

Discussion Notes
from
November 2, 2008, Chapter 7: Solemnity and Levity
(“The Eternal Revolution”)
G. K. Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy*

Discussion questions:

The central theme of this chapter can be summarized as the necessary and unique relationship between Christianity and improvement of and in the world around us. If you were asked to make an argument for that relationship, how would you support it?

Do you think that any parts of Chesterton’s argument are less relevant today than they were when he wrote? If so, which ones?

At p. 100, Chesterton wrote, “(O)urs is only an age of conservation because it is an age of complete unbelief. Let beliefs fade fast and frequently, if you wish institutions to remain the same. The more the life of the mind is unhinged, the more the machinery of matter will be left to itself.” Is this true of our time?

At p. 101, Chesterton argues that a fixed ideal is necessary, and Christianity supplies it. How does Christianity do so?

At p. 104 and elsewhere, Chesterton seems to be saying that the very idea of progress toward something better requires the mind of an artist (*i.e.*, God) to see what it is that is better. Is this a stronger argument than the argument from “irreducible complexity” that Creationists make today? What about his argument from proportion, at pp. 106-7?

At pp. 105 and 113, Chesterton argues that Christianity is uniquely conducive to frivolity, levity, and lightness of spirit. Do you agree?

At page 109, Chesterton argues that popular systems (such as methods of government) regularly become oppressive, and that the Christian teaching of the Fall is both the best explanation for that fact and the best protection for the oppressed. Do you agree?

Do you agree with Chesterton’s view that Christianity supports “eternal revolution” against oppressive systems?

At pp. 112-3, Chesterton argues that democracy is “profoundly Christian” at its core. Explain.

At p. 116, Chesterton cites the “adventure” which Christianity provides, and which he says is required for improvement in the world, because the stakes are real and our choices are binding. If someone would say to you that does not sound very adventurous, how would you reply?

Discussion notes:

Comment about what Chesterton said:

At p. 105: “This gives to the typically Christian pleasure in this earth a strange touch of lightness that is almost frivolity.”

At p. 113: “(A) characteristic of the great saints is their power of levity. Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly. This has been always the instinct of Christendom, and especially the instinct of Christian art.”

At p. 114: “Pride is the downward drag of all things into an easy solemnity. . . . Seriousness is not a virtue.”

Chapter 2 of the book of Titus tells us to weigh all things. If some things are truly heavy, then we should be serious about them. Seriousness can lead to pomposity.

We are hard-wired for humor. Smiling is easier than frowning is, in terms of how many muscles are required for each.

Good advice is, “Don’t sweat the small stuff,” and “everything is small”. So much of the time we’re driven to take stuff seriously, and people tend to resent it if you take things lightly. This world is an alien place for us.

One difference for the Christian is perspective. Such as in the election campaign now in progress, we know that not everything rides on how that turns out.

In Christian art, do you see Jesus laughing? Yet, I believe that Jesus had a sense of humor.

Light-heartedness and seriousness are not in conflict with one another.

Joy makes people approachable. Excessive seriousness scares people off.

We should remember Martha, whom Jesus told that one one thing is really necessary. We have that one thing, so let’s enjoy it.

Chesterton said:

At pp. 101-2: “(C)ertain schools of progress and moral evolution . . . suggest that there has been a slow movement towards morality, with an imperceptible ethical change in every year or at every instant.”

At p. 103: “Some people (as we have said) seem to believe in an automatic and impersonal progress in the nature of things.”

At p. 104: "They suggest that through the ages we have been growing more and more humane . . ."

At least as recently as the 1960s, that argument was still prominent. Is it still with us?

I think that it is still with us.

We are bearing the fruit of the 1960s, as the world is turning darker.

It is ironic that we are said to be becoming more humane, but it is often at the expense of people in favor of animals or nature.

One effect of that idea is seen in the decline of the populations of people in nations of Europe, for example.

I think that awareness of people has increased, but brutality has increased, too.

The general loss of belief in an abstract right or wrong has taken away the hue and cry for a utopia, so it has also undercut the idea of automatic progress.

In the 1960s modernism was still the dominant secular philosophy, and it held that truth could be ascertained by reason. Its substantial replacement since then by post-modernism, which does not hold to objective standards, has largely eliminated the idea of moral progress, and that, I think, is why this idea which Chesterton thought so important to rebut has now pretty much died away of its own weight.

