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A Review of Gilbert Keith Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*:

A phenomenal work by a phenomenal author, G.K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* is an amazing compilation of thoughts by one of the deepest and most acute minds of the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century. With witty, clever, profound, logical and interesting writing, Chesterton accomplishes what few authors have: making deep philosophical and theological concepts not only graspable, but also intriguing. Somehow, though mentally exhausting at times, *Orthodoxy* is almost addictive. Although the chapters are long and the topics often heavy, the book remains enjoyable to the end. The following is a review of this work.

Part I: Summary of Contents:

Chapter One

The first chapter of *Orthodoxy*, "In Defense of Everything Else," is merely an introduction and a statement of purpose. Chesterton explains that his objective in writing this book is to answer a challenge by one of his peers to explain his own theology. He accomplishes this by chronicling the thought processes that lead him to orthodox Christianity. In this short opening chapter, Chesterton uses the analogy of a sailor who leaves England with the objective of reaching an unexplored island, but who ends up "discovering" the very England he left. This is an illustration of Chesterton's own philosophical journey. He set off in search of a hidden and unknown answer to life's questions, only to find that all the answers already existed in the form of orthodox Christianity. That journey is what this entire book is about.

Chapter Two

Early in Chapter Two, Chesterton postulates that reason is the ultimate cause of insanity. Throughout the chapter, he explains how poets and mystics are sane, yet those who rely on reason alone to find answers to life's questions end up in mental institutions.

> "The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. The morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The mystic allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything else becomes lucid." (33)

It is this line of thinking that leads Chesterton to his primary conclusion: those who accept that there are mysteries which cannot be understood will ultimately maintain their sanity, while those who try to comprehend the incomprehensible will go insane.

Chapter Three

After taking a quick jab at the Reformation (35), Chesterton dives into "The Suicide of Thought." The beginning focuses on the world's problem of having many virtues that have "gone mad." That which was created "good" (Genesis 1) by God has been perverted. Chesterton applies this idea to modesty. He argues that man has gone from having a humility that casts doubt on his efforts to a humility that casts doubt on his aims. Thus, what would have caused us to work harder has been changed to give us no incentive to work at all. Instead of striving to raise ourselves to a higher standard, we lower the standard so we seem higher by comparison. Chesterton's train of thought then shifts to those who uphold the will as the means of creating and as something that is expandable and freeing. Instead, Chesterton argues, "every act of the will is an act of self-limitation. […] Every act is an irrevocable selection and exclusion. Just as when you marry one woman you give up all the others, so when you take one course of action you give up all the other courses" (45). Put more succinctly, "will is not only the choice of something, but the rejection of almost everything" (48).

Chapter Four

In "The Ethics of Elfland," G.K. Chesterton explains how he came to discover that there must be a being that is greater than man and nature. First, however, he discusses democracy and tradition. He claims that the primary principle in democracy is that "the essential things in men are the things they hold in common" (52). Chesterton then defines tradition as "democracy extended through time" (52) and "the democracy of the dead" (53). A tradition is preserved because the average person finds it worth spreading and carrying on from generation to generation, not by the action of a few "elites." It is on this concept of tradition being based on democracy and comprised of stories/beliefs perpetuated through the years that Chesterton bases his argument regarding fairy tales. To Chesterton, fairy tales – traditions or legends – are more intellectual than science or laws. Laws pretend to explain ideas that cannot be truly explained. But fairy tales have a solution to this problem - they treat the unexplainable as "magic." They have a more reasonable explanation for the mysteries around us than scientific laws. Fairy tales preserve the mystery of that which cannot be explained, and therefore imply that there exists some being above and beyond our comprehension. Scientific laws attempt to explain the unexplainable, and thus seek to remove or ignore that greater being.

Chesterton finally posits that repetition is a sign of life and change a sign of death. Energetic and lively children enjoy repetition. But older, more lifeless people do not. Thus, perhaps the reason that the universe is so orderly, uniform and unchanging is not because it is dead or inanimate, but because it has a living being telling it to "do it again." One daisy looks like another because the second is an encore to the first. It was this conclusion that, coupled with his observation of fairy tales and science, brought Chesterton to the realization that there must be a magician behind the magic of creation. And yet he came all this way without realizing that these were all characteristics of Christianity.

