New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12605

Chesterton and Holiness

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This article considers the life and work of the English man of letters G. K. Chesterton in the light of his religious development and especially of the present investigation of possible grounds for his recognition as a 'Servant of God'.

The suggestion of canonizing G. K. Chesterton goes back to at least 1986. The 'revisionist' Tudor historian J. J. ('Jack') Scarisbrick wrote in a letter that year to the *Chesterton Review*: 'We all know that he was an enormously good man as well as an enormous one. My point is that he was more than that. There was a special integrity and blamelessness about him, a special devotion to the good and to justice…. Above all, there was that breathtaking, intuitive (almost angelic) possession of the Truth and awareness of the supernatural which only a truly holy person can enjoy. This was the gift of heroic intelligence and understanding – and of heroic prophecy. He was a giant spiritually as well as physically'.[1] After enquiry was made, in various countries from Italy to Argentina there turned out to be some evidence of 'cultus': that is, some form of veneration of him as a holy man. Following a day-conference at Oxford on 'The Holiness of Chesterton' in 2009, a prayer for his intercession was rapidly translated into Italian and Spanish. The novelist and historian, A.N. Wilson, found the entire notion bizarre. Chesterton had certainly been a wit. He could also be called a 'perceptive (but lightweight) social critic' – but that was about all.[2] Someone so deliberately comic could not be taken seriously as a thinker, much less as a saint. This was a not uncommon opinion. There was also, for some, the question, of his alleged anti-Semitism.

So what shape did his life have, and first of all, how did it begin? In his *Autobiography*, published just after his death, Chesterton addressed the question, capitalizing on the fact that he had become well-known as a defender of dogma and tradition and a critic of philosophical empiricism. 'Bowing down in blind credulity, as is my custom, before mere authority and the tradition of the elders, superstitiously swallowing a story I could not test at the time by experiment or private judgment,

[1] Letter to the Editor, *Chesterton Review* XII. 4 (1986), p. 584.

[2] William Oddie, 'Introduction', in idem. (ed.), *The Holiness of G. K. Chesterton* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2010), pp. 2-3.

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I am firmly of opinion that I was born on the 29th of May 1874 on Campden Hill, Kensington; and baptized according to the formularies of the Church of England in the little church of St George opposite the large Waterworks Tower that dominated the ridge'.[3]

He came from a middle-class family of means who lived, as this passage relates, in west-central London. His parents were political Liberals, in the sense of supporters of the British Liberal Party. Though nominally Anglican they were undoctrinal in religion, attending for the most part a Unitarian chapel where the minister was a Universalist, holding that all human beings are necessarily saved, a comforting idea unless one values the notion of spiritual freedom. His father did as little work as possible, preferring to devote his time to a range of hobbies, especially the designing of toy theatres. By Chesterton's own account in the *Autobiography* the two key themes of his mind as child and boy were *limit* and *wonder*, qualities bound up with his delight in things: both things in particular – in their particularity (which suggests the idea of limit), and also things in general – in their generality (which suggests the idea of wonder). For formal education he was sent to St Paul's School in the City of London, a well-known private school for dayboys. At school he contrived to give an appearance of boredom and incapacity, hoping this would reduce his work-load. He also exhibited the physical clumsiness which was far from being merely appearance and accompanied him throughout life. His excellence as a debater became plain in the context of more informal school activities, such as societies and schoolboy-edited magazines. In view of later anxieties about his attitudes to Jews it is worth noting his close friendship with two Jewish brothers at St Paul's and the documented evidence for his angry reaction to news of Russian pogroms against Jews during his schoolboy period.

