

Christianity's Paradox: Chesterton after Kierkegaard

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Abstract

A convert to Catholicism, G.K. Chesterton was a leading intellectual of the British Edwardian age and one of the important social and religious thinkers of the twentieth century. His trademark was paradox. He wrote in defense of the imagination and the corralling of opposites, oppositions, contradictions, and bountiful inconsistencies. The article explores Chesterton's views on faith, religion, God, Christianity, Islam, modernity, change, and progress. It locates him in a philosophical stream that sees laughter and comedy as a religious disguise, paradox as a creative force, and the imagination as a necessary complement of reason. This is framed by a discussion of Chesterton's thoughts about the importance of limits and boundaries in defining good actions and good societies.

Keywords *paradox, laughter, comedy, imagination, faith, reason, Christianity, modernity, limits*

G.K. Chesterton was a convert to Catholicism and a leading public intellectual of the British Edwardian age.¹ He was also one of the most important social and religious thinkers of the twentieth century. His writings are voluminous. Far from having declined in influence today, they are more quoted, cited, and discussed than ever.

Chesterton was an author of remarkable insight. His work moves seamlessly from social observation and literary criticism to philosophical and theological writing to novels and poetry. His fictional detective character, Father Brown, remains a favorite with the Anglophone reading and viewing public. His principal points of intellectual reference were the greats of British literature like Dickens and Stevenson, and the masterworks of Catholic theology, notably Aquinas. He was a working journalist who defended marriage and criticized euthanasia and wrote dogged criticism of his contemporaries' moral fads and fashions. He also wrote profoundly about philosophical and theological matters and about literature.

There is a strain in Chesterton's work that echoes another religious writer, this time of the nineteenth century. Søren Kierkegaard's name is not cited in Chesterton's mountainous writings. That is not surprising. Chesterton was conversant with the intellectual traditions of Continental Europe. He often mentioned Nietzsche (in part to rebut his intellectual sparring partner, George Bernard Shaw). He also regularly cited Aristotle and Calvin. But the figures he most readily invoked were the

¹ Born in 1874, Gilbert Keith Chesterton grew up in a Unitarian household. In adulthood he became an Anglo-Catholic Anglican. He converted to Catholicism in 1922.

Victorians. Mill, Macaulay, Bentham, Browning, and Coleridge were common points of reference. Karl Marx and Matthew Arnold made appearances in his work as well. These were all writers whom Chesterton's readers were familiar with alongside Shakespeare and Chaucer.

Kierkegaard did not become a familiar figure until the decades between 1930 and 1950. Chesterton died in 1936. So their ships did not pass in the night. Outwardly they do not share much in common. One is a Catholic, the other a Protestant. Yet for all that there is an uncanny parallel between them. The immediate thing that connects them is humor. This is humor conceived as a theological and philosophical figure. In both Kierkegaard and Chesterton, humor is a proxy for paradox. Both had a gift for paradox—they had minds that ran readily and easily to it. When they observed the dark they saw light. When they peeked at passing time they glimpsed eternity. They understood that the most vital societies are energized by a sense of paradox and that religion, Christianity in particular, is a well-spring of such paradox.

Kierkegaard refers to the religious-paradoxical sphere.² In *Christian Discourses* he remarks that God's nature always joins opposites.³ In religious acts of creation, left becomes right, here is there, and what is straight ahead is turned around.⁴ In the miraculous act, starvation is transformed into a superabundance

² Søren Kierkegaard, "Two Ethical-Religious Essays," in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 343.

