I began to shake off my long-taught, long-absorbed prejudices."

Guinness joined the Catholic Church soon afterward, along with the rest of his family.

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## G.K. Chesterton: From the Editor - Diamonds and the Rough

Elesha Coffman

Some historical figures manage to be both famous and obscure. John Newton, the slave trader who wrote "Amazing Grace," has been boiled down to a perennial sermon illustration. The Earl of Sandwich lives on only as a deli order. G.K. Chesterton pops up all over as the source for clever quotations, yet the American Chesterton Society leads off its website with an article titled, "Who is this guy and why haven't I heard of him?"

The reader who approaches Chesterton through his fine phrases has taken a good first step. Chesterton celebrated the perspective of "microscopists"—people who find big truths in tiny things—and his style invites microscopist reading.

Author Philip Yancey said, "I don't think you would study him for paragraphs. I don't think you would necessarily study him for great prose style. But for the wit and turn of words contained in one sentence, I don't think he has an equal anywhere." (For more of Yancey's thoughts on Chesterton, see page 44.)

Even so, Chesterton's verbal gems shine with special luster when encountered in their original settings. Chesterton underwent at least two profound spiritual changes (page 10), and he lived through events that set the course for the twentieth century and beyond (page 18). Clashes with prominent peers honed his ideas about faith and society (page 41). Isolated quotations can't capture these developments.

Quotes also can't capture Chesterton's fundamental bigness. He read as voraciously as he ate, and he commented on a range of subjects much wider than even himself. He was able to churn out sparkling, highly concentrated thoughts largely because he had such a profusion of thoughts to begin with.

Take, for example, the Chestertonian statement that "falsehood is never so false as when it is very nearly true." It's a great quote, applicable in myriad situations. But isn't it interesting that the quote comes from Chesterton's *St. Thomas Aquinas*, where it refers to an Islam-influenced philosophy that divides faith from scientific knowledge? And isn't it absolutely amazing that, to write that biography, Chesterton gathered a stack of books on Thomas, opened the cover of the top one, shut it, and proceeded to dictate his book off the top of his head?

Think big. Think small. Think Chesterton.

With this issue, I pass the reins of the magazine to Chris Armstrong. In a sense, it's a trade—he arrives from the graduate religion department at Duke University, and I begin doctoral studies there in the fall. We both hope to promote the kind of history that delights readers, stays faithful to the facts, and draws living water from the roots of tradition toward all branches of Christ's church.

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## The Road to Rome

Chesterton's spiritual journey.

Adam Schwartz

At the place where the roads meet there is no doubt of the convergence. A man may think all sorts of things, most of them honest and many of them true, about the right way to turn in the maze at Hampton Court. But he does not think he is in the center; he knows."

So wrote media star, mystery writer, and amateur theologian G.K. Chesterton in *The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic*. In the years leading up to this statement, though, he doubted whether roads met or even existed, and he was not at all sure what lay at the center of his life's maze. The story of his twisting, halting search for that place where truth makes sense is in many ways the story of his life.

### Descent into madness

Chesterton's spiritual search began with his family's Liberalism. His parents were religious enough to have him baptized by the Church of England in 1874, but they otherwise had little use for traditional Christianity. If anything, they leaned toward Unitarianism.

"My own father and uncles," Chesterton wrote in his *Autobiography*, "were entirely of the period that believed in progress, and generally in new things, all the more because they were finding it increasingly difficult to believe in old things; and in some cases in anything at all."

Chesterton described the cultural atmosphere of his youth as distinctly post-Christian. There was "nothing new or odd about not having a religion. ... We might almost say that agnosticism was an established church."

In his youth, Chesterton expressed some curiosity about orthodox Christianity (though he disliked Roman Catholicism) and twinges of anxiety about Liberalism. These explorations soon stalled. His earliest writings extolled the French Revolution, condemned dogma, and preached the exaltation of humanity.

All of this changed, however, at the Slade School of Art.

Chesterton enrolled at the Slade School in late 1892, and over the next year he went through a nihilistic phase. He called this episode "my period of madness." Friends also feared for his sanity.

The fashion of the day was Impressionism, which celebrated the artist's perspective while downplaying physical reality. "Its principal," Chesterton wrote, "was that if all that could be seen of a cow was a white line and a purple shadow, we should only render the line and the shadow; in a sense we should only believe in the line and the shadow, rather than in the cow."

Seized by this mentality, he began to doubt the world around him. "It was as if I had myself projected the universe from within, with its trees and stars; and that is so near to the notion of being God that it is manifestly even nearer to going mad. Yet I was not mad, in any medical or physical sense; I was simply carrying the scepticism of my time as far as it would go."

## Radical realism

Chiefly by reading authors who affirmed existence and its basic goodness (particularly Robert Browning, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Walt Whitman), Chesterton emerged from the depths of depression by late 1893 or early 1894. He began to cultivate gratitude for life and wide-eyed wonder at the world—ideas so counter-cultural at the time, they seemed almost radical.

He took these insights with him as he left the Slade School in 1895 and began a career in publishing. He headed to London's journalistic hub, Fleet Street, and spent the next several years honing his ideas before a large and varied readership.

Much of Chesterton's intellectual development can be traced in his weekly columns for the mass-market **Daily News** between 1901 and 1913. To grab readers in a highly competitive market, the traditionally Nonconformist (low-church Protestant) paper assembled several strong writers and gave them broad leeway to comment on society, ideas, and world events. Chesterton became one of the publication's stars, aiding a rise in circulation from 56,000 in 1900 to 400,000 in 1909.

As Chesterton developed his personal philosophy, he faced the professional challenge of stimulating and provoking his readers without alienating either them or his long-suffering editor, A.G. Gardiner. The balance grew more precarious as he gravitated further from the Liberalism most of his readers embraced and closer to earthy traditions they deemed retrograde.

Chesterton's brother, Cecil, described the situation this way in 1908: "Thousands of peaceful semi-Tolstoian Nonconformists have for six years, been compelled to listen every Saturday morning to a fiery apostle preaching ... War, Drink and Catholicism."

In fact, Chesterton did not preach Catholicism, or any coherent system, in his early career. He was still working out the details of faith and philosophy, wondering where his fundamental commitments to gratitude and against modern skepticism would lead. He and his readers would soon find out.

## Steps toward faith

Behind the scenes of his professional success, a number of personal factors pulled Chesterton toward orthodox Christianity and, eventually, Roman Catholicism.

Taking a first step in the direction of faith, Chesterton realized that the gift of life, for which he had grown so grateful, must have been given by someone. "The truth presented itself to me, rather, in the form that where there is anything there is God," he wrote.

Chesterton had help in taking the second step toward faith.

In 1896, he met and became enamored with Frances Blogg, an officer of a London debating salon. Chesterton admired her confidence and discovered that it was rooted in her devout High Anglican faith. Her religion was "the unique quality that cut her off from the current culture and saved her from it."

Chesterton credited Frances with leading him from his vestigial Unitarianism to Anglicanism. But even though he was moving toward High Anglicanism at the time of their 1901 marriage, he still had a clearer sense of what he rejected than of what he believed. His criticism of modern theology and philosophy, laid out in **Heretics** (1905), left his affirmation of orthodox Christianity largely implied.

Chesterton finally asserted his faith in 1908 with **Orthodoxy**. In this book, he defines orthodox Christianity as the "philosophy of sanity" and shows how Christian beliefs answer deep modern problems.

For example, because Christians believe in an Incarnation, they believe in matter, spirit, and interaction between the two. This gives Christians respect for both the rational and mystical aspects of life. It also saves them from the radical doubts that nearly drove Chesterton mad in art school.

Furthermore, the historical doctrines of Christianity, so often blamed for blinding people from reality, actually reveal reality by keeping believers from blinding themselves with personal heresies. Fancy new schemes for understanding the world simply cannot compete with orthodoxy's tradition of defining dogmas. That tradition, he wrote, has not "told this truth or that truth, but has revealed itself as a truth-telling thing."

Truth is not the only thing Christian orthodoxy lavishes on its followers. In the "old theology [rather] than the new," Chesterton wrote, "we get wonder, curiosity, moral and political adventure, righteous indignation-Christendom." And, of utmost importance to Chesterton, Christians also get a Creator to whom they can express their gratitude.

### **Which church?**

But Chesterton's spiritual search did not end with his full acceptance of orthodoxy. Indeed, even as he wrote *Orthodoxy*, he was wondering which church was most orthodox. He spent the next 14 years weighing the claims of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches.

Despite boyhood prejudices against Catholics, Chesterton consistently expressed greater interest in Catholic culture and belief than his Protestant and secular peers. In particular, since youth he had felt an intense interest in the Virgin Mary. As an adult, he claimed that Mary had always symbolized Roman Catholicism to him.

There were also several early personal Roman Catholic influences on Chesterton, including his friend Hilaire Belloc, whom he met in 1900, and Father John O'Connor (the loose inspiration for Father Brown), whom he met in 1904. Additionally, Chesterton's close friend Maurice Baring became a Roman Catholic in 1909, as did his beloved brother, Cecil, in 1913.

Chesterton's beliefs at this point aligned him with the Anglo-Catholics, Christians who accepted most Catholic doctrines and practices but gave allegiance to English rather than Roman hierarchy. It was a difficult position to define, and many Anglo-Catholics moved on to either firmer commitment to reforming the Anglican Church or full communion with Rome.

Chesterton would take the second route, but only after another full round of soul-searching.

"I did not start out with the idea of saving the English Church, but of finding the Catholic Church," he wrote. "If the two were one, so much the better; but I had never conceived of Catholicism as a sort of showy attribute or attraction to be tacked on to my own national body, but as the inmost soul of the true body, wherever it might be."

One of the things that drew Chesterton toward Roman Catholicism was his fear that the Anglican Church could not combat theological Modernism. Chesterton saw in Modernism, which emphasized the rational and ethical aspects of Christianity but undermined its supernatural component, a dangerous rupture between mind and spirit-the same sort of rupture that had led to his breakdown at Slade.

He still believed that the Church of England could be both English and Catholic, so that Anglicans were not bereft of "the authority that can alone maintain dogma." But he also confessed to being "in some doubt" about the "seat of this Catholic authority."

Before Chesterton chose between Canterbury and Rome, he dropped many hints in Rome's direction. O'Connor claimed that Chesterton told him in the late spring of 1911 that he had decided to join the Roman church, but other matters of conscience restrained him. He was especially concerned about his wife, Frances, to whom he owed his orthodoxy and whose discernment he still admired.

Frances did not share her husband's anxieties about Anglicanism. She also had been grieved permanently when her brother who converted to Roman Catholicism committed suicide in 1906.