Chesterton had gifts of draughtmanship of a high order, and it was assumed he would become a professional artist, a career encouraged by his father despite its modest financial prospects. Entered at the Slade Art School, then part of University College London, he learned little more about drawing than he knew already since his style was fully formed,[4] but he listened to lectures on literature, history, and political economy with some profit. He thought the artistic Impressionism favoured at the Slade encouraged epistemological scepticism, which itself led to moral relativism and ultimately to nihilism, and these 'isms' he bracketed together as attitudes with a common factor: they were hostile to reality. Dabbling in a fourth 'ism', spiritualism: in conversation with a self-confessed nihilist at a college bonfire night he believed he had encountered the diabolic. This experience was a wake-up call,

[3] G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (Thirsk: House of Stratus, 2001 [1936]), p. 1.

[4] See on this topic Alzina Stone Dale, *The Art of G. K. Chesterton* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985).

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which began a process of shaking him free from the pessimistic mood into which he had sunk during the three years of his tertiary studies.

He escaped from pessimism by devising what he termed his own 'rudimentary and makeshift mystical theory', which he summed up in the maxim, anything is 'magnificent compared with nothing'.[5] No doubt his childhood savouring of 'wonder' and 'limit' helped. There is a marvel in sheer existence, in sharing in reality, whatever its contours. Art and religion were meant to 'dig' for what he termed 'this submerged sunrise of wonder; so that a man sitting in a chair might suddenly understand that he was actually alive, and be happy'.[6] He came to see suicide as the worst of sins, an expression of unconditional metaphysical destructiveness. 'The man who kills a man, kills a man. The man who kills himself kills all men; so far as he is concerned he wipes out the world'.[7] In a letter of 1894 to his schoolfriend, Edmund Clerihew Bentley, he gives a hint that the origin of the 'sunrise of wonder' idea was a mystical experience of God, which ended his student period of 'depression and instability'.[8] Whatever the experience was – belonging perhaps to the category of 'natural mysticism' set forth by Maritain in his essay, *L'Expérience naturelle et le vide,*[9] it did not make him an orthodox Christian. Instead he reverted to the simple Unitarian theism of his parental home. But being 'surprised by joy' would serve Chesterton as an informal argument for the existence of God, the *argumentum e gaudio*.[10]

In autumn 1896 a friend at University College – Ernest Hodder Williams of the Hodder and Stoughton publishing family who owned the magazine *The Bookman* – was responsible for Chesterton's change of career from art to literature. Williams commissioned him to review some books on two seventeenth century painters, Velasquez and Poussin. Chesterton now started to work for London publishers, while writing both comic and serious verse. He abandoned the Socialism which he had embraced at University (if not before), finding Socialists arrogant in assuming a Socialist State would know what suited people best. Also in 1896 he met Frances Blogg, a practising Anglo-Catholic, whom he was to marry. Her family lived in the artists' and writers' colony of Bedford Park, west of Hammersmith. The colony boasted

[5] G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, op. cit., p. 58.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Idem., *Orthodoxy* (London: John Lane, 1909 [1908]), p. 130.

[8] William Oddie, 'Introduction', art. cit., p. 13.

[9] Jacques Maritain, 'L'Expérience naturelle et le vide', in idem., *Quatre essais sur l'esprit dans sa condition charnelle* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1939), pp. 132-177. What Maritain had in mind was a touching of 'the substantial *esse* of one's soul and, in that and by that, of the divine Absolute', ibid., p. 164.

[10] Aidan Nichols, O. P., *A Grammar of Consent. The Existence of God in Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), pp. 165-172; idem., *G. K. Chesterton, Theologian* (Manchester, NH: Second Spring, 2009), pp. 107-118.

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a debating club called 'I.D.K.'. The name was a joke because when asked what the initials stood for a member would reply, 'I don't know' which actually was its full title not a confession of ignorance. It was in 'I.D.K.' that Chesterton tried out in public for the first time his home-grown metaphysic, which he summed up in the axiom 'Where there is anything there is God'. He later discovered that, through the notion of *ens*, 'being', it corresponded to the ontology of the thirteenth century Dominican theologian-philosopher, St Thomas Aquinas.[11] This may have some relation to Chesterton's obscure 'mystical' experience at University College. For Maritain, 'natural mysticism' is an experience of God '*inquantum infundens et profundens esse in rebus* [inasmuch as (God) infuses and pours forth being in things]',[12] a 'matter of the divine Absolute as the cause of being, not as giving Itself to be an object of fruition'.[13] The latter ('fruition') implies a sharing in the triune God's intimate life and belongs, accordingly, to the strictly supernatural order.

