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Academy Theologian Paper  
May 13, 2008

### **G. K. Chesterton: Jolly Theological Giant**

One could easily say that G. K. Chesterton was The Man of the Hour in the early twentieth century. In fact, he was the man of the hour almost every hour for more than thirty years. At 32 years of age, he was as famous as most men are after their tragic or untimely deaths. The source of his fame? Controversy met, journalistic talent employed, and Christianity defended, not to mention six feet, two (to four) inches and 300 pounds of British stock with a bigger sense of humor than all the rest of Britain.

Chesterton made a name for himself as a dedicated Catholic, a political commentator, and champion of the plain folk of England. During his life, he published 69 books, with ten more published posthumously. His essays and articles number in the thousands, and his poetry falls not far behind. What could inspire such prolificacy? First of all, a sinner saved whose joy in salvation overflowed constantly. Secondly, a keen understanding of the true nature of man amidst modernism, Darwinian evolution, eugenics, capitalism, and socialism. Lastly, an insatiable curiosity for all things he came in contact with. It seems he wrote about everything he learned, important or trivial. He gave expression to some of the happiest and some of the darkest moments of life in his poetry. His fiction is variously instructive and fantastical, but always profoundly tied to his Christian beliefs.

Two main themes that arise in Chesterton's works are what it means to be human, and how we ought to regard joy and its expressions. These themes are by no means separate, but closely intertwined. Chesterton's views on humanness and art are in

reaction to the worldviews cited above, as well as a presentation of his Christian beliefs and how they correspond to reality. I hope to touch on both of these topics in this paper, as it is impossible to summarize all of Chesterton's views in just a few pages. A quick survey of his works reveals that these two themes in particular recurred consistently over the course of his writing career.

Before attempting his theology, we must know and understand a little bit about the man Gilbert Keith Chesterton (from here known as GKC). GKC was born in Campden Hill, Kensington, in London in 1874. His family was modestly wealthy and happy. His younger brother Cecil would be GKC's best friend until his early death in World War I. His father instilled in his sons the difference between "living and making a living," and this laid a stable foundation for GKC's adult life as a businessman and author.<sup>1</sup> His childhood was filled with fairy tales and toy theaters, which were the early spark of his endless pursuit of enjoyment and happiness. Instead of University, GKC attended Slade Art School from 1892 to 1895, and attended local lectures on literature to flesh out his own education. He published his first book, *Greybeards at Play*, in 1900 at the young age of 26. His relative success enabled him to marry his sweetheart, Frances Blogg, in 1901. They would remain happily, though childlessly, married for 35 years. Regarding marriage, GKC had such lovely things to say as, "The whole pleasure of marriage is that it is a perpetual crisis," (*David Copperfield*", *Chesterton on Dickens*, 1911) and "Marriage is a duel to the death which no man of honour should decline," (*Manalive*, 1912).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> CatholicAuthors.com

<sup>2</sup> [www.chesterton.org](http://www.chesterton.org) The American Chesterton Society  
Introduction to *GK's Weekly: A Sampler*, Lyle W. Dorsett, 1986.

Two of GKC's most famous works were published in 1905, *Heretics*, and 1908, *Orthodoxy*. These books are, in a way, the biography of his spiritual journey. Though they are not in typical autobiographical style, they are the account of how he came to believe that Christianity is the best explanation, well, for all things. Philip Yancey, in the introduction to a recent edition of *Orthodoxy*, quotes GKC as declaring, "I am the man who with utmost daring discovered what had been discovered before...I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered that it was orthodoxy."<sup>3</sup> This nicely sums up GKC's general outlook: amidst the trends of "free-thinking", modernism, socialism, imperialism, and evolution, he discovered that Christianity offered the best answers to all the questions being asked.

GKC's public conversion to Catholicism didn't come for almost 15 years after these books were published. He held the Gospel of grace above all, but found great merit in the traditions of Catholicism. 1922 marked GKC's outright dedication to a particular branch of Christianity, and he became the champion of a minority in Anglican England. Catholics were by no means the only demographic who called GKC their own: the Common Man also found a prize-fighter on their side. GKC, his brother Cecil, Hilaire Belloc, and many other figures of the day developed the system of Distributism in response to socialism and capitalism. Aidan Mackey, as quoted by Lyle W. Dorsett in the introduction to *GK's Weekly: A Sampler*, describes Distributism thus,

...a social system which encourages small scale private productive ownership, based on the family unit...the small farm, the small shop, the small factory, the small professional practice, formed into small communities...each centered on church and school and living together in warm Christian

