

Discussion Notes
from
November 16, 2008, Chapter 9: Authority and the Adventurer
G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*

Discussion questions:

Why did Chesterton entitle this chapter, "Authority and the Adventurer"?

At p. 135, Chesterton says that he does not propose to turn the book into one of "ordinary Christian apologetics." What does he mean by that?

At p. 136 Chesterton relates the three "converging convictions" of the unbeliever. What do you think accounts for the development and acceptance of those convictions?

Does Chesterton successfully rebut them?

At pp. 139-40 Chesterton makes an argument for the divinity of Christ, based, among other things, on the *a fortiori* character of Christ's pronouncements. Is this persuasive for you?

Does the self-renewing power of what Chesterton knew as Christendom continue to this day? (See p. 142.)

Chesterton argues at pp. 143-6 that acceptance of the occurrence of miracles is simply a matter of evaluating and believing or not believing the testimony of witnesses. When you put that argument into your own words, do you think you can be effective in making that argument to non-believers?

Is Chesterton's concept of the Church as a "living teacher" (p. 147-8) or "a truth-telling thing" (p. 150) applicable to the whole Church, or only to those parts of the Church which have an institutional body which officially decides what is the truth of God?

What is Chesterton's argument about the Church's teaching about the importance of physical virginity (pp. 149-50)?

What does Chesterton mean about being born "upside down" or "right way up" (p. 151)?

What is Chesterton's argument about gigantic joy and small sadness? (See pp. 152-4.)

Do you see the mirth or shyness of God, as Chesterton did (pp. 153-4)?

Discussion notes:

This final chapter does not reach an anti-climax; the book begins as an ascent and continues that all of the way to the end.

This chapter contains the best defense of miracles that I have seen anywhere, and this chapter can equip us for when we talk with persons who do not believe that miracles occur.

Why the chapter title, "Authority and the Adventurer"? I think Chesterton is saying that authority is necessary for there to be adventure. See p. 151: "A man can expect any number of adventures if he goes travelling in the land of authority."

This chapter continues the entire theme of the book: Christianity is an adventure, always with something new.

Why does Chesterton say this book is not a book of "ordinary Christian apologetics"? One reason is that Chesterton is orthodox in an unorthodox way.

Mainly, though, Chesterton is not so much attempting to state a logical case (although he is rational in what he says), as to tell his own story, as a biography of his journey (his "growth in spiritual certainty", as he said at p. 135).

What accounts for the three "converging convictions" of the unbeliever? One factor is that they are easy targets; it's always easy to blame priests, because it's easy to blame the man at the top.

The first "converging conviction", that man is just a beast, reminds me of what someone said, "A cow is a horse is a pig is a boy". It is an atheist doctrine.

One reason for the belief that man is just a beast is the desire not to accept authority and not to acknowledge any Creator other than man himself.

Related to that, and another reason for the belief, is the desire not to be responsible to a Creator.

An example was Huxley, who said he simply preferred not to believe.

At pp. 136-7 Chesterton says that "man is the only wild animal", and that animals are all domestic, because they "follow the rugged respectability of the tribe or type".

A dog is always "doggish", but a man does different things, for good or for bad.

My reaction is, "Why didn't we think of this before Chesterton did?" He makes Christianity seem to be so obviously true, on the basis of observation and rational thought.

On the second "converging conviction" of the unbeliever, that primeval religion arose in ignorance and fear, Chesterton argues from the nearly universal tradition or racial memory of an idyllic past for humankind, from which mankind has departed. So, all that we can know about such ancient history is that it was *not* a time of ignorance or fear.

This “converging conviction” is criticism “from the outside”. There is a branch of anthropology which holds that primitive man had more intuitive powers than we have today. Christians today are judged by the worst examples of what Christians have done or are believed to have done, so much so that some people today believe that snake handlers are typical of all Christians.

This reminds me of what Chesterton said at p. 146, “A false ghost disproves the reality of ghosts exactly as much as a forged banknote disproves the existence of the Bank of England—if anything, it proves its existence.