Furthermore, Chesterton's family was disturbed by Cecil's attraction to Rome, and G.K. did not want to introduce additional tensions. Finally, he was not yet so convinced by Roman Catholicism that he felt morally required to convert.

He almost ran out of time to make a decision. In November 1914, he collapsed. Around Christmas he became comatose. During a period of lucidity, he expressed a desire to be received into the Catholic church, but he faded out again before anything could be done.

It would seem that Chesterton had moved beyond intellectual acceptance of Catholic teachings to a personal embrace. Yet after he recovered, in 1915, he was even more worried about Frances, having given her such a scare with his illness. It took him a few more years to translate his beliefs into practical behavior.

### **A vow in Italy**

The final stages of Chesterton's march to Rome were marked by a couple of dramatic events, a growing disaffection with Anglicanism, and sustained self-examination.

In 1919, London's *Daily Telegraph* sent him to Jerusalem to file a series of dispatches. During this trip, December 1919 to April 1920, Chesterton had two experiences that were pivotal in his religious development.

Seeing where Christ had lived heightened his sensitivity to the importance of tradition, particularly the heritage of the saints. His thoughts achieved startling clarity when he heard Benediction in the Church of the Ecce Homo on Palm Sunday. In a letter to his friend Maurice Baring, he wrote, "my train of thought, which really was one of thought and not fugitive emotion, came to an explosion."

Following this spiritually charged journey to Palestine, the Chestertons returned to Britain by way of Italy. While in Brindisi on Easter, they visited a Catholic church with a statue of the Virgin Mary. Chesterton prayed before it and made "the freest and hardest of all my acts of freedom," promising her "the thing that I would do if I returned to my own land." He was committing himself to trust God, through Mary's mediation, to see him safely to his spiritual home.

He found it easier to fulfill that vow by the summer of 1920, as he contemplated the declarations of the Anglican Church's Lambeth Conference. At Lambeth, the Anglican bishops showed willingness to bend doctrines in the name of Christian unity and offered only tepid condemnation of such quasi-Christian movements as spiritualism, Christian Science, and theosophy. Chesterton detected the taint of Modernism throughout.

As he elaborated a few years later, in the *Toronto Daily Star*, "the Church of England does not speak strongly. It has no united action. I have no use for a Church which is not a Church militant, which cannot order battle and fall in line and march in the same direction." Only in Rome, where rebellion against modernity was the rule, did unequivocal orthodoxy prevail.

## Peace at last

While the spirit seems to have been fully willing by late 1920, the flesh remained weak until mid-1922. This hesitancy was not simply a case of Chesterton's usual slowness to action. Only his feelings about Frances held him back.

Ever since he began realizing that he was a Roman Catholic, he had hoped to convince her to convert as well. Yet he also feared alienating her, believing that the slightest touch could give her either great faith in or great hatred for Rome.

To talk through the issues, he called in John O'Connor, at Frances's request. On July 27, 1922, O'Connor told Frances that only anxiety about her reaction was keeping her husband from converting.

Frances replied that she would be greatly relieved if he took the step, for it would finally give them both the peace that his preoccupation had been preventing. But she also stressed that she could not move with him.

Satisfied at last that Frances had consented, Chesterton was received into the Catholic Church July 30, 1922. To his joy, Frances eventually joined him, in 1926.

Roman Catholicism fulfilled crucial traits of orthodoxy that he had long lauded. For example, in rejecting the dualistic Modernism that he thought was besetting Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism best upheld the orthodox synergy of spirit and matter.

He further judged Roman Catholicism the best source of authoritative, consistent Christian truth-telling because of its doctrinal center (the papacy) and commitment to tradition. He thus regarded this faith as the lone contemporary Christian church unwilling to cut its creed to suit the mood of modern times, making conversion to it "a form of revolt ... [against] the established convention of much of the modern world."

Finally, Roman Catholicism affirmed his principle of gratitude. Its main theology, Thomism, held as its "primary and fundamental" belief "the praise of Life, the praise of Being, the praise of God as Creator of the World." Chesterton also found the Roman Catholic rite of mandatory, sacramental confession a unique means of atonement for ingratitude.

## Leading the leaders

As Chesterton had followed some of his closest friends into orthodox Christianity, many more British authors followed him. C.S. Lewis, T.S. Eliot, Ronald Knox, Christopher Dawson, David Jones, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh all avowed a conscious debt to Chesterton's work and, even more significantly, demonstrated an unconscious one.

As Knox asserted, his generation was often "thinking Chesterton" without realizing it. It is hardly surprising that these Christians were "thinking Chesterton" when his thoughts were such as these (from the poem "The Convert"):

The sages have a hundred maps to give  
That trace their crawling cosmos like a tree,  
They rattle reason out through many a sieve  
That stores the sand and lets the dust go free:  
And all these things are less than dust to me  
Because my name is Lazarus and I live.



*Adam Schwartz, assistant professor of history at Christendom College, Virginia, is working on a study of modern British converts to Catholicism, including Chesterton.*

### **In His Own Words**

#### ***Chesterton's take on the art school experience.***

There is nothing harder to learn than painting and nothing which most people take less trouble about learning. An art school is a place where about three people work with feverish energy and everybody else idles to a degree that I should have conceived unattainable by human nature. Moreover those who work are, I will not say the least intelligent, but, by the very nature of the case, for the moment the most narrow; those whose keen intelligence is for the time narrowed to a strictly technical problem. They do not want to be discursive and philosophical; because the trick they are trying to learn is at once incommunicable and practical; like playing the violin.

Thus philosophy is generally left to the idle; and it is generally a very idle philosophy. In the time of which I write it was also a very negative and even nihilistic philosophy. And though I never accepted it altogether, it threw a shadow over my mind and made me feel that the most profitable and worthy ideas were, as it were, on the defensive. ...

[T]he whole mood was overpowered and oppressed with a sort of congestion of imagination. As Bunyan, in his morbid period, described himself as prompted to utter blasphemies, I had an overpowering impulse to record or draw horrible ideas and images; plunging in deeper and deeper as in a blind spiritual suicide. I had never heard of Confession, in any serious sense, in those days; but that is what is really needed in such cases. I fancy they are not uncommon cases.

Anyhow, the point is here that I dug quite low enough to discover the devil; and even in some dim way to recognise the devil. At least I never, even in this first vague and sceptical stage, indulged very much in the current arguments about the relativity of evil or the unreality of sin. Perhaps, when I eventually emerged as a sort of theorist, and was described as an Optimist, it was because I was one of the few people in that world of diabolism who really believed in devils.

—*From The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, 1936*

### **In His Own Words**

#### ***G.K.'s silly and serious sides.***

#### **On absent-mindedness**

I used to say that my autobiography ought to consist of a series of short stories like those about Sherlock Holmes; only that his were astonishing examples of observation, and mine astonishing examples of lack of observation. In short, they were to be "Adventures" concerned with my absence of mind, instead of his presence of mind.

One, I remember was called "The Adventure of the Pro-Boer's Corkscrew," and commemorated the fact that I once borrowed a corkscrew from Hammond and found myself trying to open my front-door with it, with my latch-key in the other hand. Few will believe my statement, but it is none the less true that the incident came before and not after the more appropriate use of the corkscrew. I was perfectly sober; probably I should have been more vigilant if I had been drunk.

Another anecdote, expanded into "The Adventure of the Astonished Clerk," accused me of having asked for a cup of coffee instead of a ticket at the booking-office of a railway station, and doubtless I went on to ask the waitress politely for a third single to Battersea. I am not particularly proud of this characteristic, for I think that presence of mind is far more really poetical than absence of mind.

## **On Confession**

When people ask me, or indeed anybody else, "Why did you join the Church of Rome?" the first essential answer, if it is partly an elliptical answer, is, "To get rid of my sins." For there is no other religious system that does really profess to get rid of people's sins. It is confirmed by the logic, which to many seems startling, by which the Church deduces that sin confessed and adequately repented is actually abolished; and that the sinner does really begin again as if he had never sinned.

And this brought me sharply back to those visions or fancies with which I have dealt in the chapter about childhood. I spoke there of the indescribable and indestructible certitude in the soul, that those first years of innocence were the beginning of something worthy, perhaps more worthy than any of the things that actually followed them: I spoke of the strange daylight, which was something more than the light of common day, that still seems in my memory to shine on those steep roads down from Campden Hill, from which one could see the Crystal Palace from afar.

Well, when a Catholic comes from Confession, he does truly, by definition, step out again into that dawn of his own beginning and look with new eyes across the world to a Crystal Palace that is really of crystal. He believes that in that dim corner, and in that brief ritual, God has really remade him in His own image. He is now a new experiment of the Creator. He is as much a new experiment as he was when he was really only five years old. He stands, as I said, in the white light at the worthy beginning of the life of a man. The accumulations of time can no longer terrify. He may be grey and gouty; but he is only five minutes old.

**—From *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton*, 1936**

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## Issues & G.K.'s Answers

He read his times and wrote about times to come.

Dale Ahlquist

Much of what G.K. Chesterton wrote was timeless.

"He is not of our time, but of all times," wrote A.G. Gardiner, editor of the London *Daily News*. More than 100 years after Chesterton first started writing for the *Daily News*, readers continue to find his words fresh and timely, in some ways written more for our day than his own. Consider:

"Religious liberty might be supposed to mean that everybody is free to discuss religion. In practice it means that hardly anybody is allowed to mention it."

"Defending any of the cardinal virtues now has all the exhilaration of a vice."

"Men do not differ much about what things they will call evils; they differ enormously about what evils they will call excusable."

"The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people."

Such writing doesn't need a lot of explanation. But Chesterton also wrote about many events in his lifetime with which modern readers may not be familiar.

Unlike many journalists, though, he was not a reactionary. His ideas were not formed in response to what happened in the world while he lived. Rather, he was an expansive thinker with a fully formed philosophy who was able to comprehend what was happening and warn against what could and would happen.

## War

His response to the Boer War shows his layered thinking. Chesterton was a patriot, not a pacifist, but he felt compelled to criticize his country's role in this particular conflict.

The Boer War began in 1899 when Britain attempted to take over the small but gold- and diamond-rich South African country of Transvaal. The Boers, descendants of the Dutch and Germans who had settled there several generations earlier, were mostly farmers, but they were also experts in guerilla warfare. They successfully held off the superior forces of the British for over two years before surrendering.

Chesterton, like many others, disparaged such British tactics as herding Boer women and children into concentration camps, where more than 26,000 non-combatants died. But Chesterton disagreed with the war's intent as well as its methods.

A "Little Englander," Chesterton felt a natural sympathy toward his own land. He could equally

sympathize with the patriotism of those who lived in other countries.