Was Chesterton, then, to be a philosopher? Not in the academic sense of the word, for sure. After his death, opinion was divided on the question as to whether he was a philosopher in a non-academic sense. An obituary in *The Manchester Guardian* admitted he had 'a profusion of fresh and original ideas' but they reflected his own 'zestful temperament' rather than what the obituarist called 'continuous or connected thought'. On the other hand, his friend, Hilaire Belloc, considered Chesterton a real philosopher, hidden from some by 'his delight in the exercise of words and especially in the comedy of words'.[14] Belloc, to whom Chesterton was introduced in 1900, should be mentioned more than in passing, since their frequent collaboration as controversialists would lead to their conflation as the 'Chesterbelloc', a literary pantomime horse. Both political Liberals (with a capital 'L'), they were thrown together by the so-called Khaki election of 1901 where the main issue was the resumption of the Second Boer War. Both saw the South African war as an imperialistic attack on small nations (Transvaal and the Orange Free State), motivated by international finance in the shape of gold-mining and diamond-mining interests. Chesterton absorbed Belloc's social philosophy, though he never wanted to emulate Belloc's coolly classical English style. Chesterton came to understand that justice is not the highest of the virtues, but justice is 'cardinal', a hinge for morals, nonetheless.

Around 1900 Chesterton started to manage the literary page of the Liberal paper, *The Daily News.* When added to other small contracts, this meant he could afford to marry. In the Late Victorian/Edwardian

[11] See on Chesterton's discovery of metaphysical realism, Aidan Nichols, O. P., *G. K. Chesterton, Theologian*, op. cit., pp. 55-86.

[12] Jacques Maritain, 'L'Expérience naturelle et le vide', art. cit., p. 165.

[13] Ibid., p. 164.

[14] Cited William Oddie, 'Introduction', art. cit., pp. 11-12.

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period, a girl from a middle-class background would have been expected not to work once she was married, so Chesterton needed an income that could support two people – or more of course if they had children, but Frances, despite surgery, was unable to bear. They were wed in 1901 by an Anglo-Catholic priest, Conrad Noel, later famous as the 'Red' vicar of Thaxted in Essex, who flew the Communist flag from the spire of his parish church, celebrated the canonically illegal Sarum Liturgy and encouraged maypole dancing, Corpus Christi processions and other enjoyable para-liturgical activities on the village green.[15] They moved into a rather elegant block of flats in Battersea, Chesterton disliking the notion of a flat but liking the name of the block: 'Overstrand Mansions'. Marriage was pretty essential to Chesterton owing to his mind-boggling absentmindedness in every sphere of life, the consequence of benign neglect by his parents at home. Thus in money matters he would forget he had asked a cab to wait outside and when he came out of a building was reduced to offering the cabbie his wallet with the words, 'Take what you want'. In matters of dress, he was incredibly careless, once coming down to breakfast wearing two ties. When this mistake was pointed out he retorted that it showed 'I give too much attention to dress, not too little'. In matters of travel, a telegram to his wife, 'Am in Market Harborough, where should I be?' became famous, but even crossing a London street could be problematic for him. Sometimes irritating no doubt, occasionally perhaps infuriating, these habitual deficiencies were, in another perspective, signs of detachment from the common touchstones of worldliness. A spiritual director might look for such on a client's 'purgative way'.