³ *Ibid.*, "Christian Discourses," 331.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 320.

of food.⁵ In the religious domain, adversity becomes prosperity.⁶ The latter hints (albeit obliquely) at the role that certain strands of religion have played in the secular miracles of modern economies. Kierkegaard observes in *Two Ethical-Religious Essays* that thinking is immanent. Faith and paradox constitute a separate sphere altogether.⁷ Geniuses think; apostles are called to paradox. The apostle proclaims what is new. Yet paradoxically no matter how long this is proclaimed, it remains new, forever. Or as Kierkegaard put it in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, God does not think; he creates.⁸ Creation is the inception that lasts. Eternal truth is understood in the category of time.⁹ Christianity thus is based on a paradox. It puts together eternal truth and an existing person born in time.¹⁰ Its eternal truth comes into existence in time.¹¹

Conversely, without risk there is no faith.¹² That is a religious paradox. But it is also a secular one. It undergirds modern economies just as does the precept that prosperity is a function of adversity. Paradox creates absurdity. The absurd is comical on the surface yet serious underneath. It is absurd, Kierkegaard remarks, that eternal truth came into existence in time.¹³ Similarly the paradox of the god-man born in time is comical and yet the comic surface of this conceptual absurdity is the object of deep

⁵ Ibid., 331.

⁶ Ibid., 320-21, 327.

⁷ Ibid., "Two Ethical-Religious Essays," 340.

⁸ Ibid., "Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments," 220.

⁹ Ibid., 201.

¹⁰ Ibid., 210.

¹¹ Ibid., 211.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

faith. Faith is humorous or rather (as Kierkegaard puts it) humour is the incognito of religion.¹⁴ It borders on the sphere of the religious. Humor is to the religious person what irony is to the ethicist.¹⁵

The religious person is protected against what is comic by what is comic.¹⁶ The religious attitude takes to a higher level the comic mastery of contradiction. Reason relies on the “law of non-contradiction.” The comic and religious outlooks though rest on the contrary “law of contradiction.” In fact the comic, Kierkegaard notes, appears wherever there is a contradiction.¹⁷ The religious self is contradictory. Not in a confused or disorientated way but rather in a bountifully comic way. A religious person relates to their own self by relating to what is outside of their own self. The inwardness of the person is outwardly focused just as the temporal is akin to the eternal. That is to say, the subjectivity of religious persons is objectively anchored and their sense of self in interesting ways is selfless. That does not mean the self is obliterated, just that it has a comic relation to selflessness.

Kierkegaard wrote about the comical. Chesterton wrote comically. He was a humorous author—witty, amusing, entertaining, droll, and waggish. At the root of this was an extraordinary gift for paradox. He observed readily and acutely the world’s ironies, contradictions, and enigmas. He did so with great affection and zest. Not least because he understood that

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

deep contradiction, seeming illogicality, and manifest absurdity were keys to truth. For in the comic and paradoxical conjoining of opposites lie the deepest of truths. Alone among the animals, Chesterton remarked, humankind is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter. It was as if human beings had caught sight of some secret in the shape of the universe hidden from the universe itself.¹⁸

Christianity, Chesterton observes, rests on a paradox that is apparent every Christmastime. Like all great paradoxes, it is born of an association of ideas that are remote from each other, in this case, the idea of a vulnerable body and a mighty strength that sustains the stars.¹⁹ The imagination connects these when reason cannot see no need for the connection. It is the imagination, not reason, that conceives of an outcast as a deity or a god that is born like a helpless baby entirely dependent on a mother.²⁰ The importance of paradox, Chesterton thought, is as true for psychological Christians who may not believe in a God as it is for theological Christians who do.²¹ What makes a culture “Christian” is that omnipotence and impotence, divinity and infancy, ostracism and acceptance, forsakenness and adoption are fused together epigrammatically. Christianity is based on “an incredible combination of contrasted ideas.”²² So intense is this contrarian fusion that even the endless repetition of these epigrams never turns them into platitudes.²³

¹⁸ G.K. Chesterton, “The Everlasting Man,” in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 168.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 302.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 305.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 302.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 322.

Jesus on the cross cries out to his father, “My god, my god, why did you forsake me?” There is only one religion, Chesterton notes, where a god seems thereby for an instant to be an atheist.²⁴ Christianity is a superhuman paradox. It routinely entails two opposite passions that blaze beside each other.²⁵ This is underscored by the fact that Jesus was not a religious teacher in any ordinary sense. Rather he was a riddle-maker, a creator of enigmas and paradoxes. The riddles are manifest throughout Christianity. It has a strong mystical streak yet its adherents are very practical.²⁶ In fact, the most mystical Christians are often the most practical ones. This stems from the fact that the union of opposites, while religiously numinous, in non-religious spheres is also very productive and useful. Nonsense turns out to be a workaday source of sense.