Chapter Five

The main point in "The Flag of the World" relates to suicide vs. martyrdom. Before getting to that topic, however, Chesterton discusses optimism and pessimism. He states that for something to become great, it must first be loved. "Men did not love Rome because she was great. She was great because they had loved her" (73). He goes on to say that "optimism is a sort of universal patriotism" and the pessimist "is the cosmic anti-patriot" (75). Optimists come in two primary varieties. First is the rational ("bad", to Chesterton) optimist. The rational optimist *does* care about whatever it is he is optimistic about, but he covers up its faults in order to make it seem better. Bad optimists (i.e., bad patriots) love something as long as it's easy and sensible. They could be compared to a parent who spoils their child – though the parent loves their child, they are unwilling to take the difficult steps of disciplining him/her despite the positive long-term effects of such actions. On the other hand, the irrational (or "good," to Chesterton) optimist loves something so much that he is willing to do what does not make sense in order to improve it – he will tear apart that which he loves in order to rebuild it into something far greater. Good optimists (i.e., good patriots) love something for what it is, and are willing to go to great lengths to improve it. They are like a parent who disciplines their child in love – they do what is hard at the time in order to improve the child in the long run. The third type of person, the pessimist, is he who does not even care about what he criticizes, and actually criticizes it with the very purpose of hurting it.

From here Chesterton delves into the topic of suicide. The person who commits suicide is the epitome of a pessimist and commits one of the worst (if not the worst) sins imaginable. He who commits suicide has slapped everything in creation in the face. Not only has he determined his own life to be worthless, but he has also said to every person, creature, plant,

and planet that they are not worth living for. By committing suicide one essentially destroys the universe. But if suicide and martyrdom are both the act of knowingly and willingly leading yourself to death, what is the difference? He who commits suicide dies in order to end the world (from his perspective). The martyr sacrifices himself in order to make the world better. One's motive is selfishness and a hatred for all creation, whereas the other's is selflessness and a love for everything and everyone else more than for himself. Two seemingly similar actions are at extreme ends of that which is execrable and that which is noble. After coming to these conclusions, Chesterton realized that this is exactly what Christianity had always taught. The Christian should be the irrational optimist – he should go to what seems like irrational lengths to improve the world. But while the Christian is to love the world, he is to "love [it] without being worldly" (84). He should love the world enough to be willing to die for it, yet not follow it.

Chapter Six

In chapter six, Chesterton explains how he was made more orthodox as a result of reading and hearing the arguments of anti-Christians. One would convince him that Christianity was far too much of one thing, but then another would argue that it was too much of the opposite. After reading one contradictory argument after another, Chesterton began to realize that rather than Christianity being an awfully odd and contorted monster, it could actually be the only perfect and ideal entity. If one person attacks it for being too pacifist and another for it being too violent, perhaps Christianity is actually perfectly balanced – not too violent, but not too pacifist. Perhaps these contradicting extreme complaints about Christianity only prove it to be the opposite of extreme – normal, reasonable, sane. "All sane men can see

that sanity is some kind of equilibrium; that one may be mad and eat too much, or mad and eat too little" (98).

After establishing this virtue of Christianity (it being sane and in the middle of two extremes), Chesterton applies it to the concept of courage. "[Courage] means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die" (99). The courageous man "must desire life like water yet drink death like wine" (99). Courage is the result of someone being neither too ready for death nor too unwilling to die. In other words, Christianity takes the two extremes of running to death and clinging to life and combines them into something that makes perfect sense and which is itself a virtue – courage. These arguments demonstrate that there is a fine line between being too extreme in either direction, and this line is perfectly walked by Christianity. Yet this line is not a *solution* of the two extremes that results in a dumbed-down compromise, but a *mixture* of the two extremes, both of which are kept pure while combined to produce a perfectly non-extreme result. "[Christianity] has kept [the two extremes] side by side like two strong colors, red and white…it has always had a healthy hatred of pink" (103-104). This sane line that Christianity walks is razor-thin. Any movement away from this line brings catastrophic results, which is why great turmoil results over differing opinions on such "small" matters as a word in Scripture. "[A difference over a small point in theology] was only a matter of an inch, but an inch is everything when you are balancing" (106).

Chapter Seven

"The Eternal Revolution" is basically about progress. It begins, however, on the topic of standards or ideals. Chesterton uses the example of a cat killing a mouse. We cannot know who really won without knowing what the ideal, or greatest value, is. Maybe the cat won by getting his meal. Or perhaps the mouse won by being the first to escape the dangers of life.

"You cannot even say that there is victory or superiority in nature unless you have some doctrine about what things are superior" (110), and there are really only two possible sources of this doctrine: man or God. Chesterton addresses the idea of it coming from man first. It is in this discussion that he concludes that we, in opting for the easiest path, "are not altering the real to suit the ideal. We are altering the ideal: it is easier" (112). Thus, "the ideal towards which progress is directed…must be fixed" (115). This ideal is found in Eden, and because it is from the past, it is unchanging. "You may alter the place to which you are going; but you cannot alter the place from which you have come. (117). As the creator of everything, Eden included, God must be the determiner of what is superior.