In the same year as his marriage, 1901, Chesterton produced his first book of prose, *The Defendant*, consisting of articles he had published in an anti-Boer War Liberal magazine, *The Speaker*, and this really launched his career as a Fleet Street journalist. Reviewers were already complaining about excessive appeal to paradox. In a letter to *The Speaker* he 'justified his use of paradox, not as a literary device but as a necessary tool for understanding the world'.[16] The world has sharply contrasting qualities which must be held in tension. The trope of paradox expresses this in writing.[17] In his introduction to *The Defendant* he dwelt on the theme of Late Victorian and Edwardian pessimism, the so-called *fin de siècle* outlook.[18] Human beings, he said, should

[15] Reginald Groves, *Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement. An Adventure in Christian Socialism* (London: Merlin Press, 1967).

[16] William Oddie, *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 189.

[17] For a fuller discussion, see Aidan Nichols, O. P., *G. K. Chesterton, Theologian,* op. cit., pp. 87-106.

[18] John D. Coates, *Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1984), a study which also covers Chesterton's critique of the Nietzscheans, G. B. Shaw and H. G. Wells, on whom more anon.

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emulate those who were 'indignant not about the badness of existence, but about the slowness of men in realizing its goodness'.[19] The sane optimism that society needs does not depend on an ability to prove that this is the best of all possible worlds, as early modern rationalists, such as Leibniz, had sought to do. Rather, it depends on a capacity to wonder imaginatively at the fact of the world, the sheer gift of existence. In an essay on the fifteenth century Florentine friar, Gerolamo Savonarola, in the 1902 collection, *Twelve Types*, he wrote that appreciation of life requires a 'discipline in pleasure and an education in gratitude', since the hardest of all tasks is to make people 'turn back and wonder at the simplicities they had learned to ignore'.[20] Father Ian Ker, by far Chesterton's most thorough biographer, coming to this subject from a lifetime of research into Cardinal Newman's writing, remarked on Chesterton's philosophical ethos, that the 'emphasis on the importance of imagination reminds one of Newman; but the function of the imagination for Chesterton is not to make the notional and theoretical concrete and real as for Newman but [citing Chesterton himself in *The Defendant*] "to make settled things strange… so as to make facts wonders". In other words [concludes Ker], the imagination is essential for that wonder at existence that underpins optimism'.[21] 'Optimism' may not be quite the word for Chesterton's overall manner of inhabiting the cosmos, but Ker is certainly right to think he sought to subvert personal and civic pessimism as well as social *laisser-faire*.

Through his journalism, and also his unmistakable presence in the Fleet Street area of the City of London – unmistakable owing to his height, the swirling cloak which covered his increasing girth, the tiny pince-nez and flamboyant hat, Chesterton rapidly became a great London character, often compared in this respect with the eighteenth century sage and wit, Samuel Johnson, and in other respects too: humour, absentmindedness, generosity, constant writing in pubs which in Chesterton's case extended also to writing on buses and trains, and in cabs, whether horse-drawn or motorised.

His early essays have a number of shared themes. They hail the common man who is interested not so much in high art, as elites are, but in the world at large: as he put it, 'to common and simple people this world is a work of art though it is, like many great works of art, anonymous'.[22] The essays celebrate the modern city, to whose romantic quality the modern detective story bore witness – it was a genre he would master in his tales of the priest-detective 'Father Brown'. Based on a Scholastically-minded Yorkshire parish priest of Irish birth whom

[19] G. K. Chesterton, *The Defendant* (London: J. M. Dent, 1914 [1901]), p. 14.

[20] Cited in Ian Ker, *G. K. Chesterton. A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 106.

[21] Ibid., p. 84.

[22] G. K. Chesterton, *The Defendant*, op. cit., p. 85.

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Chesterton met for the first time in 1903,[23] Father Brown has only one kind of expertise, knowledge of the human heart. But this is precisely what enables him to rehearse interiorly the role some agent has played and thus to identify the most likely suspect for a given crime.

