

Discussion Notes
from
November 9, 2008, Chapter 8: The Romance of Orthodoxy
G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*

Discussion questions:

- At p. 118, Chesterton says that in his day free-thinking meant believing in “one particular class of conclusions”, all opposed to the orthodox faith. Is something similar to this at work today?
- At p. 120, Chesterton cites “a faith in a fixed and godless fate; a deep and sincere faith in the incurable routine of the cosmos.” Is that bleak view justified?
- At p. 120, Chesterton says, “A miracle only means the liberty of God.” Why do you think so many contemporaries of ours find oppressive or even repulsive the idea of God’s liberty?
- What do you think of “the tyranny of circumstance” (p. 121)?
- Is the desirability of miracles an argument in their favor? (p. 121)
- At p. 121 Chesterton cites the belief, much present in his day, that all religions are essentially alike. Is that belief as strong today? Put into your own words what is Chesterton saying, when he says this at p. 126: “This is the meaning of that almost insane happiness in the eyes of the mediaeval saint in the picture. This is the meaning of the sealed eyes of the superb Buddhist image.”
- At p. 127, on what reasoning does Chesterton assert that the belief in the transcendence of God is what dethrones tyrants?
- At p. 128, Chesterton says that “it is not well for God to be alone.” What does he mean? What is an example in today’s world, which illustrates what Chesterton means?
- At pp. 128-9, Chesterton says that Christianity is a story rather than a plan. Why? What is the importance of the distinction?
- At pp. 130-1, Chesterton says, “Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete.” Explain.
- At p. 131, Chesterton says: “Nay, (the matter grows too difficult for human speech,) but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.” Is this shocking? Is it correct?
- At pp. 132-3, Chesterton discusses the phenomenon of people who so much disbelieve and detest the Christian faith that they are willing to destroy freedom in this world, if need be, to destroy the faith. Are there similar examples today?

Discussion notes:

Comment about what Chesterton said:

At pp. 128-9: “But to a Christian existence is a *story*, which may end up in any way. In a thrilling novel (that purely Christian product) the hero is not eaten by cannibals; but it is essential to the existence of the thrill that he *might* be eaten by cannibals. The hero must (so to speak) be an eatable hero.”

At p. 129: “The true philosophy is concerned with the instant. Will a man take this road or that? . . . The aeons are easy enough to think about, any one can think about them. The instant is really awful: and it is because our religion has intensely felt the instant, that it has in literature dealt much with battle and in theology dealt much with hell. It is full of *danger*, like a boy's book: it is at an immortal crisis.”

At pp. 129-30: “But the point is that a story is exciting because it has in it so strong an element of will, of what theology calls free-will. You cannot finish a sum how you like. But you can finish a story how you like. When somebody discovered the Differential Calculus there was only one Differential Calculus he could discover. But when Shakespeare killed Romeo he might have married him to Juliet's old nurse if he had felt inclined. And Christendom has excelled in the narrative romance exactly because it has insisted on the theological free-will.”

There is a branch of Christian theology which is called narrative theology. It emphasizes that salvation is a story.

This has some similarity to the thinking of Christian existentialists such as Kierkegaard, in whose thinking there is the ever-present possibility of non-being, the idea that we are hanging by a wire.

I had always been put off by the Puritan Jonathan Edwards and his idea that people are sinners in the hands of an angry God, but Chesterton has caused me to be more accepting of the contingency part of that thinking.

Where there is no conflict, there is no story.

In the play, "On the Verge," it was said that the role of evil in the universe is "to thicken the plot."
 We don't know what tomorrow will be like, what the conflict will be, but we know the end of the story.
 It can be likened to a "choose your own adventure" book, in which a child who is reading the story has the option of taking a variety of options at several decision points, and the story goes differently according to those choices.
 I think it's in the Psalms that at one point it says that the Lord will "overtake us and surprise us."
 Yes, our faith brings us surprises.
 There is a sense of freedom in that. I know that the path may not be what I expected it to be, but that's okay. My free will (and that of others) can alter that path, within or in concert with God's sovereignty.
 One's poor choice of a path need not end up in a dead end; God can lead us to a side street.
 God has a more detailed map than we do.
 About the novel's being a Christian invention, Latin American novels probably would not have been produced if there hadn't been an underlying Christian influence.
 I think Christianity is indeed necessary for the existence of the novel, because the dominant conflict is between good and evil, and not every system of belief acknowledges that fact.
 In Hinduism and Buddhism, existence is seen as being a great circle, and one doesn't get out of it. Christianity has an end, so there is inherent conflict with the dénouement.
 With Christianity, we are led toward an end with the hope that "they all lived happily ever after."
 Storytelling is innately human, in all cultures, but the novel is distinct.
 That reminds me of C.S. Lewis' idea that other religions contain an intuition of truth, because of the "natural revelation" of God to that extent.
 What do you think about Chesterton's idea of miracles as expressing "the liberty of God" (p. 120)?
 He made the rules, and he can break them.
 People try to explain miracles away, by seeking a rational explanation. I say that a rational explanation is okay, but that may merely be the means through which God worked.
 The miracle might abide in our perception and how the event impacts us.
 That may be, but we can be just as much locked into a course of action by our perception of reality as by reality itself. If the action of God is to change our perception and thereby open up a new course of action to us, that is just as effective as an action of God that would change the reality with which we must cope.
 Chesterton referred at p. 121 to "the tyranny of circumstance". Sometimes we let our circumstances be our tyrants.
 To the rationalist everything is explicable, or is sought to be explicable, in materialist terms. However, the miracle of the loaves and fishes is one which cannot be explained in that way and for that reason is particularly a heresy to the rationalist.
 The greatest heresy to the rationalist is the Virgin Birth.
 People more readily accept magic than miracles.
 Chesterton's idea, at p. 121, that miracles "are certainly desirable" was a fresh way to approach the matter.
 At p. 121 Chesterton rebutted the idea that all religions are alike in what they teach. Is that idea prevalent today?
 Yes, that idea could even be said to be "doctrine", an article of belief, among people who are outside the Church.
 Yes, the idea is dominant, and it's sometimes expressed as meaning that everything is okay, and nothing is prohibited.
 To many, the idea that salvation is only through Christ is offensive.
 It really helped me, that Chesterton said that love was and is communicated to all of humanity; all people can love. The ability to love is outside the sphere of religion, so that commonality among people is not an argument for saying that all religions are alike.
 The idea that you can "make your own religion" is a great detour and a waste of time.
 The offense is the Cross; that is an anathema to every other religion.
 Chesterton said at p. 124 that to fall in love with oneself would be "a monotonous courtship". It is boring to be a narcissist.
 Narcissism is more prevalent, or more recognized today, than formerly.
 Narcissism can result when a person thinks that he or she has all the time in the world, so why not focus the whole universe on yourself.
 At p. 128 Chesterton argues that there is a danger in worshiping a unitary, non-triune god, because that is the worship of a being without moderation. The Muslim god is not the same as the One we worship, because the Muslim god is not trinitarian.
 Jesus is our advocate, but there is nothing to modify the tyranny of the Muslim god.
 An important further distinction is that Christ is not just our advocate, but our divine advocate. Muslims don't object to regarding Jesus as a prophet, but the Cross and Jesus' divinity are abhorrent to Muslims.
 At pp. 130-1, Chesterton says that Christianity has felt that "omnipotence made God incomplete." Jesus went through not only agony, but also doubt, and Chesterton said that God became an atheist for a moment. God took the risk on the Cross that God might fail the test. As Chesterton said, "the matter grows too difficult for human speech." Wow!