It is also good for us. As long as you have mystery, Chesterton mused, you have health. When you destroy mystery you create morbidity.²⁷ A purely rationalist world turns out to be a nightmare. This is not an argument for irrationalism. Rather the logician, by trying to make everything lucid, only makes it all the more obscure. Whereas the mystic, by relying on one thing that is mysterious, makes all the rest lucid. Chesterton’s detective character Father Brown approached the world back-to-front. He took notice of insignificant things. The small inconsequential things actually turn out to be important to solving the murder

²⁴ See G.K. Chesterton, “Orthodoxy,” chap. 7 in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. 8.

²⁶ See G.K. Chesterton, “The Blatchford Controversies,” chap. 2 in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, chap. 1.

mystery. The philosophical point of this is that the illogical union of the insignificant and the important is not the antithesis or enemy of reason. Rather it is the condition of the possibility of reasoning. Or, in Aristotle's terms, reason rests on the paradox of the unmoved mover (God). Comparing George Bernard Shaw (unflatteringly) to Shakespeare, Chesterton said that Shakespeare was illogical where Shaw was logical, chaotic where Shaw was orderly, and mystical where Shaw was clear.²⁸

Not all religion is wrought from paradox. Chesterton contrasts the enigmatic nature of Christianity with the literalness of Islam. Chesterton's portrait of Islam in *The New Jerusalem* is notable for its power-saw astuteness. The Saracen warrior Saladin, Chesterton observes, stripped the pyramids in order to build a military fort on the heights of Cairo. The Mamelukes used the Sphinx for target practice. The Moslem mind was never inclined to Saint Augustine's mode of "loving but leaving" ancient beauty.²⁹ That is, preserving it while transcending it. Through the Christian middle ages we see this combination at work. It was not a compromise, Chesterton argues, but rather "a complexity made by two contrary enthusiasms," as when the Renaissance popes imitated Greek temples while denying Greek gods. Chesterton concluded that Christianity had absorbed the opposing passions of clarity and mystery in order to hold them both simultaneously.³⁰

Such high inconsistency, Chesterton argued, is inconsistent with Islam. Islam takes everything literally. It does not know how

²⁸ G.K. Chesterton, "Chesterton on Shaw," in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 11 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 347.

²⁹ G.K. Chesterton, "The New Jerusalem," in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 20 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 216.

³⁰ See Chesterton, "Orthodoxy," chap. 2.

to play with anything.³¹ Christianity in contrast is double-coded; it re-enacts and redoes the past. This means that it is neither “original” in the Romantic sense of the word, nor derivative, but rather it is reconstructive and analogical. Historically it took something that existed and rebuilt it in a different way. As Chesterton described it, the Christian Church had from an early date the idea of reconstructing a civilization to create a new balance different from the balance of the Stoics of old Rome.³² Even at its height, Islam was not like this at all. No one ever thought that Mohammed wanted to restore ancient Babylon. The builders of the Mosque of Omar did not look at the Pyramids as the builders of St. Peter’s looked at the Parthenon.³³ Islam began at its beginning. It possessed a truth, yes, but one so imposing, Chesterton argued, that it was hard to see that it was a half-truth. Its one-sidedness denoted religion without irony, humour, or paradox. In Kierkegaard’s terms, it was a left that did not interpolate its right.

In contrast, in the world of religious paradox, motion is a kind of rest, and moving forward is premised on being able to return. Islam, Chesterton argued, motivated movement but without simultaneous stillness. It was a nomadic religion of desert. It inspired homelessness yet without the countervailing image of home. Movements have to be balanced against other things, otherwise in the end they stop, becoming calcified and petrified. Movement suffers if it is only in one direction.