Chesterton then enters into a discussion on improvement. He first addresses the idea that it is natural.

> "The world, through mere time, might grow black like an old picture, or white like an old coat; but if it is turned into a particular piece of black and white art – then there is an artist" (118).

Thus, for nature to "progress" in an intelligent way it must be guided by a greater being. Evolution's treatment of nature is that she is our mother, but the Christian view is that she is our sister, having the same Father as us. Both nature and humanity are under God. As before, Christianity encompassed all these ideas – of ideals needing to be fixed and of order having to come from design.

From here Chesterton explains that for things to resist corruption there must be continual revolution. If we are inactive, we succumb to entropy and are corrupted. To fight this, we must be always in a state of rebirth or renewal. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of prosperity and power. Christianity recognizes the vested interests of wealthy men, and therefore teaches that they are not to be trusted for the mere reason that they are wealthy. Christianity also warns against elevating men to positions of power and fame, for

they will become idolized for their power and wealth. In searching for what a Utopian society required, Chesterton again realized that Christianity had already figured it out.

Chapter Eight

In this chapter, Chesterton discusses modernist materialist views, pantheism, love, and free will. At the beginning Chesterton points out how liberalism and other modern philosophical movements are really just skepticism in disguise. A liberal by definition should see things liberally, but instead they see them skeptically and reservedly. Liberals doubt miracles because they impose their materialist views on the supernatural, effectively binding the Creator (134). Chesterton then combats pantheism. He says that even though many claim that Christianity and Buddhism are really only different in form and are actually quite similar in doctrine, this is a lie.

> "All humanity does agree that we are in a net of sin. Most of humanity agrees that there is some way out. But as to what is the way out, I do not think that there are two institutions in the universe which contradict each other so flatly as Buddhism and Christianity" (137).

This contradiction can be seen in each religion's art. "The Buddhist is looking with a peculiar intentness inwards. The Christian is staring with a frantic intentness upwards" (138). The reason for this difference is that the Buddhist religion is pantheistic. In pantheism, individuals are not really individual, but are one with everyone else. To see "god" humans must look within and try to become spiritually and mentally one with nature. But the Christian looks upward because the Christian God is above and beyond us and creation. The Christian also looks outward because he recognizes everything as unique and different. A husband does not love his wife because she is like him, but because she is beautifully different. Christianity recognizes personality, but Buddhism sees all persons as a single homogeneous being. This

Christian emphasis on personality may be seen in the Christian view of God being a Trinity – "God Himself is a society" (142).

Finally, Chesterton touches on the concept of free will being the secret to Christianity's success. He points out that by using active will, people will seek for the answers that lie in Christianity. Activity is what initiates reform, and it is by diligently searching for the truth that one finds it. This pursuit is driven by the will. Chapter Eight concludes with the idea that secularists, in attacking Christianity, only succeed in damaging themselves and that "the faith [is] the mother of all worldly energies, [while] its foes are the fathers of all worldly confusion" (147).

Chapter Nine

The last chapter in *Orthodoxy*, "Authority and the Adventurer" brings closure to the entire work. Chesterton explains the final question that must be answered before he concludes the book, and that is whether all of his observations might be accepted apart from Christianity. He articulates it more succinctly: "why cannot you take the truths and leave the doctrines?" (149). Chesterton's first response is from the rational perspective – it is far easier to agree with a concept if you know the reasons behind it. He gives an example: "If I am treating man as a fallen being it is an intellectual convenience to me to believe that he fell" (149). Chesterton does not simply want to take the truths he has found for granted; he wants to know why they are true. This is at the foundation of Chesterton's acceptance of Christianity – "I believe in it quite rationally upon the evidence" (150). Chesterton chose Christianity because he found, upon thorough examination, every anti-Christian argument patently false. He gives the example of non-Christians who dismiss Christianity because of man's similarity to beasts. He

turns this argument upside-down by focusing on how unlike an animal man is. Animals may have a civilization, but is a grossly inferior one.

> "Who has ever found a bee-hive carved with the images of gorgeous queens of old? […] No, the chasm between man and other creatures may have a natural explanation, but it is a chasm" (151).