Chesterton's *Defendant* essays also celebrated marriage. He saw easier divorce as – once again – the result of pessimism: more specifically, a pessimism concerning the weakness and mutability of the self. Lifelong marriage vows are said to be unrealistic. He argued to the contrary that such vows were thoroughly reality-oriented, since '[i]t is the nature of love to bind itself'.[24] He would continue to write on this topic, annoying both libertarians and feminists. Fewer writers have been less hospitable to the (David) Humian heresy of the 'serial self'.

Chesterton defended Christian ethics more generally, over against determinists who appealed to evolutionary theory – in effect, to humanity's affinity with the animal world – so as to justify their denial of free will. Without freedom of the will there could be neither praise nor blame. It would be impossible even to say 'Thank you' to someone for passing the mustard. As he explained in his autobiography, 'It was the secularists who drove me to theological ethics, by themselves destroying any sane or rational possibility of secular ethics'.[25] Last but not least, his essays lauded the Western Christian Middle Ages, which he preferred to the classical world: the mediaeval period had far more extravagant vitality, as its architecture suggests.

All this was in journalism, collected into articles of book length, a practice he continued, to popular demand, till the end of his life. His study of the rather difficult poet, Robert Browning, in 1903, was his first proper book. Its frequent mistakes in citation demonstrated his belief that poetry should always be quoted from memory, since only then would the critic really have made the poems his own. Chesterton praised Browning for his stress on the role of small things in life. Browning's love poetry is the truest ever written because, while it says little about love as such, it 'awakens in every man the memories of that immortal instant when common and dead things had a meaning beyond the power of any dictionary to utter'.[26] In 1904 he wrote a book on the Late Victorian painter, George Frederick Watts, once known as England's Michelangelo, and here, inspired by the clarity of Watts' painterly line, he emphasised the need for dogma, meaning in this context the importance of giving truth clear definition. By now, as his 1905 essay collection, *Heretics*, showed, he had moved on from straightforward theism to a more recognizably Christian

[23] John O'Connor published his reminiscences of their relations in the year following Chesterton's death: *Father Brown on Chesterton* (London: Muller, 1937).

[24] Cited in Ian Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, op. cit., p. 87.

[25] G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, op. cit., p. 115.

[26] Idem., *Robert Browning* (London: Macmillan, 1967 [1903]), p. 49.

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system of belief. 'Dogma' – here the sense of the word is more that of clarity about initial assumptions – is required for human thought to get started, just as metaphysics – which affirms the value of what is – is likewise needed for life to be livable. And the supernatural – understood as the incoming of an order of grace – is required both for thinking that is adequate to reality and for a manner of living that is adequate to the thinking in question. Take away the supernatural and, so Chesterton predicted, what remains will be unnatural. The specifically Christian virtues – faith, hope, charity, and, especially, for Chesterton, humility – are needed to sustain such natural virtues as justice, fortitude, and temperance in order that basic human decencies can be maintained.[27] So, for Chesterton, dogma, metaphysics, and the supernatural form an indispensable triangle within which all other realities find their place.

That implies, of course, that religiously he had moved on, well beyond the 'natural mysticism' of the Slade. His acute sense of the utter dependence of the finite on the Infinite, what the Russian theology of the twentieth century would call the 'intuition of creaturehood',[28] had apparently opened him to the operation of further 'economies' in the cosmic household. Chesterton's profound sense of the demands of the natural law, and his capacity to identify the virtues that serve that law and flourish in its light, may remind the Thomistic observer of the role classically ascribed to the angelic economy: a task of clarifying the intellect and steadying the will where human basics are at stake. (At the close of this essay, the topic of his relation to *angels* will recur.) Salvationally, it is reasonable to suppose that his exemplary docility to the *Creator Spiritus* – and that Spirit's angelic ministers – disposed him to receive graces of conversion of mind and heart which re-actualised the baptismal regeneration undergone in childhood. As the maxim runs, God does not deny his grace to the one who does what is in him. Increasingly, charity and humility emerge as the heroes of his *oeuvre*, an indicator, if Catholic ascetical and mystical theology is anything of worth, that the 'purgative way' is starting to yield place to its 'illuminative' counterpart. That would be an impossible development unless sanctification was underway. The charity and humility in question, of course, must be lived and not simply chronicled in literature – but just this is what Chesterton-observers almost unanimously remarked.