Still, Chesterton's respect for the autonomy of other countries had limits. He fully supported England's role in the Great War, which we now call World War I, even though the conflict took his brother's life.

Chesterton hated aggression on the part of any empire, including the British Empire, but he especially disliked the aggressive growth of the Prussian (German) Empire. He feared Prussia both as a military regime and as the home of a philosophy that disdained God and threatened to destroy Christian civilization.

He traced those ideas back to the meeting between King Frederick the Great, "the Protestant prince who was not even a Christian," and Voltaire, his "soulless soul-mate." The combination of Voltaire's skepticism and Frederick's pride gave birth to all the "long-winded German theories" (relativism, materialism, communism, and Nazism) that were the enemies of Christian thought.

Chesterton predicted that the inconclusive end to World War I would lead to a far greater war, "the worst the world would ever see." Chesterton only lived long enough to see the beginning of that war (he died as Hitler was rising to power), but the prediction certainly came true.

## **Feminism**

Chesterton carried on a war of his own with the feminists of his era, who would "chain themselves to a tree and then complain they were not free." He criticized feminists for simply imitating men while neglecting such high and exclusively feminine callings as motherhood.

This partly explains why he opposed woman's suffrage. For him, politics was at best a game that men ran off and played. At worst, it was something dirty and corrupt. In the latter case, he did not want women sullied by it. In the former, though men claimed that politics were important, women knew better. (Actually, most women didn't even want the vote, a fact that did not sit well with the suffragists.)

Chesterton had a theory that corrupt politicians were only interested in preserving their own power, and they figured the best way to do it was to give women the vote—without giving them anything else. Indeed, upon getting the vote, the suffragists rewarded those politicians who helped them get it by keeping them in office.

Chesterton opposed women working outside the home as well. He thought that women seeking jobs were merely duped by big business interests who supported the idea of "the right to work" and the "liberation" of women, not because these industrialist-capitalists were idealists, but because they saw women as a source of cheap labor.

"Ten thousand women," Chesterton wrote, "marched through the streets shouting, 'We will not be dictated to,' and went off and became stenographers."

The main problem that Chesterton saw with women having the vote was that it would shift the power of society from the home to the state. He was not afraid of women having more power, but of the state having more power.

He argued that women could not possibly be more powerful than they are in the home, where the most important decisions are made, where children are born and raised, and where people eat and drink and live and die.

The basic unit of society must be the family. If the family is atomized into smaller units, "individual

rights" take precedence over the needs of the family. But those individuals will regroup into other interest groups, according to race or class or sex, and the rights of those groups tend to undermine the family.

No one today suggests that women should not vote, and few suggest that they should not work. But families have broken up and government has grown, just as Chesterton said.

## **Prohibition**

Chesterton opposed American Prohibition, which was passed in 1920. He blamed it on Puritanism—"righteous indignation about the wrong things."

He defended the right of the working class to drink beer together in a local pub, as they had done for centuries. It was a tradition he honored, as he generally honored tradition against fads. He argued that drunkenness is a sin but beer is not, just as gluttony is a sin but bread is not.

We "wreck the tribunal of truth" when we pronounce the innocent guilty just as much as when we pronounce the guilty innocent, he wrote. We destroy all innocence when we teach people to detest an innocent practice. When we turn morals upside down, it always ends badly.

He predicted that Prohibition would eventually lead to "the worst and wildest license." Bootleggers and bathtub gin proved him right.

## **The Marconi Scandal**

While largely forgotten compared to these other events, the Marconi Scandal was very important to Chesterton. Today it would be known as a case of insider trading.

In 1913, the British government was about to award a huge contract to Marconi Wireless. Certain members of the government bought shares before the information was made public, then enriched themselves by selling the shares at a handsome profit.

Those officials included David Lloyd George, who would become prime minister a few years later, and Sir Rufus Isaacs, who was to be secretary of state. Rufus's brother, Godfrey, orchestrated the deal.

Chesterton's brother, Cecil, excoriated the Isaacs brothers in his newspaper, the *New Witness*. Godfrey Isaacs hired the most prestigious attorneys in England to bring a libel action against Cecil.

Cecil, who refused to accept counsel, lost in court, though the judge, who could have sent him to prison, let him off with a small fine.

The whole affair confirmed G.K. Chesterton's worst fears about politics, the press, the courts, and the business world, particularly international finance. The fact that the Isaacs brothers were Jewish and that Chesterton accused Jewish financiers of undue influence throughout Europe caused critics to accuse him of anti-Semitism.

## **Anti-Semite?**

In Chesterton's defense, however, though he warned of the dangers of international finance to local governments and economies, he never accused all Jews of being international financiers nor all international financiers of being Jewish.

He also pointed out that rich Jews often profited from the poor Jews in the European ghettos. Because of this small, exclusive class of Jews, Chesterton could see that people would think ill of all Jews, and he predicted there would be a horrible outbreak of violence against them. He was right.

Those who accuse G.K. Chesterton of anti-Semitism ignore the fact that he was among the first to speak out against Hitler's treatment of the Jews, and that in 1935 he wrote that he would die defending the last Jew in Europe. He also supported the concept of a Jewish homeland. Prominent American rabbi Stephen Wise hailed Chesterton as a defender of the Jews.

G.K. Chesterton was a lucid reporter of his age and gives us a living perspective of it, which helps us better see our own age. He reminds us of universal truths, enabling us to see history from the inside, where "every man knows the inmost core of every other man."

***Dale Ahlquist is president of the American Chesterton Society.***

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 75: G.K. Chesterton: Prolific Writer & Apologist

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## The Woman Question

Chesterton's ideas on this controversial subject reflected the strengths of the two women he knew best.

Bonnie C. Harvey

At 26 years old, G.K. Chesterton wrote that the world in 1901 was "full of the trampling of totally new forces." One of these "new forces" was commonly called the Woman Question:

Should women be allowed to receive higher education? Should they be allowed to vote and take part in politics? What about women being employed equally with men in the business world?

Chesterton agreed with the conservative views of most of his male peers on these questions, but not always for their reasons. Chesterton was not afraid of women, and he did not consider it his God-given right to rule over them. He merely believed that, while women could achieve many things out in the world, they were at their happiest and best in the home. At least this was the case for his mother and his wife.

Chesterton did not grow up in a religious home. Nevertheless, his home provided a shelter from the outside world, and his parents (and brother, Cecil) formed a close-knit, loving family. It was here that his views of women seem to have been formed.

Cecil called his brother's childhood "the happiest in literature." The permissive parents let the two boys roam and play to their hearts' content in the roomy house and garden. Mr. Chesterton ran the family real estate business, and Mrs. Chesterton busied herself with ordering the household activities. Instead of sending their sons away to boarding school, the Chestertons kept them at home. The parents refused to be separated from them.

Chesterton enjoyed a childhood in which he immersed himself in fairy tales and made puppets for a toy theater his father had made. One of Chesterton's closest childhood friends, Edmund Bentley, remarked that "he had never met with parental devotion or conjugal sympathy more strong than they were in the exceptional woman who was his mother [or] in his father. ... whose feeling for literature and all beautiful things worked so much upon his sons in childhood."

Chesterton's wife, Frances, was another exceptional woman. Like his mother, she kept the house in order and took care of him. She even put up with his absent-mindedness, as on the day when he wired, "Am at Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?" She answered, "Home."

Chesterton also admired his wife's spirituality. Her faith had been instrumental in his conversion, and even when he felt himself pulled away from her Anglicanism, he always greatly valued her opinion. She acted as his chief literary critic as well.

Chesterton's well-documented love and respect for his mother and his wife temper the apparent misogyny in some of his writings. His writings on the Woman Question also often argue more subtle points than his critics give him credit for.

In "Folly and Female Education" (from *What's Wrong with the World*), for example, Chesterton seems to suggest that women should not be admitted to day-schools or Oxford and that they should return to

Victorian styles of dress. His real argument, though, is with those who think women should slavishly imitate men.

"It is all part of the same silly subjugation," Chesterton wrote; "there must be a hard stick-up collar around the neck of a woman, because there is already a nuisance round the neck of a man."

The essay "The Independence of Women," on women in the workforce, picks up the same theme. He writes that the "economic independence of women is the same as what is called the economic wage slavery of men."

Essays such as "The Drift from Domesticity" (in *The Thing*) strike closer to Chesterton's larger concern for the sanctity of the family. Here he argues that if women work outside the home, they become independent of their husbands and dependent on their employers. This shift will inevitably take a toll on home life.

Chesterton has much to say on the family. He equates stepping into a family with stepping "into a fairy tale" (*Heretics*). The family, "a world that we have not made," may not always be convenient or harmonious, but it is always "full of fiery possibilities." He also compares the home to the church, calling it "the temple of the hearth."

One Chesterton biographer, Alzina Stone Dale, suggests that what he wrote in his essays about women and the home can perhaps be summed up by reversing an old nursery rhyme: "The queen is in the counting house, counting out the money, The king is in the parlor, eating bread and honey." Women, in Chesterton's experience, display extraordinary skill in keeping families running. What job could be more important or rewarding?

Even though Chesterton's writings on women appear somewhat dogmatic and outdated, today some career women are leaving their jobs and returning to the home. We can almost hear the jovial Chesterton chuckling and saying, "I knew that sooner or later you'd come around to my way of thinking."

***Bonnie C. Harvey has written several biographies of nineteenth-century figures including Carry Nation and Daniel Webster (both Enslow).***

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Genius with a Message

Every piece in Chesterton's immense body of published work bears the imprint of his soul.

Deb Elkind

Critics over the past century have sought to identify the fundamental Chesterton. He offers an answer in **Orthodoxy**: "The central Christian theology ... is the best root of energy and sound ethics." Indeed, theology informs and connects everything he wrote: about 50 Father Brown stories; more than 85 major works in genres including novel, short story, poem, play, biography, lecture, and literary criticism; some 1,600 articles in *The Illustrated London News*; and countless other pieces.

### Essays

Though Chesterton did not proclaim Christian faith until adulthood, inklings of faith appear even in his earliest work. More than 200 notebooks filled with his youthful writings were discovered just a decade ago beneath old clothing in a storage trunk in England, affording a glimpse of his developing spiritual thought and literary style. His early short story "The Wine of Cana," for example, includes the weighty line, "On that last night, in that dark garret, knowing that the gibbet hung above him, he gave those he loved a last symbol and memory."

Chesterton's first published work, a short piece in *The Speaker*, appeared in 1892. Soon his art college magazine, *The Quarto*, printed more of his work. Even as he studied visual art, he prepared for a career in publishing.

