

**Discussion Notes**  
**from**  
**October 12, 2008, Chapter 5: The Oddity of Things**  
**“(The Flag of the World)”**  
**G. K. Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy***

**Discussion questions:**

What is Chesterton’s criticism of pessimism? Of optimism?  
Chesterton’s title for this chapter is “The Flag of the World”. What did he mean by that?  
What value did Chesterton see in patriotism? Did he see it as anything more than loyalty, such as to one’s favorite sports team?  
Chesterton saw Christianity’s distinct evaluations of suicide and martyrdom as an answer to “the first of a long train of enigmas” (p. 66). What was the enigma, and what was the answer?  
At p. 67, Chesterton said Christianity was the answer to a riddle. What riddle?  
Why is it that Chesterton said at p. 69 that there is great danger in having man look inward for answers?  
Chesterton said at p. 70 that Christianity “stepped in and offered a singular answer” when some men were breaking up this world, and others did not care enough to stop them. What was that answer?  
At p. 72 Chesterton said that Christianity made the oddities—including “those blind fancies of boyhood” he related in the previous chapter— which he had seen, suddenly fit into a coherent whole. Do you, too, see that coherence?  
How is it that Chesterton found joy, as related at pp. 72-73, in realizing that *he* didn’t quite fit in, and that oddities in nature could have been other than what they are?

**Discussion notes:**

Chesterton has an ability to take ideas which nearly everyone takes for granted, to examine them, and to ask, “Do you *really* believe that? Such as, that love is blind. He says at p. 63 (using the example of women) that love is bound, but not blind.  
A problem with the pessimist is that he doesn’t love what he’s pessimistic about.  
To the “cosmic patriot”, sadness is a reason for loving, like the love of a mother for a sick child.  
Is being a sports fan different from being a patriot?  
Loyalty starts early, with family loyalty, and then grows outward as one becomes more aware of one’s environment—but we can forget that “we’re all in this together” as our awareness expands. Instead of allowing our patriotism to become diluted, we should remember to be cosmic patriots.  
Loyalty is earned, and it needs to be tended and fed. False loyalty comes from wanting something to be worthy of loyalty, like the bad optimism that Chesterton discussed. It is not healthy to be loyal to a dysfunctional system.  
It is hard to read this, because the words “patriotism” and “loyalty” already have hooks in our brains. I found this to be greatly freeing, because loyalty is a matter of love. Our response to that love is, “We’re going to change the world,” and, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” This sort of patriotism and loyalty enable us to pray for God’s revolution.  
Barth translated “kingdom” as “revolution”, as in, “Thy revolution come.”  
Chesterton’s critique of suicide makes it clear why suicide has been repudiated by Christianity. It is a matter of affirmation vs. denial; suicide cancels everything and is the ultimate sin. If we love the world, we can’t quit; we have to try to fix it.  
Chesterton may have been prompted by British history, to come to his conclusion that patriotism causes us to care enough to try to reform the world. England had gone through many revolutions, and they were led by people who were loyal to England, although not necessarily to the particular powers who or which ruled England at their respective times.  
When does patriotism become blind?  
Underlying love to the underlying principle behind something keeps one trying to improve the thing one loves. Loyalty is the source of creative energy, Chesterton said. The place to which one is loyal isn’t wonderful in itself, but it is wonderful because one loves it.  
Chesterton wondered why his home was in the universe, but he didn’t feel fully at home in the universe. [Is this sense that there is something missing, universal to mankind, or to most people?]  
The rational patriot who doesn’t see the flaws in the thing to which he is loyal, but holds to it anyway, can be destructive.  
The kind of loyalty which does care about the good but only about winning, is destructive.

Chesterton could help us to see our nation, and to understand that when people disagree with one another politically their loyalty to the nation should not on that account be called into question.

Love should act out of a holy love, and not in pursuit of a lesser agenda.

One should love enough to be able to pursue change for improvement.

I see a contradiction in what Chesterton said, because he said rationalists were off-base, but we need a rational basis for what we do and believe.

I think that in Chesterton's criticism of those who have a "reason" to be loyal or patriotic, he was using that in the sense of saying that such persons are only loyal if the thing they love is or behaves a certain way. To say it another way, he was saying that they love conditionally, and they can as easily walk away if the condition isn't fulfilled, instead of trying to reform the thing they profess to love.

The more you love, the more you will see flaws and ache to make it better.

Chesterton said that Christianity was the answer to a riddle, about how one can love a thing which is not what it should be.

Chesterton gets to the central point of the chapter when he says, at p. 68, that the most horrible religion is the one that worships the god within, or the "inner light". He says, at p. 70, that Christianity offered "a singular answer", by dividing God from the cosmos, just as a work of art is divided from its creator, or the poem from the poet.

It seems to me that because Chesterton reasoned from his own feelings and perceptions (such as his feeling not quite at home in the universe), he started with the "inner light" but didn't stay there.

It sounds to me that Chesterton knew of the writings of Barth, whose major thesis was the transcendence or "otherness" of God. Many of our problems come from an unwillingness to acknowledge the transcendence of God.

As Chesterton says, St. George saw the sacredness of the design of the cosmos affected by the Fall. He had the original image in mind, and that tells us how it is that the Christian optimist has a guide; he can know what the thing was meant to be.

So if we're eaten by the dragon it doesn't matter!

What Chesterton says at pp. 67-68 tells me that piety is not unique to Christianity. We should not get caught in the importance of our personal piety. Piety is good, but it is not enough. We need to hold in tension a love of the world while we "hate" it, too, in the sense of being willing to pursue its reformation from what it is to what it should be.

Yes, we can love the world without being worldly.

At pp. 72-73, Chesterton states his conclusions, which can be listed as these: (1) The way things are in nature is by choice, not that they had to be that way; (2) personal happiness indeed hangs on a condition, in accord with the doctrine of the Fall; (3) the cosmos is not vast and void, but small and cozy, as any work of art must be in relation to its creator; (4) the instinct that goodness is not a tool but a remnant of something lost accords with Eden; and (5) Christian optimism is based on the fact that we do *not* fit in this world, whereas the optimism of the age was that we do. Christian pleasure is "poetic", as Chesterton said, "for it dwelt on the unnaturalness of everything in the light of the supernatural." Now Chesterton knew why he could "feel homesick at home."

What does Chesterton mean by "The Flag of the World"? One interpretation of that is that he contrasts that to the Christian flag, as an indication of where one's loyalty is. Or, one could say that one is loyal to the world, *because* one is loyal to the Christian faith; one loves the world enough to care to reform it.

This chapter is similar in its theme to that the the Johanine writings in the New Testament, and even to Old Testament themes, that we are on a pilgrimage, and the world is not our final home. We are in the world, but not of it.