

Discussion Notes

from

September 28, 2008, Chapter 3: Freedom to Think

G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*

Discussion questions:

Questions posted in advance of the discussion:

- What does Chesterton mean when he says at p. 22, "The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone."?
- At pp. 24-25, Chesterton refers to the "intellectual helplessness" which causes people to doubt their own aims. Do you see examples of that today?
- At p. 24, is Chesterton right, that the world is at war with reason?
- At p. 25, Chesterton says, "Reason is itself a matter of faith. It is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all." Do you agree?
- Pages 25-26: Is religion a bulwark in support of reason? What is Chesterton's argument on this point? If religion goes, will reason go, too?
- Chesterton says at p. 27: The philosophic evolutionist reverses and negatives the epigram. He says, "I am not; therefore I cannot think." Is he right?
- Chesterton discusses free thought at p. 29. Are there parallels today?
- Does Chesterton's discussion of the will at pp. 30-32 explain anything about culture and thought in America today?
- At p. 34 Chesterton speaks of the decline of satire and relates that to the absence of standards. Do you agree?
- Do we have a role in defense of reason today? If so, what is it?

Discussion notes:

- Was Chesterton right that the chief pleasure is surprise? That depends on what the surprise is.
- Support for Chesterton's view is the practice of children at Christmas to hurry from the opening of one gift to another, to see what each one is.
- The end of surprise is the beginning of another knowledge.
- The assertion of the importance of the freedom of choice derives from Nietzsche's idea of the will to power. It is the assertion of the importance of choice rather than of the importance of choosing well.
- I observed some years ago that some Chinese visitors to the U.S. were overwhelmed with the scope of choices that were available to them here, because in their homeland they did not have much freedom or opportunity to choose.
- Nietzsche's idea was based on the concept as the individual as being the essential unit of power. The individual is important to God, but in terms of reasoning and doing rightly rather than in terms of the exercise of power.
- Were you surprised by Chesterton's argument that religion supports reason? Faith without reason can't exist, because without reason one is incapable of description of the world or of what we are.
- If religion is eliminated from the picture, the tendency is toward an elitist post-modernism.
- Some persons criticize Christians as though Christians practiced blind faith and believe in irrationality, but reason and faith are inseparable.
- Some modern philosophers see truth as being only perception rather than reality, but to follow that idea to its logical conclusion means that you can't reason anything. As Chesterton said, it leads to intellectual helplessness.
- The belief that nothing is higher than another or that one way of thinking is as good as another is helpless drive.
- With regard to Chesterton's belief that satire is dying because of the loss of standards against which something or someone can be satirized, some evidence that satire remains alive is the book *The Shack*.
- At p. 33: "Liberalism has been degraded into liberality." The classical meaning of liberalism has been deprived of its content, without a claim to having a substantive truth.
- I'm wondering about the relationship that Chesterton asserted, between satire and standards. Sometimes it's hard to tell whether a statement is meant to be satirical, and some of the best humor was not really what the speaker intended.
- Chesterton asserted that the creeds and the crusades were organized for the defense of reason. Do you agree? Maybe that was the effect, but it may well not have been the conscious intention of many of the participants, as to the Crusades.
- When we recite the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, we are affirming evidence for the faith—reasons for the faith—and not simply the stated conclusions based on those reasons.
- However, reasons are not necessarily the same thing as reason.
- Chesterton's statement that to the extent that religion has gone, reason is going, reminds me of philosophers' efforts to deal with the problem of consciousness. Some attempt to explain consciousness as simply the result of electrical and chemical processes, but if that is the case, then we have no way of *knowing* anything; whatever we think we perceive is simply some blind chemical or electrical process which may have no correlation with reality, if there is reality. Yet as a matter of common

practice we rely upon what we perceive through our consciousness, and we regard as being true what it is that we experience as being true through our consciousness. But if we do that for matters of science or everyday knowledge, then how can we logically discount what that same consciousness tells us of the presence of God?

As we think, so we are.

Regarding Chesterton's view of the role of limitations in the work of an artist, a sculptor often perceives his or her work as releasing what is inside the block.

An artist, or even an observer, has to look at the negative spaces to see the positive spaces. Painting is as much what you leave out as it is what you put in.

Reason uses reasons to defend reason, through the same process by which reason uses reason to defend faith.

That is one reason why those who debunk religious faith find that their debunking turns around on whatever else they believe.

Regarding Chesterton's argument that evolution when it is seen as a philosophy does not destroy religion but rationalism, there are those who argue a materialistic understanding of evolution, which is to say that all that we know or experience must, by definition, come to us through one or more of our five senses. Yet haven't you had the experience of suddenly knowing something—something unprecedented in your experience—in your conscious mind, distinctly from your five senses?

If our capacity to reason is broken, then we can't use it; one can't use a broken tool to fix something. If our premises are faulty, we are unlikely to make accurate observations. In such a circumstance, degradation is as strong a possibility as improvement is.

Chesterton rebuts those who argue against objective truth and for the supreme importance of one's right to choose, that observation of human experience shows us that indeed the people have made a choice, and that is to believe in objective truth.

If one experiences love, such as love for one's wife, one becomes aware of that love in one's consciousness. There may be—there would be—evidences that support that love and which come to us through our five senses, but the love itself is a matter of consciousness, an internal awareness that is on-going and not tied to the on-going operation of the five senses. This suggests to me that one can become aware of God in one's consciousness just as one can become aware of love in one's consciousness. Those who argue that we can know nothing that does not come to us through the five senses have simply, by definition rather than by logic or necessity, defined God out of the picture—but there is no reason to believe that a supernatural God could not make us aware of himself directly in our consciousness.