Chesterton's ability to write succinct, lively prose—and to write it quickly—suited him perfectly for newspaper publishing. London's *Daily News* picked him up in 1899, and *The Illustrated London News* gave him a regular column in 1905. His output proved so valuable that many of the essays were republished in book form.

Though produced for the boisterous world of Fleet Street, Chesterton's essays feature beautiful metaphors and deep theological insights. For example, "In Defence of Baby Worship" (from *The Defendant*, 1901) asserts:

The most unfathomable schools and sages have never attained to the gravity which dwells in the eyes of a baby of three months old. It is the gravity of astonishment at the universe, and astonishment at the universe is not mysticism, but a transcendent common sense. ... With each one of them all things are remade, and the universe is put again upon its trial.

Other essay collections, such as *All Things Considered* (1908), continue the theological theme:

Man is an exception, whatever else he is. If he is not the image of God, then he is a disease of the dust. If it is not true that a divine being fell, then we can only say that one of the animals went entirely off its head. ("Wine When it is Red")

Many books ensued, including *Varied Types* (1908), *Tremendous Trifles* (1909), *What's Wrong with the World* (1910), *Appetite of Tyranny and The Crimes of England* (wartime books dealing with German thought, 1915), and *Eugenics and Other Evils* (1922). *Fancies Versus*

*Fads* (1923) typifies his criticism of modernity, and *The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic* (1929) exemplifies some of the specifically theological titles following his 1922 entry into the Roman Church.

## Poems, plays, pictures

If Chesterton's first teenage essays gave way to such a string of collections, his first two books, published in 1900 (*The Wild Knight* and *Other Poems and Greybeards at Play*), introduced his poetry. On the divine presence within creation, Chesterton writes in "The Holy of Holies":

"Speller of the stones and weeds,  
Skilled in Nature's crafts and creeds,  
Tell me what is in the heart  
Of the smallest seeds."  
"God Almighty, and with Him  
Cherubim and Seraphim,  
Filling all eternity—  
Adonai Elohim."

"The Ballad of the Battle of Gibeon" (referring to Joshua as a figure of the incarnate Christ) and "By the Babe Unborn" are two well-known poems. "The Donkey," a unique perspective of the crucifixion, also is often quoted:

"Fools! For I also had my hour;  
One far fierce hour and sweet:  
There was a shout about my ears,  
And palms before my feet."

The later, earthy poetry in *Wine, Water and Song* (1915) became popular in the wartime pubs of his day. "Who Goes Home?" for example, is a rousing, military cheer for the God-given freedom of individual will:

For there's blood on the field and blood on the foam,  
And blood on the body when man goes home.  
And a voice valedictory—Who is for Victory?  
Who is for Liberty? Who goes home?

Other poems include historical and religious epics such as *The Ballad of the White Horse* (1911), *The Ballad of St. Barbara* (1922), and *The Queen of Seven Swords* (1926).

*Magic* (1913) was the first (and most successful) of three plays Chesterton wrote. His illustrations appear in some of his own works, 10 Hilaire Belloc novels, and Edmund Bentley's 1905 *Biography for Beginners*.

## Critical thoughts

In 1903, Chesterton was commissioned to write his first major literary critique, *Robert Browning*. He followed this with books on Charles Dickens (responsible for a scholarly revival in the popularity of that author), Robert Louis Stevenson (one of Chesterton's favorite writers), Chaucer, William Blake, and others. *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913) remains an important text of literary and cultural criticism.

Chesterton also applied his critical thinking skills to debate. In 1903-4, *The Clarion* printed his

controversy with the paper's atheist editor, Robert Blatchford. This argument became the first public arena for Chesterton's Christian beliefs.

Chesterton sparred with many other partners in print as well. In *Heretics* (1905), he took on several contemporary thought-leaders as a means of critiquing prevailing philosophies of the age. The book is unabashedly polemical, for, as Chesterton writes, "[N]o man ought to write at all, or even to speak at all, unless he thinks that he is in truth and the other man in error."

## Fiction

In 1904, Chesterton published his first of a half-dozen novels, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*. He identified its theme in the introductory poem dedicated to his lifelong friend, Hilaire Belloc:

For every tiny town or place  
God made the stars especially;  
Babies look up with owlish face  
and see them tangled in a tree ...  
Yea; Heaven is everywhere at home.

Inspired in part by the 1899 outbreak of the Boer War, the socio-political motif of this novel is rooted in Chesterton's love of home as "an Earthly Paradise": "Nature puts on a disguise when she speaks to every man; to this man she put on the disguise of Notting Hill."

His subsequent novels explored questions of good versus evil. *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) depicts Chesterton's own pursuit of God through the chaos of a fallen universe, which yet retains traces of the Creator:

"Listen to me," cried Syme, with extraordinary emphasis. "Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world? We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face? If we could only get around in front."

Other novel titles include *The Ball and the Cross* (1909, a fictional "quarrel" serialized in 1905-6, shortly after the Blatchford controversy), *Manalive* (1912, with its theme of the global wanderer searching for "home"), *The Flying Inn* (1914), and *The Return of Don Quixote* (1927). *Basil Howe: A Story of Young Love*, written when Chesterton was just 20, was recently discovered and published.

Chesterton's first short story collection, *The Club of Queer Trades*, came out in 1905. Other collections include *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1922), *Tales of the Long Bow* (1925), *The Poet and the Lunatics* (1929), *Four Faultless Felons* (1930), and *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* (1937).

His most popular works, the Father Brown series, also fit into the short-story category. Ostensibly conventional "whodunits," these remarkable pieces nonetheless reinforce the messages Chesterton preached elsewhere.

## Nonfiction

A maturing Chesterton found much to say about places he visited on frequent trips abroad. A journey to Ireland yielded *Irish Impressions* (1919), in which he supports Irish Home Rule. *The New Jerusalem* (1920) details some observations from a trek that influenced his faith. *What I Saw in America* (1922) and *Sidelights on London and Newer York* (1932) feature more

social commentary, but religious questions always surface as well.

Chesterton's faith informed his books on history and culture, too. ***A Short History of England*** (1917) and a commemoration of a war hero, ***Lord Kitchener*** (1917), preceded a book central to understanding Chesterton's view of the Incarnation. ***The Everlasting Man*** (1925) divided the religious history of the world into two parts, which balance on the fulcrum of Jesus Christ:

The cross has become something more than a historical memory; it does convey, almost as by a mathematical diagram, the truth about the real point at issue; the idea of a conflict stretching outwards into eternity. It is true, and even tautological, to say that the cross is the crux of the whole matter.

Two important religious biographies, ***St. Francis of Assisi*** (1923) and ***St. Thomas Aquinas*** (1933), flesh out the relationship between Christianity and history. "When Religion would have maddened men," Chesterton writes in *Aquinas*, "Theology kept them sane."

Whether in journalism or debate, script, poem, or novel, Chesterton's comprehensive application of the creeds of Christianity remained focused on spiritual issues. His voice and his purpose still ring in the earliest words of his famous sleuth, Father Brown, who on Hampstead Heath frustrated the attempts of the jewel thief to snatch a sapphire-encrusted relic. Along with his fictional character, Chesterton, too, can perhaps boast: "I saved the cross, as the cross will always be saved."

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 75: G.K. Chesterton: Prolific Writer & Apologist

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## The Un-Apologist

Oblivious to convention, Chesterton launched a bold campaign to point a mad world back to truth.

John Warwick Montgomery

In one of his most important books, *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton claims that he is doing spiritual autobiography, not apologetics. He goes so far as to declare: "I never read a line of Christian apologetics." Yet in this and many other works, he made his era's most robust case for faith.

### Defense on the attack

Several elements come together to produce Chesterton's unique—and unusually effective—apologetic style.

First, though the word *apologetics* means literally "defense," Chesterton was never defensive. As one commentator put it, he "wrestled the initiative from the skeptics and presented the historic faith upon a note of triumphant challenge."

By exposing the false and irrational presuppositions of unbelief, Chesterton shows that the self-styled rationalist is as naked as the monarch in "The Emperor's Clothes." A few examples typify Chesterton's withering logic.

He observes that "the man who denies original sin believes in the Immaculate Conception of *everybody*."

Against the argument that we must remain agnostic and never claim that God has in fact revealed himself in this world, he says, "We don't know enough about the unknown to know that it is unknowable."

He says to those who believe that evolution eliminates God's creative activity, "It is absurd for the Evolutionist to complain that it is unthinkable for an admittedly unthinkable God to make everything out of nothing, and then pretend that it is more thinkable that nothing should turn itself into everything."

Chesterton never tires in pointing out the unjustified and unrecognized dogmatism of the unbeliever, contrasting this close-mindedness with the open and attractive worldview of the orthodox Christian. "The Christian," he writes, "is quite free to believe that there is a considerable amount of settled order and inevitable development in the universe. But the materialist is not allowed to admit into his spotless machine the slightest speck of spiritualism or miracle."

### Facts for faith

In today's apologetic climate, there are two major schools of thought. The *presuppositionalists* hold that, because of sin, the unbeliever always starts from his or her presuppositions of unbelief, and that only by starting from the presupposition of Christian truth can one achieve anything. The *evidentialists* argue that we can and must convince the unbeliever of Christian truth by presenting factual evidence.

Chesterton would certainly have joined the evidentialist camp. Note how he defends the miracles of the New Testament, which constitute the central evidence for Christ's deity:

"Somehow or other an extraordinary idea has arisen that the disbelievers in miracles consider them coldly and fairly, while believers in miracles accept them only in connection with some dogma. The fact is quite the other way. The believers in miracles accept them (rightly or wrongly) because they have evidence for them. The disbelievers in miracles deny them (rightly or wrongly) because they have a doctrine against them."

Chesterton's point, here and in general, is that the facts support Christian orthodoxy. If one is willing to investigate those facts, the truth of the faith will become plain. Unbelieving dogmatism keeps a fallen race from the gospel, not an absence of evidence.

Ronald Knox, the great translator of the New Testament, noted this essential characteristic of Chesterton's apologetic as it is reflected in the methods of Father Brown:

"The real secret of Father Brown is that there is nothing of the mystic about him. When he falls into a reverie—I had almost said, a brown study—the other people in the story think that he must be having an ecstasy, because he is a Catholic priest, and will proceed to solve the mystery by some kind of heaven-sent intuition. And the reader, if he is not careful, will get carried away by the same miscalculation. ... And all the time Father Brown is doing just what [Agatha Christie's sleuth Hercule] Poirot does; he is using his little grey cells. He is noticing something which the reader hasn't noticed, and will kick himself later for not having noticed."

### **Eat, drink, and witness**

We have all heard that "actions speak louder than words." This certainly applies to Christian witness. The lives of some apologists have been so unattractive that no one will listen to their arguments.