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Yancey, *G. K. Chesterton: Prophet of Mirth*, in the introduction to Doubleday's 2001 edition of *Orthodoxy*.

neighborliness...it involves disengagement from all manifestations of the existing practice of usurious finance...<sup>4</sup>

The cause of Distributism was furthered in the publication *GK's Weekly*, which was published from 1925 until GKC's death in 1936. GKC was the paper's owner, benefactor, and chief editor. The main reason I mention Distributism is because the whole view stemmed from GKC's belief that men relate best to God when they are closest to nature. He saw modest and honest work as a form of communion with God, closest to the kind of simple but meaningful existence men were meant to have in the first place.

To conclude this brief biography, Chesterton was nothing less than truly prolific. His other accomplishments include 30 years of weekly columns for the *Illustrated London News*, 13 years of weekly columns for the *Daily News*, poems, plays, novels, essays, articles, biographies, literary commentaries, social commentaries, historical analyses, all with entertainment abounding. His lust for life was only matched by his lust for food, which was probably the cause of his relatively early death, at age 63. Knowing a bit more about the person, we can move forward to the theology.

As I mentioned above, the two main themes I want to discuss are GKC's thoughts on humanness and art/imagination. His writings on these topics are broad and full. On being human, GKC's main work is *The Everlasting Man*, published in 1925.

To GKC, 'human' is not derogatory, but specific; not natural, but intentional. Humanness is a relationship to God, not just a sad state of affairs. To be human is to fulfill the specific purpose for which we are created. Quentin Lauer, author of *Chesterton: Philosopher without Portfolio* describes GKC's view of humans, not

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<sup>4</sup> Section III of Dorsett's introduction to *GK's Weekly: A Sampler*, 1986.

characterized by worldly success, but “rather to be distinguished by an acute awareness of being the recipient of a tremendous gift to which the only adequate response is everlasting gratitude.”<sup>5</sup> Lauer also observes,

The focus of all Chesterton’s enormous output...had but one ultimate end in view: to bring human beings to an ever-greater realization of the marvel of being human, a realization that was blocked in his day by the “heresy” of seeing human beings as simply the product of nature.<sup>6</sup>

GKC clearly states this himself,

...it is exactly when we do regard man as an animal that we know he is not an animal. It is precisely when we do try to picture him as a sort of horse on its hind legs, that we suddenly realise that he must be something as miraculous as the winged horse that towered up into the clouds of heaven.<sup>7</sup>

It is fairly obvious that he regards man’s origin and intent as something more supernatural than natural. *The Everlasting Man* is by no means outrageous praise of humanity. In fact, its whole point is that Christ is the Everlasting Man, the perfect human. He humbled himself and honored us by becoming human. That Christ came back as a man, and not a donkey, bespeaks the special interest God Himself has in humans. GKC is particular to point out that man, as man, is a being of matter and spirit. One cannot be a man without both elements, and in fact, the blend of the two is what gives us our humanness: “Upon this sublime and perilous liberty hang heaven and hell, and all the mysterious drama of the soul. It is distinction and not division, but a man *can* divide himself from God, which, in a certain aspect, is the greatest distinction of all.”<sup>8</sup> We must also understand a bit about why this positive focus on humanness was controversial:

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<sup>5</sup> *Chesterton: Philosopher without Portfolio*, Lauer, 1988. Ch. 6 “Chesterton’s Christian Humanism”

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152

<sup>7</sup> *The Everlasting Man*, G. K. Chesterton, 1925.

<sup>8</sup> *St. Thomas Aquinas*, G. K. Chesterton, 1933.

GKC was writing for the popular reader during the height of socially and governmentally supported eugenics programs bolstered by naturalistic Darwinian views of the origin and nature of man. The extreme right (totalitarianism) and extreme left (socialism) regimes were both based on ideologies that dehumanized man, reducing him to his material worth. GKC faced the onslaught, by no means alone, but conspicuously and boldly. He was a large, jolly, mustachioed pillar to which men could cling in this downward spiral of human dignity and worth.