[27] For Chesterton as 'virtue ethicist', see Aidan Nichols, O. P., *G. K. Chesterton, Theologian,* op. cit., pp. 161-182.

[28] '[I]t sounds, this wonderful voice, imperiously whispering: in all of its immeasurableness the world's being does not belong to it, it is *given* to the world', thus Sergei Bulgakov, *Unfading Light. Contemplations and Speculations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 181; 'Creation by its very existence witnesses to and proclaims its creaturehood', thus Georges Florovsky, *Collected Works, III. Creation and Redemption* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1976), p. 45.

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1905, the year he published *Heretics*, also saw the beginning of his novelistic production with the most cryptic of his novels, *The Man who was Thursday.* Its message seems to be that nature is more Godlike than might at first sight appear to be the case, just as seen in certain lights those who are friends can look like fiends. (The novel's sub-title, after all, is 'A Nightmare'.) *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* followed three years later. This is a tragic-comedy where the London district of Notting Hill goes to war against other suburbs. The moral of the novel is that a community could have found a sense of local identity and pride without patriotism degenerating into war and imperialism. In these last years of the reign of Edward VII, he was also writing, more significantly for 'holiness', on Charles Dickens: a book-length study as well as introductions to re-printings of Dickens's fiction, gathered together under the general rubric 'Appreciations and Criticisms'. His 'take' on Dickens was altogether distinctive. Dickens's 'main contention' was the claim that 'to be good and idiotic is not a poor fate, but, on the contrary, an experience of primal innocence, which wonders at all things. Dickens did not know [Chesterton went on], any more than any great man ever knows, what was the particular thing he had to preach. He did not know it; he only preached it. But the particular thing he had to preach was this: That humility is the only possible basis of enjoyment, that if one has no other way of being humble except being poor, then it is better to be poor and enjoy; that if one has no other way of being humble except being imbecile, then it is better to be imbecile and to enjoy'.[29] It was a recommendation of life as a holy fool, a recognized category of sanctity both in Western Catholicism and, more especially, in Eastern Orthodoxy.[30]

His first truly great book, *Orthodoxy*, was published in the same year as *The Man who was Thursday*, 1908, and remains the best example of his controversial writing. He wrote in answer to a challenge from a reviewer of the earlier *Heretics.* Chesterton, said the reviewer, had been quick to criticize other thinkers in a negative way but slow to state his own positive thought, if indeed he possessed any. That thinking, Chesterton now explained, takes as its starting-point the following question, How can one both be astonished at the world and also at home in it? We ought to feel wonder at the world and yet at the same time feel welcome in it. A world which calls for these two forms of response plainly has a meaning of some sort, and this entails a someone to mean that meaning. Such a world is a gift of some kind, so there must be someone to give it. This 'someone' is what all men call 'God', whether they acknowledge the existence of a divinity or

[29] Idem., *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (London: J. M. Dent, 1911), p. 128.

[30] John Saward, *Perfect Fools. Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

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not. Chesterton warned he was not yet ready to discuss the question of who, if anyone, has authority to interpret divine meaning, i.e., what Church, among the many in Christendom competing for attention, had the best right to obedience. Yet, without knowing the answer to that question, the truth of some doctrines is already patent. The most important of these is original sin. The world looks like a play which human actors or directors have partially spoiled; the good has survived some primordial catastrophe. This is the situation the Christian religion addresses. Assaults on that religion come from different viewpoints, but they have a habit of cancelling each other out. For example one critic will consider Christianity too ascetic, compared with Epicureanism, another will consider it not sufficiently ascetic, compared with Buddhism. Both critics, as it happens, are right. Proper Christianity represents a fine balance that avoids with equal success mutually opposing heresies. In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton argued, furthermore, for the superiority of belief in the Trinity over an unqualified monotheism, calling it 'the conception of a sort of liberty and variety existing even in the inmost chamber of the world'.[31] He also commended belief in the Atonement as the ultimate disproof of divine indifference to the human lot: in the bearing of human sin by the Father's Son a cry from the Cross 'confessed that God was forsaken of God',[32] an observation that anticipates the discussion of the Death of the Messiah by the Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar.[33]