³¹ Chesterton, “The New Jerusalem,” 217.

³² Ibid.

³³ On Greek, Roman, and Christian civilization as a series of re-naissances or re-constructions, see Peter Murphy, *Civic Justice: From Greek Antiquity to the Modern World* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001); also, Peter Murphy and David Roberts, *Dialectic of Romanticism* (London: Continuum, 2004).

This problem is not peculiar to Islam. There are plenty of modern movements, ranging from feminism to Bolshevism, Chesterton thought, which suffer from the same problem. They all lack the capacity to rub one thought against another. They lack the inner vitality that comes from complexity and the complexity that comes from comparison. Such movements at best are fashions; at worst they descend into monomania and fanaticism. One thing is exaggerated while everything else is neglected. They can move forward a certain distance in one direction for a time. But eventually they will succumb to entropy. This is because they are undialectical. An Islam that is petrified can only begin again, argued Chesterton. It cannot grow. It does not have what the Catholics call development or the Protestants call progress. In short, religion without paradox lacks the capacity to interpolate things together and in so doing create great, constructive energies.

For Chesterton, nothing was more serious than humor. The oldest jokes in the world he thought were all about serious things—like getting married or getting hanged.³⁴ There is something elemental and eternal in a joke.³⁵ Jokes may seem superficial but they harbor things deep and often theological in nature. Silly jokes about people sitting on their hats allude to the primary paradox of the human experience, namely that “man is superior to all things around him and yet is at their mercy.”³⁶ That

³⁴ See G.K. Chesterton, “Heretics,” chap. 16 in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 1.

³⁵ See G.K. Chesterton, “Carlyle,” in *Twelve Types* (London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1902).

³⁶ See G.K. Chesterton, “Cockneys and Their Jokes,” in *All Things Considered* (New York: John Lane, 1909).

hints at the paradox of freedom and necessity in modernity. Persons who live in modern liberal democracies value their liberties. But often those liberties are best used when human beings gracefully and subtly bend themselves to the larger forces that shape their lives. Part of a good life is accepting limits.

Successful modern societies learn how to grow. But growth, Chesterton was aware, has its own paradoxical aspect. He drew the line at Shavian “evolution” and imperialist “expansion,” which he both disliked.³⁷ Figuratively speaking, Chesterton was attracted less to the growth of a tree than its fruit. “The fruit is final and in that sense finite; it has a form and therefore a limit.”³⁸ God’s domain is unlimited creation; the human condition is one of limited creation.³⁹ Therefore he was not comfortable with Promethean conceptions of political economy, whether these happened to be Romantic or Corporate Gargantuan kinds or just old-fashioned thoughtless, greedy, over-reaching economic behaviours. Everyone, he thought, ought to be a property owner and thus have the means to create. But this vision of a yeoman property-owning economy had an in-built brake on irrational exuberance. The point he made was that growth undermines itself if it is growth without form or shape.

Brightness of color and clearness of shape, Chesterton held, are signs of things that are well-formed.⁴⁰ Good things have sharp edges. Accordingly, he thought that growth was a function of

³⁷ G.K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton*, with an introduction by Randall Paine (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 220.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ See G.K. Chesterton, “What’s Wrong with the World” and “The Homelessness of Man” in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 4 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987).

⁴⁰ See G.K. Chesterton, *William Blake* (London: Duckworth, 1910).

limits. We grow best, he thought, when we have a vision of a clear and distinct outline. We need to be able to say so far and no further. In part this is because growth (certainly in modern societies) relies on imagination. The imagination operates through images, and an image, Chesterton noted, is something that has an outline and therefore a limit.⁴¹ The best work of the imagination is not shadowy or fantastical but rather clear-cut, definitive and unalterable.⁴² When a person looks through an archway to the landscape beyond (the classic framing of a view), that observer realizes the necessity of boundaries.⁴³ Boundaries, Chesterton remarked, are the most beautiful things in the world.⁴⁴ He detested the cult of progress. He thought progress was concerned with the breaking of limits and the effacing of boundaries.⁴⁵

Chesterton was a life-long English liberal but he was not a libertarian. He did not think that everything was about free will or choice. If will is all that matters, he reasoned, then how can one choose to will one thing rather than another?⁴⁶ Will is conditioned by things that we do not will. For example, Chesterton thought that free love was a contradiction in terms. For it is the nature of love to bind itself.⁴⁷ To love anything, Chesterton thought, is to love its boundaries.⁴⁸ Shapes and forms endure through change. They give things their identity, i.e. their sense of who-ness or

⁴¹ Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton*, 111.