In evangelical circles, the problem has often been one of sanctimonious pietism. For example, prohibitionists who attempted to tell their neighbors of Christ's love were reviled for their stance on alcohol and ignored on all other counts. Protesters shouting slogans outside theaters and pool-halls met deaf ears when they attempted to make reasoned cases for faith.

Chesterton never fell into this trap. He had a strong doctrine of Creation and saw the beauties and pleasures of this world as gifts of God. He consistently criticized pietistic legalism and even devoted an entire novel to the absurdities of Prohibition.

In *The Flying Inn*, Chesterton supposes that England elects a Muslim prime minister, who abolishes all inns and pubs. This creates all the same evils faced by Prohibition-era America: bureaucracy, crime, and the general increase—not decrease—of social problems. The happy-go-lucky creators of a "flying inn," which moves from place to place just ahead of the authorities, display the kind of relaxed openness that characterizes believers who are comfortable with God's world.

Chesterton himself enjoyed fine cuisine and wines. He dressed idiosyncratically and sometimes eccentrically. He understood the scriptural emphasis on the unique importance of each individual before God and hated all bureaucratic attempts at enforced conformity. He was the polar opposite of the Pharisee, and there is little doubt that his transparent genuineness reinforced his apologetic arguments.

### **Ripples**

One way to assess the significance of Chesterton's apologetic work is to look for people he influenced. They are easy to find.

Etienne Gilson, the great medievalist of the mid-century, called Orthodoxy the best apologetic the

twentieth century had yet produced.

When Chesterton died, Charles Williams of the Oxford *Inklings* lamented, "The last of my Lords is dead."

In his obituary for Chesterton, famed poet and literary critic T.S. Eliot stated that Chesterton "did more than any man of his time" to "maintain the existence of the [Christian] minority in the modern world."

C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien also felt Chesterton's impact. Concerning the Gospel, Lewis asserts that "here and here only in all time the myth must become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man," and Tolkien declares, "this story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. Legend and history have met and fused." Both echo Chesterton, who wrote:

"In answer to the historical query of why it was accepted, and is accepted, I answer for millions of others in my reply: because it fits the lock; because it is like life. It is one among many stories; only it happens to be a true story. It is one among many philosophies; only it happens to be the truth."

In the final volume of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis has the children find in Narnia companions they thought they would never see again and learn that in God's kingdom "no good thing is ever lost." Lewis picks up where Chesterton left off:

"Paradise is somewhere and not anywhere, is something and not anything. And I would not be so very much surprised if the house in heaven had a real green lamp-post after all."

## **Recalled to duty**

No one writes in a cultural vacuum, and Chesterton, as a professional journalist, produced much ephemera that few but scholars read today. But the apologetic value of his contributions remains unassailable.

One of the major reasons for this is the resurfacing of theological liberalism. Many thought that two World Wars would put an end to the humanistic theology Chesterton targeted so often, but liberalism returned in guises like process theology and the "death of God movement."

In many respects, the pendulum has swung back to the kind of liberalism that Chesterton opposed with such force and effectiveness. The "Jesus Seminar" and Bishop Shelby Spong echo the arguments of such turn-of-the-century figures as Harry Emerson Fosdick and Bishop James Pike. All of them, in their rationalistic refusal to take the Gospel records seriously, place themselves directly in the sights of Chesterton's heavy artillery.

To all such deviations from classical Christian orthodoxy, Chesterton continues to speak:

"On the third day the friends of Christ coming at daybreak to the place found the grave empty and the stone rolled away. In varying ways they realised the new wonder; but even they hardly realised that the world had died in the night. What they were looking at was the first day of a new creation, with a new heaven and a new earth; and in a semblance of the gardener God walked again in the garden, in the cool not of the evening but the dawn."

***John Warwick Montgomery is an English barrister and Distinguished Professor of Apologetics at Trinity College and Theological Seminary (Indiana).***

## The Mystery Deepens

With Father Brown, the sleuth who plumbed hearts, Chesterton redefined the whodunit.

John Peterson

Nearly everyone agrees that Chesterton achieved something extraordinary with his Father Brown stories. Yet after literally hundreds of commentators have had their say, there is still no consensus about what his achievement was or in what ways Father Brown is significant. Truly, these critics are so at odds with one another that often they do not seem to be discussing the same stories.

Part of the problem is that Chesterton's stories resist analysis from the specialist's point of view. For example, not many who are experts in the field of detective fiction understand Chesterton as a philosopher. These critics react to Chesterton's moral and political ideas as if they were an intrusion of irrelevant propaganda.

Similarly, few students of Chesterton are mystery story enthusiasts, and fewer still are conversant with scholarship on the detective genre. They often fail to appreciate Chesterton's work within the framework of this literary form.

The Father Brown stories follow a format developed in the nineteenth century for readers of the new mass-circulation magazines. The formula, invented by Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s, boils down to this:

A mystifying crime is discovered, and a plausible explanation proves elusive. The mystery deepens until the eccentric but brainy sleuth (not a member of the official police) deduces the truth and reveals the surprising solution at the story's conclusion. The sleuth then reappears in subsequent magazine stories to solve other puzzling crimes.

Arthur Conan Doyle perfected this approach with his tales of the peerless Sherlock Holmes, written for *The Strand* magazine in the 1890s. Conan Doyle aimed to compete against the serialized novel with a character whose fascinating personal appeal—rather than a continuing cliff-hanger plot—would keep readers coming back for more. It was the greatest success in magazine publishing history.

Conan Doyle's triumph was not lost on *The Strand's* competitors. A host of Holmes-like sleuths soon appeared, each with his own series of linked short stories. Unfortunately none of these had the Sherlock Holmes magic, and today the stories seem hopelessly artificial and contrived.

Chesterton said as much at the time. He was the first respected literary critic to write extensively on the genre and the first to formulate the rules that would come to govern the classic "whodunit."

Chesterton's ideas dominated the so-called Golden Age of the mystery story and remained unchallenged until American pulp-fiction writers introduced the street-wise and tough-as-nails private eye, of which Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade remains the archetype.

### Rules of the game

Chesterton insisted that detective stories must focus on domestic crimes enacted in familiar settings, with the action restricted to a short span of time, a confined place, and a small cast of characters. He



conceived of the stories as a kind of literary game and demanded that writers play fair by showing their readers all the clues known to the sleuth.

He also insisted that, however complex the mystery might be made to appear, its eventual solution had to be simple enough to explain in a single shout from the rooftops. His illustrative example was, "The Archdeacon is Bloody Bill!"

Chesterton deplored the focus on mere mechanics of crime and detection—the easy way out for writers trying to imitate Conan Doyle. Chesterton faulted a story if it turned on a trick of detail rather than the drama of human interaction.

He disliked learning at the end that a high wall had not been a barrier to the suspect because the man had once been a pole-vaulter, or discovering on the last page that the main confusion in a story had been caused by the presence of someone's identical twin brother. Chesterton demanded an emphasis on the human aspects of the case—motives, emotions, and choices freely made.

In 1910 Chesterton's critical theories were put to the test when his Father Brown stories began appearing in *The Saturday Evening Post*. The stories followed the Poe and Conan Doyle formula, but they also fulfilled Chesterton's own rules and ideals. When the first 12 tales were collected and published as *The Innocence of Father Brown*, mystery specialist Ellery Queen called it "The Miracle Book of 1911."

The Father Brown series eventually reached a total of 51 short stories, collected in five volumes. They are universally admired for their ingenious crimes and brilliant detection. No mystery writer has devised more inventive plots or so effectively paraded his clues before a perplexed readership.

### The heretic hunter

Of equal significance for the future of the genre, Chesterton turned away from artificially tricky puzzles to an emphasis on character, following the example of the great Victorian novelists who had dabbled in the detective story form—Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Wilkie Collins.

The Father Brown stories achieve remarkable depth and richness in their intellectual themes. Chesterton, of course, was a man of ideas, and he was convinced that ideas influence behavior—bad ideas cause bad behavior. He therefore peopled his stories with villains and fools whose ignoble actions flow from their mistaken ideologies.

Thus Father Brown is actually more of a heretic hunter than he is an amateur policeman. As the priest explains to one of his detective friends, he has never had anything to do with "running down criminals." Instead, he makes it his business to confront the same errors that Chesterton warred against in his journalism.

Each of the stories may be read as an analogue of one of Chesterton's argumentative essays. Perhaps the most familiar example is "The Queer Feet," in which Father Brown laments the sort of moral blindness that makes servants invisible to their masters. The priest's view precisely echoes Chesterton, who commented at length on the subject in his *Illustrated London News* essay of September 9, 1911.

Father Brown captured the attention of the leading mystery writers of the day and set the tone and direction of detective fiction for a generation. E.C. Bentley dedicated his groundbreaking 1912 novel *Trent's Last Case* to Chesterton and insisted that he had written the book with Chesterton's principles in mind.

In 1929, when Anthony Berkeley founded London's Detection Club, one of its avowed purposes was to promote the very ideals that Chesterton had articulated as a critic and had realized so successfully in his stories. The small and select group included such luminaries as Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, and Freeman Wills Crofts.

Chesterton, of course, was duly installed as the club's first president, a position he held until his death in 1936.

***John Peterson publishes Gilbert! magazine and edited Father Brown of the Church of Rome (San Francisco, 1996), a collection of 10 Chesterton tales with notes. The Annotated Father Brown is forthcoming.***

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 75: G.K. Chesterton: Prolific Writer & Apologist

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## The Real Father Brown

G.K. Chesterton

When a writer invents a character for the purposes of fiction, especially of light or fanciful fiction, he fits him out with all sorts of features meant to be effective in that setting and against that background. He may have taken, and probably has taken, a hint from a human being. But he will not hesitate to alter the human being, especially in externals, because he is not thinking of a portrait but of a picture.

In Father Brown, it was the chief feature to be featureless. The point of him was to appear pointless; and one might say that his conspicuous quality was not being conspicuous.

His commonplace exterior was meant to contrast with his unsuspected vigilance and intelligence; and that being so, of course I made his appearance shabby and shapeless, his face round and expressionless, his manners clumsy, and so on.

At the same time, I did take some of his inner intellectual qualities from my friend, Father John O'Connor of Bedford, who has not, as a matter of fact, any of these external qualities. He is not shabby, but rather neat; he is not clumsy, but very delicate and dexterous; he not only is but looks amusing and amused. He is a sensitive and quick-witted Irishman, with the profound irony and some of the potential irritability of his race.

My Father Brown was deliberately described as a Suffolk dumpling from East Anglia. That, and the rest of his description, was a deliberate disguise for the purpose of detective fiction. But for all that, there is a very real sense in which Father O'Connor was the intellectual inspiration of these stories; and of much more important things as well.