These profundities in no way displaced his characteristic humour. After he had published *Orthodoxy* Chesterton found his perfect foil in the Irish playwright and controversialist, George Bernard Shaw, a follower of the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was already in an asylum for lunatics when Chesterton began writing, but translations of his works were influencing Edwardian intellectuals such as Shaw and H.G. Wells, both of whom appealed effectively to the middle- and high-brow public through a combination of philosophical and imaginative prose. With Shaw, this took the form of philosophical 'Prefaces' to plays along with the plays themselves; with Wells it was prose exposition of ideas along with novels – most famously in science fiction. For Nietzsche, if we can perfect genetic inheritance and improve the cultural environment to match the quality of designer babies, we can form the perfect man. For Ian Ker, Chesterton's most memorable reply is his journalistic fantasy 'How I found the Superman' (a piece for *The Daily News*), which retails his 'discovery' of the grotesque but mercifully short-lived offspring of a *mésalliance* between an aristocratic (and anti-*ouvrier*) social worker in London's East End

[31] Idem., *Orthodoxy*, op. cit., p. 249.

[32] Ibid., p. 255.

[33] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama. Theological Dramatic Theory, IV. The Action* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1994), pp. 323-350.

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and a medically qualified eugenicist from the more genteel portions of Suburbia.[34]

In 1909 Chesterton moved from London to Beaconsfield in Buckinghamshire where he would continue to live until his death. This was at Frances's insistence and probably extended his life-span. His heavy-drinking journalist's life-style when combined with obesity was an obvious recipe for early death. But in literary output the pattern established by his London period continued. Once again there were huge numbers of newspaper and magazine articles, many collected into books, and these were punctuated by 'real' books, that is, books written as a unitary whole. *The Victorian Age in Literature*, from 1913, was one of the proper books, an intellectual history of the Victorian age, which Chesterton saw as a series of reactions against a dominant attitude derived from Utilitarianism. Chesterton called that attitude 'a hard rationalism in religion, a hard competition in economics, a hard egoism in ethics'; but with 'embarrassment', as a 'gentleman in trade showing ladies over his factory'.[35] In the 1914 novel, *The Flying Inn*, he prophesied the rise of multiculturalism and the growing influence of Islam. His epic poems of this period, *The Battle of the White Horse*, on Alfred of Wessex repelling the Danes, and *Lepanto*, on the European naval victory over the Ottoman Turks, were meant to affirm historic Christian civilisation and became well-known in a culture where the memorizing of verse formed a normal part of education. *Lepanto* was recited by troops in the trenches in the 1914–18 War, and a generation later *The Ballad of the White Horse* was cited by *The Times* in a famous leader at the time of the disastrous fall of Crete to the Germans in May 1941, and then again (a different section of the poem) at the first British victory of the war at El Alamein a year and a half later.

Chesterton was himself much involved politically in the years 1911 to 1918. During the Marconi Scandal of 1911 to 1913, in collaboration with his brother, Cecil, he attacked financial corruption in the Liberal Party, leaving the party at the start of that period over Lloyd George's National Insurance Act, which mirrored the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's attempts to create a State alternative to Socialism. After 1914 he wrote propaganda against German ('Prussian') atrocities, notably in Belgium. When peace returned he took up the cause of Distributism, the socio-economic theory which advocates the widest possible distribution of the means of production in a society of small farmers, manufacturers, and craftsmen, as well as small retailers. Though he was still an Anglican, this entailed alignment with the papal social teaching of the previous decades. Distributists argued that not only Socialism but also welfare Capitalism are tending towards a

[34] See Ian Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, op. cit., pp. 237-238.