⁴² See Chesterton, *William Blake*.

⁴³ G.K. Chesterton, "The Patriotic Idea," in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 20, 603.

⁴⁴ See G.K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*, chap. 28 (London: Methuen, 1909).

⁴⁵ See Chesterton, "Heretics," chap. 20.

⁴⁶ See Chesterton, "Orthodoxy," chap. 3.

⁴⁷ See G.K. Chesterton, "A Defense of Rash Vows," in *The Defendant* (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1901).

⁴⁸ See Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*, chap. 28.

what-ness. Human beings have a capacity for self-binding. They can commit themselves durably. Durable commitments denote the capacity for self-forming, for shaping oneself. “The liberty for which I chiefly care,” Chesterton declared, is “the liberty to bind myself.”⁴⁹ In a genuinely free society, people keep to their bargains. Their engagements and oaths are taken seriously by others. A husband, Chesterton remarked, enjoys a hundred honey-moons because he loves one wife.⁵⁰ In short, real choice is a combination of liberty and limitation.⁵¹

The merger of liberty and limitation is perhaps most beautifully conceived in stories. Humanity tells itself stories. Chesterton himself was a master storyteller. Human lives are recounted as stories or dramas. Among the most interesting stories are adventures. In the adventure story the hero passes various tests to save his life just as a person has to pass various ordeals in life to save their own soul.⁵² In any case, because life has a story-like character, part of it is settled without our permission.⁵³ It is subject to workings of necessity, fate, fortune, and destiny.

Modern intellectuals tend to take the opposite view. They think that life is romanticized, that it exists in a state of liberty. It has no limits.⁵⁴ This is a world where human beings are perfectible and education will make everyone good.⁵⁵ It is a world

⁴⁹ Chesterton, “Orthodoxy,” 328.

⁵⁰ See G.K. Chesterton, “Man Alive,” chap. 4 in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 7 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

⁵¹ Chesterton, “The New Jerusalem,” 195, 229.

⁵² See Chesterton, “The Everlasting Man,” chap. 4.

⁵³ Chesterton, “Heretics,” chap. 14.

⁵⁴ See Chesterton, “Orthodoxy,” chap. 3.

⁵⁵ See G.K. Chesterton, “Chesterton on Dickens,” in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 15 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 46, 392.

without original sin. There is no evil, constraints, nature, or fortune to contend with. Yet in truth there is. So the intellectuals end up furiously hating humankind for not living up to their expectations. If the people are to blame, then sack the people, they say. All modern tyrannies attempt to do exactly that. In Chesterton's day the liberal theologians who disdained miracles were the same people who embraced tyrannies. Intellectuals often support totalitarian movements. They may possess expansive reason, but they combine it with a contracted common sense.⁵⁶

Lack of common sense is obvious in the fads and fashions intellectuals slavishly adopt. Chesterton was very skeptical about ideological fashions. That included those that propagated in the Anglican Church which he eventually left. He waged spirited polemics against modern reforming zealots. The problem, he thought, was that their views stemmed from a hatred of modern life rather than a love of it. Chesterton was not against change, which, he thought, happens in any event. If you have a white post and you want it not to turn black, you have to paint it from time to time.⁵⁷ Change happens one way or the other, whether one does something or not. What concerned Chesterton was not change per se, but the modishness of modern reformers, who transform truth into an artefact of time.⁵⁸ All works then that try to be "modern" end up quickly becoming old and insipid. Modern reformers embrace change as their ideal and in so doing make change unchangeable.⁵⁹ They become enslaved to it, whether it is bad, good, or indifferent.