In short, whenever Chesterton looked into a fact that was supposed to point away from Christianity, he found the exact opposite to be true – it always pointed directly there. Chesterton makes several other refutations of common attacks brought against orthodoxy. He mentions how the Bible actually portrays Christ not as submissive and weak, but as extraordinarily intense and determined. The "Dark Ages" in which Christianity enjoyed much political influence, was not all that dark, Chesterton points out – rather, "it was the shining bridge that connected two shining civilizations" (154).

G.K. Chesterton also addresses the supernatural and how those who believe in it do so because of evidence, not blind faith. "It is we Christians who accept all actual evidence – it is you rationalists who refuse actual evidence by being constrained to do so by your creed" (158). Christians can accept the evidence of a miracle because it is perfectly compatible with their worldview, but the rationalist must make excuses to explain away these "impossible" occurrences. Chesterton ties all this together into his answer to the initial question: "why cannot you take the truths and leave the doctrines?" He believes in the veracity of Christianity as a whole, not simply the individual truths that are a part of it, because Christianity "has revealed itself as a truth-telling thing" (164). While the world may teach us how to be healthy, "orthodoxy makes us jump by the sudden brink of hell; it is only afterwards that we realize that jumping was an athletic exercise highly beneficial to our health" (164). Modern philosophy tries to discover individual truths, but not believing that there is any meaning in the universe, it misses the source of all Truth.

The final theme in this chapter, and thus the entire book, is that of joy. Joy is the ultimate benefit that Chesterton derived through the emancipation of his mind by Christianity. He explains that while the pagan may find joy in the little things, he is ultimately sad about the significant ones. Chesterton claims that this is unnatural: "Man is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial" (166). He describes those who reverse these roles as having been "born upside down" (167).

> "The skeptic may truly be said to be topsy-turvy; for his feet are dancing upwards in idle ecstasies, while his brain is in the abyss. To the modern man the heavens are actually below the earth. The explanation is simple; he is standing on his head; which is a very weak pedestal to stand on. […] Christianity satisfies suddenly and perfectly man's ancestral instinct for being the right way up; satisfies it supremely in this; that by its creed joy becomes something gigantic and sadness something special and small. […] Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian" (167).

Chesterton applies this wonderful aspect of Christianity to Jesus Christ Himself. Though he never concealed his tears or anger, he always hid something. "There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth" (168). Christ Himself had a joy that is unattainable outside of Christianity.

Part II: Personal Opinion:

The first work by Gilbert Keith Chesterton that I have read, *Orthodoxy* thoroughly impressed me. Because I enjoyed this book, I have purchased several others by Chesterton – specifically *The Complete Father Brown* and a compilation including *The Man who was Thursday, Napoleon of Notting Hill* and others. What I found most interesting in *Orthodoxy* was the incredible depth in nearly each sentence. One could practically select any sentence at random and it would be a thought-provoking quote even separated from its context. In context,

however, the various sentences may seem disconnected. If the reader only superficially skims through a chapter out of *Orthodoxy*, they might find it nonsensical and plagued with tangents and rabbit trails. But on closer perusal, the apparently unrelated thought processes that comprise each chapter actually work together to lead to a meaningful conclusion. For example, in Chapter Four: "The Ethics of Elfland," Chesterton begins with a discussion on democracy and concludes with the idea that repetition in nature is a sign that there is a Creator. How does he tie the apparently unrelated concepts together? From the topic of democracy, Chesterton explains how it applies to the concept of tradition ("democracy extended through time"). He shows how tradition is the basis of fairy tales, which are more reasonable than scientific laws because they allow for the unexplainable. He then posits that repetition is a sign of life, whereas change is a sign of death. Death is a sudden change, but life is a preservation of health and is contrary to change. Chesterton concludes with the idea that the unchanging, orderly nature of the universe is a sign of a greater, unexplainable being telling it to "do it again." Fairy tales are perfectly consistent with this concept, but scientific proofs deny its possibility.

It is this organizational method that allows Chesterton to apply his remarkable insight to many topics while simultaneously forming a conclusion that relates to the greater whole of the book. This method also keeps the chapters interesting. Though long, they rarely become slow or boring. Chesterton's brilliant statements combined with interesting subject matter that does not remain on one topic for too long results in a read that is not only thought-provoking and deep, but also fun and engaging. And while Chesterton, a Catholic, occasionally takes shots at Protestant theology, I never was offended while reading and do not find his statements terribly opposed to my own beliefs. Most of his playful jabs are directed at Calvinists and, not

being one myself, they are relatively humorous to me rather than objectionable. Yet this aspect of *Orthodoxy* would not prevent me from recommending it to anyone – not even to a staunch Calvinist. There is such a wealth of insight in those pages that no thinking Christian should pass up the opportunity to read them.