—*From The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton*

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 75: G.K. Chesterton: Prolific Writer & Apologist

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## The World Made Strange

Chesterton's unique theology reveals what Christians know, but forget to believe.

Stratford Caldecott

G. K. Chesterton did not think of himself as a theologian. In his era, Catholic theology was still the domain of a highly trained clerical elite. Granting the title "theologian" to a journalist in those days would have been as outrageous as dubbing a journalist a "physicist" or "lawyer" today.

But within a generation of Chesterton's death, "lay theologian" was no longer sounding to Roman Catholic ears like a contradiction in terms. Chesterton's striking contributions to theology, partly the fruit of his unusual perspective, more than made up for his lack of formal qualifications.

### "Second spring"

In nineteenth-century England, which saw the restoration of the Roman episcopal hierarchy after centuries of suppression, Catholic culture developed in several different directions at once.

On an administrative level, a flood of Irish immigrants built a strong and loyal foundation for the revival of the parishes. Intellectually, the church was blessed with several generations of highly educated literary men such as John Lingard, John Henry Newman, and Coventry Patmore.

This double infusion of energy led to a vast program of building (churches, schools, seminaries) on the one hand, and what became known as the "Catholic literary revival" on the other. Newman had prophesied as much, foreseeing in 1852 an imminent "second spring" for Catholic Christianity in Britain. This literary revival continued until the 1950s.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was at its heart. Priests and bishops, philosophers and theologians, Church of England and Church of Rome took an interest in his writing.

Like several of the revival's leaders, Chesterton was not in Holy Orders, but his great intellect and education enabled him to penetrate any subject he addressed—including theology. As he commented in *The New Jerusalem*, "Theology is only thought applied to religion." On another occasion, he described theology as a "sublime detective story" in which the purpose is not to discover how someone died, but why he is alive.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, the great Swiss theologian who died in 1988, recognized Chesterton as a masterful practitioner of the "lay style" of theology. He found in Chesterton's humor the antidote to much of the "bestial seriousness and desperate optimism of modern world views," as well as a brilliant demonstration that only in Christianity "can one preserve the wonder of being, liberty, childlikeness, the adventure, the resilient, energizing paradox of existence."

### Absurd, but true

"Paradox" is a word consistently used to describe Chesterton's style. It refers to statements that seem contradictory but are actually true.

Hugh Kenner's classic study *Paradox in Chesterton* shows how his use of this device is not, as it may appear, a weakness. Chesterton's paradoxes flow from the "direct intuition of being," a metaphysical vision of reality shaped by his transforming encounter with God.

Chesterton did not so much make paradoxes as *see* them. Most of the time, we fail to notice them because we are content to think in clichés and truisms—what Kenner calls "mental inertia." And this is precisely why Chesterton's statements so often appear absurd when we first encounter them. For example, in the introduction to *The Defendant*, he writes:

Religion has had to provide that longest and strangest telescope—the telescope through which we could see the star upon which we dwell. For the mind and eyes of the average man this world is as lost as Eden and as sunken as Atlantis. There runs a strange law through the length of human history—that men are continually tending to undervalue their environment, to undervalue their happiness, to undervalue themselves.

The great sin of mankind, the sin typified by the fall of Adam, is the tendency, not towards pride, but towards this weird and horrible humility.

This is the great fall, the fall by which the fish forgets the sea, the ox forgets the meadow, the clerk forgets the city, every man forgets his environment and, in the fullest and most literal sense, forgets himself. This is the real fall of Adam, and it is a spiritual fall.

It is a strange thing that many truly spiritual men, such as General [Charles] Gordon, have actually spent some hours in speculating upon the precise location of the Garden of Eden. Most probably we are in Eden still. It is only our eyes that have changed.

The passage provides several Chestertonian paradoxes and helps to explain why they are theologically important. It is a paradox, seemingly in flat contradiction to received wisdom, that the primary sin of man is not pride but humility. It is a paradox that the Fall was an undervaluing not of God but of ourselves. Above all it is a paradox that we live in a world that must be discovered.

### **Shocking orthodoxy**

The last of these is the fundamental paradox that underlies almost everything Chesterton tried to do. He expands upon it throughout *The Defendant* and in a dozen stories in which a character journeys far for adventure or treasure but succeeds only by returning to the place he left, this time with eyes wide open.

One might even argue that *only* someone with a talent for seeing paradox can do theology. This talent can manifest itself in different ways, though, encompassing both the winsome wit of Chesterton and the philosophical prose of his biggest theological influence, Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas dared to address some of the most puzzling apparent contradictions of the Christian faith. God is three, and God is one. The Fall irreparably damaged human intellect, yet through intellect humans can discover important truths. God predestines, yet Christians are commanded to pray.

In addition to large frames and unusually sharp minds, Chesterton and "the colossal friar" shared an ability to find truth in contrasts. They then had to help others see those truths.

"I believe in preaching to the converted," Chesterton wrote, "for I have generally found that the converted do not understand their own religion." But Chesterton preached paradox to those outside the fold as well.

Against the liberal theologians and so-called "free-thinkers" of his day, he asserted that the dogmas of Christianity set us free. It is the refusal to believe them that closes "all the doors of the cosmic prison on us with a clang of eternal iron."

Furthermore, if the early church had not asserted the paradox of the Trinity (three Persons, one God) or the paradox of the Incarnation (two natures, one Person), the human mind would long ago have collapsed into a comfortable heresy.

"People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum and safe," Chesterton wrote. "There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy."

## **Echoes of laughter**

Recently, Chesterton has been remembered more for his Father Brown stories and his quotable *bon mots* than for his Christian apologetics, but the rediscovery of Chesterton the "defender of the faith" is well underway.

In his own time Chesterton was undoubtedly one of the most influential Christian writers alive. His prolific output for a variety of magazines and newspapers (including his own), his role as a popular debater and lecturer, and even his work as a broadcaster in the early days of the BBC all made him a media superstar.

Nor can his *indirect* influence through those who read him—from Mahatma Gandhi to C.S. Lewis—be overestimated. Even today there is no more inspiring example of the "lay style" of theology than this humble giant of a journalist who was always laughing at himself.

Chesterton was a theologian whose thought constantly unfolded the supreme and simple truth that creation springs from nowhere but the love of God. The emotion he seems to feel most often—and to write most movingly about—is simple gratitude.

He never grew tired of the simplest things, and he projects this feeling onto God as well. Perhaps, he speculates, the sun rises the same way each morning because God is like a child, crying, "Do it again!" while the grown-ups weary of the sight.

Chesterton may have been an *amateur* theologian, but an "amateur" is defined as one who loves. The love of God is certainly the best qualification for doing theology.

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## Economics after God's Own Image

Appalled by the slavery of the British working class, Chesterton joined Hilaire Belloc in promoting a brave new ideal.

Chris Armstrong

One night in 1900, deep within one of those gray British metropolises that he once called "the interior of a labyrinth of lifeless things," G.K. Chesterton discovered a kindred spirit. At the Mont Blanc Restaurant in London's Soho district, a man approached him and opened a decades-long conversation with the remark, "You write very well, Chesterton."

As the evening progressed, Chesterton became increasingly excited. He had discovered in this man—the cantankerous, visionary historian and author Hilaire Belloc—a lifelong friend and intellectual partner.

George Bernard Shaw imagined this partnership as a monstrous quadruped, the "Chesterbelloc," whose best-known idea issued from the Belloc half and was blithely accepted by the Chesterton half. That idea was distributism, a "third economic solution" distinct from both capitalism and communism.

Chesterton saw capitalism as legalized pickpocketing, for it channeled wealth from many workers to a few capitalists. Communism was hardly an improvement, Chesterton wrote, for it only "reform[ed] the pickpocket by forbidding pockets."

Both systems effectively abolished private property, a move that Chesterton insisted damaged the Christian dignity of the common man. "Every man," he said, "should have something that he can shape in his own image, as he is shaped in the image of heaven."

To restore common dignity, then, a Christian nation should give individual workers control over their own land, labor, and finances. To fulfill this progressive ideal, the nation should look back to the Middle Ages.

### Roots of the dream

Hilaire Belloc was indeed the original theorizer of distributism. Born in France in 1870, Belloc spent a brief period in his youth at the feet of Cardinal Henry Manning. The aged cardinal's tireless social activism inspired Pope Leo XIII's *De Rerum Novarum* (1891), the encyclical that launched a century of Catholic action on behalf of the poor.

Manning's chief intellectual contribution to that encyclical was his teaching of "subsidiarity," the principle that no area of a people's social life should be administered by any larger body than necessary, lest administration become oppression.

Two decades later, Belloc feared that just such oppression was beginning to swallow up England. He sounded the alarm in *The Servile State* (1912), the first clear statement of distributism's principles.

He argued that the essentially capitalist British establishment was absorbing the age's widespread socialist concern for the poor, and that the result was a distorted charity that amounted to slavery. Already captive to wage labor and to the usury of the big banks, workers now faced, in Liberal social

legislation, oppressive regulations that extended into their homes and families.

George Orwell, author of *1984*, later said that Belloc had foretold "with remarkable insight" the development of the modern welfare state. But Belloc did not stop at prophecy. He went on to insist that the solution to this oppression lay in England's history—in the serfs, freeholders, and guildsmen of centuries past.

These laborers had enjoyed, in the view of Belloc and Chesterton, virtually untrammelled freedom, because they owed no more than token dues to those over them. The English could recapture that freedom if their government distributed land more equitably and supported shared-ownership models of labor.

In 1926 the "Chesterbelloc" and a group of earnest compatriots established the Distributist League. A think tank and political agitation group, the league spread its message through pamphlets, raucous public debates, and the pages of Chesterton's frequently insolvent publication G.K.'s *Weekly*.

League membership peaked at 2,000 in 1928. After this brief heyday, though, the group floated out of view. It capsized in the 1940s, swamped by dissension within and the tidal wave of industrial capitalism without.

### **Criticism and support**

The most persistent critique of distributism—voiced from Chesterton's time to the present—is that its vision of modern Western nations filled with self-sufficient guilds, small farms, and cooperatives was simply never practicable.

Catholic intellectual and social commentator Richard John Neuhaus voiced this criticism when, in a 1995 issue of *First Things*, he wrote of distributism as Chesterton's "unfortunate foray into economic theorizing," a tissue of "poetry and preachment" with no modern relevance.

Indeed, distributism had little to show for itself in Chesterton's England. A few starry-eyed proponents formed a distributist Catholic model community at Ditchling, England, in 1913, but it soon collapsed. Other distributists preferred to quarrel interminably over how far to emulate medieval culture.