⁵⁶ Chesterton, "Orthodoxy," 222.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, chap. 6.

⁵⁸ Chesterton, "Chesterton on Shaw," 424.

⁵⁹ See Chesterton, "Orthodoxy," chap. 3.

The acolytes of change dislike tradition. Yet tradition, Chesterton argued, is the democracy of the dead. Just as democracy more generally is our attempt to tap the opinions of those who are otherwise too modest to offer them. In a democracy we place our trust in those who do not trust themselves just as tradition is the vote we give to our ancestors.⁶⁰ The rhythm of repetition is not necessarily bad or wrong. The child full of vitality says “do it again.” All genuine revolutions, Chesterton thought, were restorations.⁶¹ Repetition does not have to mean monotony. It can be a theatrical encore. Recurrence of the good rhythmical pleasurable kind is a kind of limit. But modern intellectuals disdain limits just as they scorn normality and celebrate abnormality. Chesterton’s view of change was rich, deep, and subtle. Good change, in his eyes, arises not from a contempt for things but rather from our loyalty to them. We have to dislike something enough to want to change it, and yet (importantly) love it enough to think that it is worth changing.⁶² Change driven simply by the scorn for things leads to bad and infernal change. The modern intellectual habit of derision, condescension, and disparagement ends poorly, with change motivated by a mocking, dismissive attitude towards the world rather than by love for and careful attention to it.

Intellectual schemes for change often have a mirthless, bossy, and tyrannical undercurrent. Chesterton remarked that he did not begin life believing in supernormal things. Rather, what convinced him was the people who disbelieved even in normal

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, chap. 4.

⁶¹ See Chesterton, “Man Alive,” chap. 3.

⁶² See Chesterton, “Orthodoxy,” chap. 5.

things.⁶³ They hated humankind. The Fabian, Nietzschean, and Communist reformers each wanted a “new type of man.” All of these currents misunderstood a fundamental anthropological paradox. No chain including the human chain is stronger than its weakest link.⁶⁴ The reformers were eager to sacrifice the normal for the abnormal and the rule for the exception.⁶⁵ They wished to eliminate not just the abuse of things but rather things themselves.⁶⁶ Reification, the idea that things exist outside human control, distresses them. Everything, they think, is subject to human volition. Consequently, everything can be engineered out of existence, “which is as if it were to abolish ponds or abolish trees.”⁶⁷

Neither traditional religion nor common sense can exist where everything is thought of as an artefact of human volition. Classic religion and common sense both require, as Kierkegaard noted, that the subjectivity of a person be objectively anchored. As subjectivity overwhelmed and consumed objectivity through the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, secularism replaced religion, and fads and fashion replaced common sense. Chesterton observed how secularism often ended up looking like a third-rate, cult-like bad religion. Intellectuals who despised religion managed to engage in all kinds of pseudo-religious posturing. The cult of Darwinism, which is peculiarly resistant to

⁶³ Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton*, 177.

⁶⁴ See Chesterton, “Heretics,” chap. 4.

⁶⁵ G.K. Chesterton, “The Superstition of Divorce,” in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 4, 247, 288; “Eugenics and Other Evils,” in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 4, 311.

⁶⁶ See G.K. Chesterton, “The Terror of a Toy,” in *Fancies versus Fads* (New York: Dobb, Mead and Co., 1923).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

scientific questioning or counter-theories, is a case in point. Chesterton noted how crazes for things like eugenics were connected with the rise of “scientific officialism.”⁶⁸ Experts, supposedly the models of reason, were oddly attracted to strange mixtures of cult and science or else technology and nature-worship. The idolatry of “climate change” theories in the early 21st century mixed apocalyptic millennialism with naïve paganism. It turned out that modern intellectuals, having spurned creeds, ended up with a scrap-heap of pantheistic catch-words instead.⁶⁹