With regard to the third “converging conviction” of unbelievers, that “priests have blighted societies with bitterness and gloom,” would one rather have lived, during the Soviet Communist regime, on the one hand, in Poland, where Catholic priests were powerful agents for the people’s freedom, or in Italy or Ireland where the priesthood was very strong, or, on the other hand, in Russia or East Germany, where there was virtually no freedom? Russia and East Germany had bitterness and gloom in strong measure, but not because of priests.

Today the Church is the only hope for the preservation of freedom in Europe; it is the Church, not government, which resists philosophies and movements that would enslave people.

With regard to Chesterton’s argument for the divinity of Christ based on the *a fortiori* (“how much more”) way in which Jesus spoke—his “curiously gigantesque” language, as Chesterton put it—I am dubious about making such an argument. I am more comfortable, though, with making such an argument based on the images which Christ used in what he said. Apart from the images he used, I think it’s difficult to tell whether the words recorded in the New Testament are the actual words he used.

Author Flannery O’Connor said that it is necessary to shout, to get people’s attention, and the drama that permeates much of what Jesus said publicly may well have been an early example of that “shout”.

We are not as much at a loss in our efforts to know what Jesus actually said, as may first appear. There is a commonality of expression in the Gospels that supports the belief that Jesus really did say these things.

Does Europe possess today the power of self-renewal of which Chesterton spoke at p. 142? The Word of God does indeed enable such renewing, with the two-edged sword of the Word of which Jesus spoke.

Renewal often seems to come only after pain; we tend not to realize the need for renewal until we experience pain.

Christianity is indeed self-renewing. That may not be true in Europe today, though, because of the weakness of the Church there.

The Eucharist is a source of renewal for the Church, and through the Church, for the world, too.

The idea of individual freedom developed in Christian Europe. That freedom is renewing, but that freedom seems to happen only in the Christian world—not in Buddhism, for example.

We are about to see this more, as Europe is in danger of re-entering the Dark Ages. We can be confident, though, that Christianity will provide a bridge that will emerge as a way out of that.

The central point of this chapter is stated on p. 135, where Chesterton sets out to rebut the idea that one could take from Christianity the “common-sense core” and leave aside that which is incomprehensible.

Along the way, Chesterton provides a defense of miracles, which can be summarized this way: Millions of people testify to the occurrence of miracles in their own lives. If their observations about anything other than miracles were important to a lawsuit, their testimony about those observations would be accepted as valid regardless of their status or lack of status. People who say that no miracles can occur say they cannot accept the testimony of those who believe in miracles, because such people are superstitious because they believe in miracles. So, Christians believe in miracles on the basis of testimony. Deniers of miracles disbelieve in miracles because they disbelieve in miracles. It is a stunning example of circularity.

Scientific people do not accept anecdotal evidence, but we live in a world of functional imagination rather than in a world of abstract science. We rely on anecdotal evidence to accept that a chair is a solid, although scientists know that it really isn’t.

Isn’t the question of miracles a red herring?

The question of miracles isn’t the main point of the chapter, which shows up at pp. 147-8, where Chesterton provides what he says is “the far more solid and central ground” for accepting Christianity, and why it is that one cannot just take from Christianity the “common-sense core” and leave aside the remainder: that the Church is a living teacher, through which we can always expect to see some new truth that we have never seen before. What he is saying here, as he has said all along, is that on point after point, after he reached his conclusion about the way things are, he found that the Church had taught that from the beginning. In the light of that series of experiences, Chesterton said he could now accept other things which are taught by the Church but for which he had not yet learned the rational basis.

At pp. 152-3, Chesterton tells of his understanding that joy is meant to be the fundamental thing in mankind, and grief is meant to be the superficial thing—but in the rationalist, materialist world, it’s the other way around. Chesterton contends that because life has meaning, it is a source of adventure and joy, in our service of a God who is shy about disclosing his own mirth.

This proposition is supported by the Scripture which tells us that God created us and called us into marvelous light.