Then there was Chesterton himself. Distributism's most famous advocate had no great grasp on the workings of economic systems. Even his own household's economy seemed to mystify him.

The story is told of his return one day from a trip on which he had managed to misplace his pajamas. When his exasperated wife asked, "Why did you not buy a new pair?" he replied plaintively, "Are pajamas things that one can buy?"

Chesterton was, however, far from naïve. Critics miss the guarded realism in his "distributist novels"—*The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), *The Ball and the Cross* (1909), and *The Return of Don Quixote* (1927).

The utopian attempts of these stories run aground on human folly (or, in one case, reach fulfillment only by the improbable intervention of a friendly millionaire). These novels thus reveal Chesterton's deep sense of humanity's sinfulness.

A moderate with little time for quasi-medieval experiments, Chesterton relegated revolutionaries to his novels. In the real world, he joined other distributists in advocating gradual measures such as the institution of taxes and tariffs to support small enterprises.



The Distributist League failed to create an effective program out of these measures, but the effort is not over. Distributist ideals still inform such ventures as the American Catholic Worker Movement, the Antigonish Movement (preserved at the Coady International Institute) in Canada, and the Mondragon Cooperative Company of Spain.

Distributism has also continued to garner articulate advocates. In the 1970s, E. F. Schumacher's "back-to-the-land" bestseller ***Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*** (1973) briefly made a modified distributism the most fashionable economic and political creed in the world. Today, conservative Catholics and some left-leaning political theorists argue that distributism holds answers for many economic problems.

In this age of impersonal, multinational corporations, the distributist program of small property, self-sufficient labor, and communal collaboration retains an undeniable appeal. This may be one more area in which G.K. Chesterton still has something to teach us.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 75: G.K. Chesterton: Prolific Writer & Apologist

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## Chesterton Today

(Chesterton quotes)

**Common hesitation** in our day touching the use of extreme convictions is a sort of notion that extreme convictions, specially upon cosmic matters, have been responsible in the past for the thing which is called bigotry. But a very small amount of direct experience will dissipate this view. In real life the people who are most bigoted are the people who have no convictions at all.

*Heretics, 1905*

**Modern man is staggering** and losing his balance because he is being pelted with little pieces of alleged fact which are native to the newspapers; and, if they turn out not to be facts, that is still more native to newspapers.

*Illustrated London News, April 7, 1923*

**Civilization** has run on ahead of the soul of man, and is producing faster than he can think and give thanks.

*Daily News, February 21, 1902*

**Tradition Means** giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death.

*Orthodoxy, 1908*

**To have a right** to do a thing is not at all the same as to be right in doing it.

*A Short History of England, 1917*

**Modern masters** of science are much impressed with the need of beginning all inquiry with a fact. The ancient masters of religion were quite equally impressed with that necessity. They began with the fact of sin—a fact as practical as potatoes.

*Orthodoxy, 1908*

**On every bookstall**, in every magazine, you may find works telling people how to succeed. They are books showing men how to succeed in everything; they are written by men who cannot even succeed in writing books.

*"The Fallacy of Success," All Things Considered, 1909*

**It is not always wrong** even to go, like Dante, to the brink of the lowest promontory and look down at hell. It is when you look up at hell that a serious miscalculation has probably been made.

*Alarms and Discursions, 1910*

**The position** we have now reached is this: starting from the State, we try to remedy the failures of all the families, all the nurseries, all the schools, all the workshops, all the secondary institutions that once had some authority of their own. Everything is ultimately brought into the Law Courts. We are trying to stop the leak at the other end.

*Illustrated London News, March 24, 1923*

**The next revolution is always perfect.**

*G.K.'s Weekly, 1928*

**Most modern freedom** is at root fear. It is not so much that we are too bold to endure rules; it is rather that we are too timid to endure responsibilities.

*What's Wrong With the World, 1910*

**There are two kinds** of peacemakers in the modern world; and they are both, though in various ways, a nuisance. The first peacemaker is the man who goes about saying that he agrees with everybody. He confuses everybody. The second peacemaker is the man who goes about saying that everybody agrees with him. He enrages everybody. Between the two of them they produce a hundred times more disputes and distractions than we poor pugnacious people would ever have thought of in our lives.

*Illustrated London News, March 3, 1906*

**Comforts that were rare** among our forefathers are now multiplied in factories and handed out wholesale; and indeed, nobody nowadays, so long as he is content to go without air, space, quiet, decency and good manners, need be without anything whatever that he wants; or at least a reasonably cheap imitation of it.

*Commonwealth, 1933*

**You cannot evade** the issue of God. Whether you talk about pigs or the binomial theory, you are still talking about Him.

*Daily News, 1903*

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## G.K. Chesterton: A Gallery of Beloved Enemies

Chesterton clashed with many leading intellectuals of his day. He also counted them as friends.

Zachry O. Kincaid, Darren Sumner

MISGUIDED SUPERMAN FAN

**George Bernard Shaw**

1856-1950

"He is something of a pagan," said Chesterton of George Bernard Shaw, "and like many other pagans, he is a very fine man." The assessment hints at the complexity of their relationship.

The prolific playwright, critic, essayist, and Irishman G.B. Shaw first met Chesterton in 1901. They disagreed about nearly everything, but they remained friends for a tumultuous yet playful 35 years.

Of Shaw's more than 50 plays, American audiences are most familiar with *Pygmalion*, on which the musical *My Fair Lady* is based. The themes in that story—class division, the power to remake oneself—barely hint at the author's deeper, and to Chesterton's mind more dangerous, ideas about the world.

To frame their differences simply, Shaw believed in man, or Nietzsche's Superman, while Chesterton believed in the Son of Man. Shaw, a socialist, looked for society to develop the values of humanism and thereby help a superhuman "life-force" become a god. Chesterton, who believed that all life owed its existence to God, called society back to Christian humility.

Chesterton debunked Shaw's theories on many occasions, always with humorous grace. In 1905, Chesterton gave Shaw his own chapter in *Heretics*. In *Orthodoxy*, published in 1908, Chesterton writes, "I know of men who believe in themselves more colossally than Napoleon and Caesar. I know where flames the fixed star of certainty and success. I can guide you to the thrones of the Supermen. The men who really believe in themselves are all in lunatic asylums."

Shaw could dish out challenges, too. In a 1908 letter he told Chesterton to write plays rather than newspaper columns, threatening to "destroy" his credit "until starvation and shame drive you to serious dramatic parturition."

Instead of a play, Chesterton gave the public *George Bernard Shaw* (1909), a biography with the preface: "It is indefensibly foolish to attempt to explain a man whose whole object through life has been to explain himself."

Chesterton and Shaw began a series of public debates in 1911 that continued until 1928. Their last public debate received the apt and ironic billing "Do We Agree?" Chesterton claimed that it would take his friend 300 years to agree with his views, if he could live that long, but he would "certainly" agree.

Despite their creative goading, Chesterton, in his *Autobiography*, completed just weeks before his death, wrote movingly of their relationship: "I have argued with him on almost every subject in the world, and we have always been on opposite sides, without affectation or animosity. ... It is necessary to disagree with him as much as I do, in order to admire him as I do; and I am proud of him as a foe even more than as a

friend."

—Zachry O. Kincaid

#### WORLD-SHRINKING WRITER

### Rudyard Kipling

1895-1936

"Mr. Kipling does certainly know the world," Chesterton wrote; "he is a man of the world, with all the narrowness that belongs to those imprisoned in that planet."

An international celebrity in Chesterton's day, Kipling was a renowned storyteller and poet. His tale of a young boy named Mowgli, in *The Jungle Book*, remains a classic. But Kipling's internationalism, Chesterton believed, inevitably led to a program of "making the world smaller"—robbing the world of its wonder by conquering it. And Kipling did love conquest.

Born in Bombay in 1865, Kipling began his writing career as a teenage reporter for Anglo-Indian newspapers. On the side, he began to write the short stories and poetry that would eventually win him fame—and the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1907. He always heartily supported British imperialism.

He returned to England in 1889, married, and began to travel the world—a pastime for which he would become almost as famous. This lifestyle provided fodder for Kipling's stories of remarkable, far-off lands but also, in Chesterton's opinion, made Kipling unable to truly *know* any place.

Chesterton wrote, in *Heretics*, "He knows England as an intelligent English gentleman knows Venice. He has been to England a great many times; he has stopped there for long visits. But he does not belong to it, or to any place."

Even worse, Kipling destroyed the awe of the universe by becoming its tourist. "The telescope makes the world smaller; it is only the microscope that makes it larger," Chesterton wrote. "Before long the world will be cloven with a war between the telescopists and the microscopists. The first study large things and live in a small world; the second study small things and live in a large world."

Chesterton's greatest hope for fighting this trend lay with the common people who cared more for enjoying the world than examining it. These true traditionalists would watch, "possibly with a smile of amusement, motor-car civilization going its triumphant way, outstripping time, consuming space, seeing all and seeing nothing, roaring on at last to the capture of the solar system, only to find the sun cockney and the stars suburban."

—Darren Sumner

#### AIMLESS PROGRESSIVE

### H.G. Wells

1866-1946

"He is so often nearly right," says Chesterton of H.G. Wells, "that his movements irritate me like the sight of somebody's hat being perpetually washed up by the sea and never touching the shore."

Wells had a gift for projecting alternate realities, displayed in novels such as *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). He seemed always to be working out a philosophy of human progress, though he frequently depicted that progress leading to terribly destructive

ends.

Politically, Wells began as a socialist, much like his close friend George Bernard Shaw. He later ran unsuccessfully three times as a Labor Party parliamentary candidate. He visited Lenin, Roosevelt, and Stalin to discuss, respectively, the advantages of evolutionary collectivism, the encouragement of the New Deal, and the errors of isolationism.

This fervor dwindled to disenchantment. He became convinced that no institution could completely "reconstruct the world"—least of all the organized church, which he believed had buried the pure message of Jesus under "weary theology." Chesterton faulted Wells for always "coming from somewhere rather than going anywhere" (an idea supported by the title of Wells's last major work, *Mind at the End of Its Tether*). Because Wells had no clear destination, all of his attempts to map out human progress must fail.

In *Heretics*, Chesterton cites Wells as saying, "Nothing endures, nothing is precise and certain. There is no abiding thing in what we know." Chesterton, by contrast, was sure that only those who believed in abiding truth could comprehend true progress. "If the standard changes, how can there be improvement which implies a standard?" he asks. "Progress itself cannot progress."

Wells said that if he made it to heaven, "it would be by the intervention of Gilbert Chesterton." And despite Chesterton's criticism of his friend's philosophy, he nonetheless called Wells "the only one of many brilliant contemporaries who has not stopped growing."