A sign of such pseudo-religions is the seriousness of their adherents about their neo-atheistic crypto-reverential quasi-pantheistic junk ideologies. So seriously do the cultists take their catchphrases, they cannot laugh at themselves. As Kierkegaard put it, they lack the incognito of religion: humor. They are easy to spot. They all employ the same kind of awkward, empty, evasive language. Chesterton observed that it is a language designed to avoid suggesting that people have souls. The experts talk about the “outbreak” rather than the “waging” of war. They gracelessly describe “relations between the sexes” rather than the perambulations of love and lust.⁷⁰ They are preoccupied not with the souls of men and women but with their health. They agitate to legislate prohibitions on the evils of consuming food and alcohol (Chesterton predicted that nicotine would be eventually targeted).⁷¹ Yet how can physical science prove that a man is not

⁶⁸ Chesterton, “Eugenics and Other Evils,” 293.

⁶⁹ See G.K. Chesterton, “The Sectarian of Society,” in *A Miscellany of Men* (London: Methuen, 1912).

⁷⁰ Chesterton, “Eugenics and Other Evils,” 325.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 326.

depraved? Chesterton wondered. “You do not cut a man open to find his sins.”⁷²

Modern intellectuals have lost sight of the paradoxical nature of virtue and sin, indeed the paradoxical nature of all existence. In Chesterton’s view, a strand of contradiction runs through the universe. He thought that Alexander Pope’s poetry, filled as it was with Augustan-era antitheses, was fully in harmony with existence because the poetry, like existence itself, was full of contradiction.⁷³ That meant that logic, based on the law of non-contradiction, had its limits. A well-meaning person who studies the logical side of things may decide that “faith is nonsense.” But faith and humor are alogical. They are the two supreme assertions of the truth that one cannot draw out the soul of things with a syllogism.⁷⁴ That is not an argument against logic but rather an acknowledgment of the limits of logic and the need for imagination which, like humor, is analogical rather than logical.⁷⁵

Chesterton points out that the very possibility of morality hangs on the paradoxical union of opposites. Courage means that a person has to risk his or her own life in order to preserve it.⁷⁶ Charity means loving unlovable people.⁷⁷ In the same way, romance or adventure lies in thinking that something is more delightful because it is salted with danger.⁷⁸ And what is it that makes grand things possible? Humility. For without a sense of

⁷² See Chesterton, “Science and Religion,” in *All Things Considered*.

⁷³ See Chesterton, “Pope and the Art of Satire,” in *Twelve Types*.

⁷⁴ See Chesterton, “A Defense of Nonsense,” in *The Defendant*.

⁷⁵ See Murphy, *The Collective Imagination*.

⁷⁶ See Chesterton, “The Methuselahite,” in *All Things Considered*.

⁷⁷ See Chesterton, “Orthodoxy,” chap. 6.

⁷⁸ See Chesterton, “Heretics,” chap. 12.

humility, Chesterton argued, it is difficult to look upon anything as being wondrous.⁷⁹ That is also why ordinary things are more important than extraordinary things. Because any colossal thing conceded always depends on a small thing withheld.⁸⁰ Humility saves us from the foolish belief that we can invent everything for ourselves.

Digging deeper still, we find that the ability to laugh at oneself is the essential foundation on which humility stands. Jokes are good for one's soul, Chesterton observed, because their paroxysms (the body shaking with laughter) is a way that people forget themselves for a time, deftly deflating their own self-importance.⁸¹ Laughter allows us to step outside of ourselves. Again, as Kierkegaard suggested, it anchors our subjectivity in something objective. We look at ourselves from the outside. We see ourselves as others see us, one among many souls, all with names and concerns and interests, and yet all combined anonymously, synchronously, and harmoniously into various orders of different scales and magnitudes, all larger than our own selves, all governed, as Adam Smith put it, by the hidden hand of God.

⁷⁹ Ibid., chap. 4 & 5.

⁸⁰ See Chesterton, "Orthodoxy," chap. 4.

⁸¹ See G.K. Chesterton, "The Flat Freak," in *Alarms and Discursions* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1911).

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