Note Chesterton's propositions regarding what is necessary for improvement in our world:

At p. 95: ". . . necessary content and necessary discontent . . ."

At p. 98: "We have said we must be fond of this world, even in order to change it. We now add that we must be fond of another world (real or imaginary) in order to have something to change it to."

At p. 101: "This, therefore, is our first requirement about the ideal towards which progress is directed; it must be fixed."

At p. 107: "This, then, is our second requirement for the ideal of progress. First, it must be fixed; second, it must be composite. It must not (if it is to satisfy our souls) be the mere victory of some one thing swallowing up everything else, love or pride or peace or adventure; it must be a definite picture composed of these elements in their best proportion and relation."

Note Chesterton's recounting of how he heard the voice of the Church speaking up, at each point of his journey, just as he thought he had come up with something original:

Summarized at p. 115:

In short, I had spelled out slowly, as usual, the need for an equal law in Utopia; and, as usual, I found that Christianity had been there before me. The whole history of my Utopia has the same amusing sadness. I was always rushing out of my architectural study with plans for a new turret only to find it sitting up there in the sunlight, shining, and a thousand years old.

At pp. 102-3:

Something seemed to be saying, "My ideal at least is fixed; for it was fixed before the foundations of the world. My vision of perfection assuredly cannot be altered; for it is called Eden. You may alter the place to which you are going; but you cannot alter the place from which you have come. . . . Your vision is not merely a fixture: it is a fact."

At p. 107:

Twice again, therefore, Christianity had come in with the exact answer that I required. I had said, "The ideal must be fixed," and the Church had answered, "Mine is literally fixed, for it existed before anything else." I said secondly, "It must be artistically combined, like a picture"; and the Church answered, "Mine is quite literally a picture, for I know who painted it." Then I went on to the third thing, which, as it seemed to me, was needed for an Utopia or goal of progress. And of all the three it is infinitely the hardest to express. Perhaps it might be put thus: that we need watchfulness even in Utopia, lest we fall from Utopia as we fell from Eden.

At p. 109:

Christianity spoke again and said: "I have always maintained that men were naturally backsliders; that human virtue tended of its own nature to rust or to rot; I have always said that human beings as such go wrong, especially happy human beings, especially proud and prosperous human beings. This eternal revolution, this suspicion sustained through centuries, you (being a vague modern) call the doctrine of progress. If you were a philosopher you would call it, as I do, the doctrine of original sin. You may call it the cosmic advance as much as you like; I call it what it is—the Fall."

At p. 111:

Only the Christian Church can offer any rational objection to a complete confidence in the rich. For she has maintained from the beginning that the danger was not in man's environment, but in man. Further, she has maintained that if we come to talk of a dangerous environment, the most dangerous environment of all is the commodious environment. . . . (T)he words of Christ . . . at the very least mean this—that rich men are not very likely to be morally trustworthy.

At p. 116:

I could never conceive or tolerate any Utopia which did not leave to me the liberty for which I chiefly care, the liberty to bind myself. Complete anarchy would not merely make it impossible to have any discipline or fidelity; it would also make it impossible to have any fun. To take an obvious instance, it would not be worth while to bet if a

bet were not binding. . . . All my modern Utopian friends look at each other rather doubtfully, for their ultimate hope is the dissolution of all special ties. But again I seem to hear, like a kind of echo, an answer from beyond the world. "You will have real obligations, and therefore real adventures when you get to my Utopia. But the hardest obligation and the steepest adventure is to get there."

Wow!

It would be harder to make that argument today, because some substantial parts of the Church no longer stand for fixed principles.

Original sin is built into the nature of things, because it's much the same as entropy. Scientists are now moving more and more toward religion, because they have seen the certainties of the modern world falling away.

We all make that journey in some sense. The fixed and true things are at the heart of existence. We grab them and let go of others, and so come to saving grace in Jesus Christ.

How does Chesterton's argument about proportion compare with the argument for God, from irreducible complexity?

In scientific practice of evolutionary theory, we breed into animals those characteristics which we find to be pleasing, and that means that there has to be a standard of what it is that is pleasing. This can be compared with the Old Testament restrictions on who could enter the temple; the Old Testament is all about the pursuit of the ideal.

Proportion is related to tension, and that is not going to go away.

As Chesterton says, although we pursue proportion, nothing quite achieves it; there's always something that's not quite as it should be, always something just short of the perfection we seek and which we believe should be there.