—Zachry O. Kincaid

ATHEIST EDITOR  
**Robert Blatchford**

1851-1943

"Mr. Blatchford's philosophy," Chesterton claimed, "will never be endured among sane men." Still, Chesterton expended considerable energy refuting it.

Robert Blatchford edited the *Clarion*, a socialist London newspaper. He used the paper to promote his atheistic views, prompting Chesterton to respond with a defense of Christianity. Their civil yet forceful debate occurred entirely in print and lasted nearly two years (1903 and 1904).

Blatchford, a determinist, argued that free will is a sham if God created men's and women's minds. He also denied all miracles and attempted to deny all dogmas.

Despite his inflexible opinions, Blatchford was cordial, sincere, and magnanimous in the debates, as Chesterton frequently points out. Blatchford willingly opened the pages of his paper to allow the opposition to respond to his published attacks on Christianity—every week for six months. Blatchford even called on a friend to gather and edit the Christian response, rather than do it himself.

Chesterton wrote three essays for the *Clarion*, published over three weeks in the summer of 1904. He dashed the anti-Christian arguments one at a time, addressing issues from the Fall to free will, from miracles to asceticism.

Blatchford suspected the historicity of Christianity because it shares much with other religions and cultures—flood stories, crucifixions, divine incarnations. Chesterton wrote that he would think it odd if other peoples did *not* have some "muddled version" of the true nature of things.

Chesterton also agreed with Blatchford's charge that Christianity has produced wars, cruelty, and

bloodshed. Chesterton, however, did not consider this a reason to doubt the religion. Does not human nature fight for what it believes to be most important, most beautiful, and most true? We should be troubled if Christianity had not produced some severe conflicts.

Chesterton concluded the debates with the observation that "if I gave each of my reasons for being a Christian, a vast number of them would be Mr. Blatchford's reasons for not being one." He also called Blatchford's *God and My Neighbour* his favorite textbook of theology.

The responses to Blatchford helped to establish Chesterton as a champion for the faith and laid the groundwork for both *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy*.

—*Darren Sumner*

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 75: G.K. Chesterton: Prolific Writer & Apologist

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## G.K. Chesterton: Christian History Interview - Exactly the Opposite

Chesterton is seldom what we expect but often what we need.

conversation with Philip Yancey

***Philip Yancey credits G.K. Chesterton with helping to save his faith from a bitter encounter with fundamentalism. The power of Chesterton's work also pointed Yancey toward a writing career that has produced such enriching books as Soul Survivor, The Jesus I Never Knew, What's So Amazing About Grace? and Where Is God When It Hurts? We talked to Yancey about what contemporary Christians—especially evangelicals—can learn from the jolly journalist.***

**You've written that Chesterton helped you recover the joy of faith. How did he do that?**

Chesterton believed that a godly way of life is the best way of all ways. It's the way the world is supposed to work, the way the world is meant to be.

Evangelicals often say that Christianity is a "counter-culture." I think Chesterton would probably say, "No, Christianity is the culture. Heretics are the counter-culture."

What we need to do is rediscover the culture. And the culture includes joy and pleasure.

So often, the church is viewed as this finger-wagging, don't-have-fun institution. Those of us who are in it know that that's a caricature, but that is the impression a lot of people have. Chesterton would say exactly the opposite. He would say: "To have fun, live the way God intended life to be lived—the Christian way."

That was very helpful to me, because I came from a fire-and-brimstone, guilt-saturated fundamentalist past. I had never really encountered that positive view of the world. I thought we were supposed to go through life afraid, with our heads down, fleeing anything that smacked of pleasure. And here was a person saying exactly the opposite. So that was an important step in my spiritual journey.

**Is Chesterton's positive view of culture related to his Catholicism?**

One of Chesterton's major contributions to me is his sacramental view of life. I'm not talking about baptism and the Eucharist and those things, but about the layers of meaning that are built into the world. In this view, sex and marriage, for example, are not just physical acts—they are also spiritual acts and, in a sense, theological acts. That's scriptural, and I think the Catholic church has done a much better job of exploring the sacramental meaning of ordinary acts than, say, Protestant evangelicals have.

**In what other ways does Chesterton's upbeat attitude toward life play out?**

When I was writing *The Jesus I Never Knew*, one of the things that struck me about Jesus was that the people we would most expect to be repelled by him—prostitutes, tax collectors, the poor, outcast lepers—were actually very attracted to him. I'm sure none of them thought, ***If I go to Jesus, he'll approve of my behavior.*** Jesus had very high moral standards; no one would question those. But somehow, he was able to convey a respect for them, a compassion, and a love, even though he disagreed with choices they made.

I think Chesterton conveys much the same spirit. He carried on public debates and even wrote a book called *Heretics*, but he always truly engaged people who disagreed with him.

For most of us, "heretics" conjures up the Inquisition and these scowling Inquisitors turning the screws of the rack. Well, Chesterton was the exact opposite of that. His theology was just as strong as theirs, and he believed it just as fervently, but his attitude toward people he disagreed with was one of compassion and respect and good humor. If we as a church could just master that skill, we'd



go a long way toward rehabilitating what is often viewed as the soiled reputation of the church.

### **Chesterton's humor seems to be especially lacking in much Christian writing today.**

The folks at the old *Wittenburg Door* could tell you all sorts of war stories about how evangelicals completely misunderstand satire and other attempts at humor. I've experienced this, too. I answer letters probably every week from people who are very uptight over something I said.

For example, I recently responded to a woman who was upset about a quote I used from Frederick Buechner. He had visited my church, and the person leading worship was a woman who happened to be grossly overweight. He made the comment, "How can anyone let herself get that fat?" Many of us in the audience were wondering the same thing. I reproduced that comment.

Well, I got this *stinging*, four-page letter about how obesity is a disease, and what am I going to do next, line up people with AIDS and make fun of them? I tried to answer her sensitively and compassionately, but I felt like just saying, "Lighten up."

Chesterton would be a good example there, because he *was* grossly overweight, over 300 pounds sometimes, and he joked about it as much as anybody. He just had that disarming approach of levity towards the world. He didn't take things too seriously. And I think we evangelicals do.

We're not particularly good at humor. We're susceptible to our own form of political correctness—it's different from what you'll find in academia, but it's there.

People joke about my gray "Afro" hairstyle. This is just a fact of my life, so I laugh with them. I think Chesterton's approach, making himself the main butt of his jokes, is a good model for all of us.

### **Even with all of his humor, can't Chesterton be tough to read?**

I would recommend drinking very strong coffee before reading Chesterton. He is not bedtime reading, at least for me, because his sentences are so compact and compressed, and he leaps from thought to thought.

Chesterton was a chaotic person, and he had a chaotic style. He throws ideas and phrases up in the air, but they become seeds. The seeds fall to the ground and take root, because they sound true. They reflect reality.

There have been people to whom I have strongly recommended the book *Orthodoxy* who come back and say, "I wasn't able to get into it at all." It takes some work, but it's definitely worth it. I would say *Orthodoxy* had as much influence on my spiritual direction as any single book, and it's one of the few books that I go back and reread. It was a revolutionary book for me.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 75: G.K. Chesterton: Prolific Writer & Apologist

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## G.K. Chesterton: Recommended Resources

### From his pen

One longtime fan of Chesterton acknowledges that learning to read him is a bit like learning a second language. Once the language is learned, though, the rewards start pouring in.

The best place to begin reading Chesterton is his *Autobiography*. This book gives the gist of his life, but even more so the gist of his style and thought. It's a great place to learn the language.

The second round of reading consists of *Heretics*, *Orthodoxy*, and *The Blatchford Controversies*, gathered in volume 1 of the Ignatius Press *Collected Works*. The Blatchford essays appear last in this edition, but they were actually written first and provide a good introduction to the other two books.

At least four reading tracks proceed from here.

The fiction track includes Father Brown stories and the novels *Manalive*, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, *The Flying Inn*, and *The Return of Don Quixote*. Brave souls who wish to tackle *The Man Who Was Thursday* may want to check out *The Annotated Thursday*, edited by Martin Gardner (Ignatius, 1999).

For a poetry side-trip, add *The Ballad of the White Horse*. Ignatius Press reissued the tenth edition of this historical verse epic, with reproductions of Robert Austin's 1928 woodcuts, in 2001.

The theology track takes in *The Everlasting Man*, *St. Francis of Assisi*, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, and *The Well and the Shallows*.

*What's Wrong with the World*, *The Outline of Sanity*, and *A Short History of England* provide a good entree to Chesterton's social and cultural commentary. His newspaper columns offer more examples. These can be found in collections and floating around online. IHS Press reprinted *The Outline of Sanity*, a key distributist text, in 2001.

Highlights of Chesterton's literary criticism include *The Victorian Age in Literature* and his works on Dickens and Chaucer.

Several of Chesterton's best-known works are now available on audiocassette or as e-books. A remarkable array of Chesterton's publications—from short stories, poems, and essays to some whole books—also appears online. Martin Ward collects links to these works and posts them at [www.dur.ac.uk/~dcs6mpw/gkc/books/](http://www.dur.ac.uk/~dcs6mpw/gkc/books/).

### From his fans

A long line of Chesterton biographies began with his friend Maisie Ward's official *Chesterton* (Sheed & Ward, 1943). Joseph Pearce's *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G.K. Chesterton* (Ignatius, 1997) is a high-quality entry of more recent vintage. Garry Wills's *Chesterton* (Image, 2001) takes a different tack, focusing on the author's literary development rather than the chronology of his life. *The*

***Chesterton Review***, edited by Ian Boyd and distributed in North America by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, features scholarly, though readable, essays on Chesterton and his literary peers, as well as some unpublished pieces by Chesterton.

Perhaps as a tribute to Chesterton's wide writing range, books that explore his views include both monographs and essay collections. Some of the most helpful books include ***The Christian Imagination: G.K. Chesterton on the Arts*** by Thomas C. Peters (Ignatius, 2000); ***The Universe and Mr. Chesterton*** by Randall Paine (Sherwood Sugden & Co., 1999); ***The Novels of G.K. Chesterton*** by Ian Boyd (out of print); and ***Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis*** by John D. Coates (Hull University Press, 1984).

***Schall on Chesterton: Timely Essays on Timeless Paradoxes*** (Catholic University of America, 2000) falls into the second category. Author James V. Schall, S.J., attempts to capture Chesterton's style and spirit as well as his ideas.

***The Gift of Wonder***, edited by Dale Ahlquist of the American Chesterton Society (see page 18), features essays on many facets of Chesterton's character and beliefs. The society's website, [www.chesterton.org](http://www.chesterton.org), and magazine, ***Gilbert!***, are also great resources.

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