The second theme to which I now turn is that of joy and its expressions. The pure joy of art and imagination may be the only theme stronger than that of our humanness. But, as stated above, the two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are mutually inclusive. GKC emphasizes again and again that our ability to create and to imagine is the image of God in us. If we understand that GKC's desire was for man to fulfill his original purpose, then it will not surprise us to hear, "In the end, Chesterton believed that for the Christian, the purpose of art is to help people to discover the glory they have lost,"<sup>9</sup> and "We are created in the very image of the God who created laughter, joy, play, nonsense, and imagination."<sup>10</sup> GKC views these things as the highest expression of holiness, a holiness beyond the artificially somber attitudes taken by 'religionists'. He goes so far as to say

I do not like seriousness. I think it is irreligious. Or, if you prefer the phrase, it is the fashion of all false religions. The man who takes everything seriously is the man who makes an idol of everything: he bows down to wood and stone until his limbs are rooted as the roots of a tree or his head as fallen as the stone sunken by the roadside.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *The Christian Imagination*, Thomas C. Peters, Ignatius Press, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 127

<sup>11</sup> *The Uses of Diversity*. G. K. Chesterton, 1921.

His point is that you cannot fully love or worship the God who created things like laughter and imagination without using them. GKC finds it no coincidence that Jesus said we must enter the kingdom of God like little children, and childhood is where these attitudes of joy reside. GKC's incredible creative output should inspire many of us to pursue our own creative endeavors. More than that, we should realize that the total commitment GKC had to Christianity influenced every aspect of his creative imagination. His works are thoroughly Christian and thoroughly entertaining. GKC himself serves as the best example of the point he was trying make: we are supposed to be creative, to revel in the joys of God, to use every aspect of our lives to worship Him, including our imagination.

GKC's influence was not small. In fact, one very important Christian was influenced by GKC. C. S. Lewis, fellow Brit, writes in *Surprised by Joy*:

In reading Chesterton, as in reading MacDonald, I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere – "Bibles laid open, millions of surprises," as Herbert says, "fine nets and stratagems." God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous.<sup>12</sup>

GKC blew Lewis's personal convictions wide open. The truest understanding of our humanness paired with almost appalling talent is not easy to resist. This jolly giant of Britain took the staunch atheist aback, far, far back. We might say that imagination is powerful, and powerfully used by God, when it is all to His glory.

In my opinion, G. K. Chesterton is still so very relevant to our current times. A century ago he battled the very worldviews, in their infancy, which we combat today. Naturalism still relegates Man to the realm of animal. Materialism, as a philosophy,

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<sup>12</sup> *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis. Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1955; p. 191

bleeds the meaning from true spirituality, reducing all to just atoms. Eugenics, though not governmentally implemented, is still practiced (i.e. abortion, for its many reasons). Humanity is losing what little dignity is available to it. Chesterton's desire was for humans to take their humanness as a point of inspiration and of right thinking. I would say we need that now more than ever. To emphasize our humanity, in Chesterton's view, as something to be embraced, we do not remove the need for a Savior. Quite the contrary. We come to know what we ought to be, how we were intended to be, and that serves to underscore our need of redressment. Jesus Christ is our only hope. After at least a century of relentless siege, I think we need to revisit what it means to be created in the image of God. GKC brought it out at the beginning, maybe it's time for an encore.

I think it is fair to say that Christianity has seen a cold-shouldering of the arts, particularly in the last century. It has never been fully rejected, but frowned upon, put aside for more 'serious' pursuits of spirituality. Of course, there are always the exceptions, Lewis and Tolkien are two well-known. But by and large, the arts have been worse than neglected. In very recent years we have seen a little revival, but even then the understanding of creative expression seems a tad misunderstood. We must know and understand the rich artistic history that Christianity owns. We must seek to understand why creating is also worshipful, we must let go of some of our modern stoicism to fully enjoy this under-expressed aspect of our humanness. Chesterton achieved this with ease, and thousands of publications. I think simply experiencing the art of those who came before would do much to revive our current artistic attitudes. We should challenge each other to explore our creative tendencies, or feel the need to discover them in the first place. Chesterton is a less obvious place to start. Many people read Lewis, but many

people do not know that Chesterton's imagination inspired much of Lewis's own. Chesterton has something to offer for all tastes: plays, poetry, literature, biography, theology, sketches and drawings, songs, and on and on. The keen insight and incredible variation is something, I feel, is largely lacking in contemporary Christian art. We could learn much from such a man as Chesterton.

I know that Chesterton has inspired me to be broader in my reading, to let go of my prejudice against 'warm-fuzzy' Christian novels, and the despair that all poetry seems to be morbid and boring. His little ditties have inspired a few of my own. All in all, I recommend, nay, challenge, you, the reader, to pick up some Gilbert Keith this summer. It will be an adventure, I promise!