[35] G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1925), p. 37.

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'servile State' where most people, in one way or another, were clients or dependents of the State. The proper goal of civil policy should be the widest spread of property, especially productive property, which alone can guarantee the citizen's real and effective and not merely nominal or legal freedom. Originating in the outlook of the Hebrew prophets, this remains a *cantus firmus* in the rather variable music of Catholic social teaching.

In 1920 Chesterton went via Egypt to Palestine, then administered by the British under a mandate from the League of Nations. In *The New Jerusalem* he described Islam as a desert religion that lacks the humane complexity that comes from comparison; this, he thought, explains the potential of Islam for fanaticism. On Judaism he set out a case for Zionism on the terms stated by the Balfour Declaration, namely, without prejudice to existing groups already living in Palestine. But he wanted Jewish settlement in the Middle East to be complemented by self-governing Jewish enclaves in Western societies. He had two accusations against Jews: cosmopolitanism, a consequence of not having a fatherland, and the disproportionate role wealthy Jews played in international finance. It has to be admitted that both themes figured in the rise of political anti-Semitism in Europe. One of his strangest ideas was that all Jews should wear Arab dress. This was found especially offensive when, after Chesterton's death, the authorities in German-occupied Europe insisted that Jews wear a distinctive yellow star of David. Yet Chesterton lived long enough to see and denounce the return of racist theories in the first three years of Hitler's Reich. That must be set against the more damaging features of his utterances on this topic.

By 1920, though Chesterton attended Anglican services in Alexandria and Jerusalem with his wife, and addressed the Anglo-Catholic Congress in London's Albert Hall that year, he had come to view the Church of England as what he termed a 'porch', meaning a way of entry to a Church rather than in the fullest sense a Church itself.[36] He was deterred from becoming a Roman Catholic for another two years, waiting until his wife came to the same conclusion as he had, which she did at more personal cost, given her greater spiritual investment in Anglo-Catholicism. In articles in the English Dominican journal, *Blackfriars*, for 1922 and 1923 Chesterton set out his reasons for conversion to Rome.[37] The most straightforward were twofold: the

[36] Ian Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, op. cit., p. 428.

[37] G. K. Chesterton, 'Where All Roads Lead, I. The Youth of the Church', *Blackfriars* III. 31 (1922), pp. 371-376; III. 32 (1922), pp. 463-469; 'Where All Roads Lead, II. The Case for Complexity', *Blackfriars* III. 33 (1922), pp. 491-495; 'Where All Roads Lead, III. The History of a Half-truth', *Blackfriars* III. 34 (1923), pp. 555-560; III. 35 (1923), pp. 617-622; 'Where All Roads Lead, IV. A Note on Comparative Religion', *Blackfriars* III. 36 (1923), pp.703-707; III. 37 (1923), pp. 737-741.

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Roman Catholic Church's claims were true, and it could forgive sins. Other reasons were more subtle. Catholicism was the one creed that was not ashamed of being complicated. It was rich in having a number of ideas in reserve, which explained its power of historical recovery. In order to have this power it was necessary to have the whole – unlike High Church Anglicans who had only taken parts. Again, he thought it dishonourable to accept the Reformation and then restore one by one traditions the Reformers had rejected, as High Churchmen were doing. Finally (this was not an example of a subtle reason, however) the Roman Catholic Church was a Church with a clear mind. On a lecture tour of North America He told the *Toronto Daily Star*, 'I have no use for a Church which is not a Church militant, which cannot order battle and fall in line and march in the same direction'.[38]

Chesterton's most important Catholic books now followed: in 1923, *St Francis of Assisi*; in 1925, *The Everlasting Man*, which in part, at least, was a response to H. G. Wells' *The Outline of History*, which ran from human beginnings to the present; in 1931, *Chaucer*, and in 1933, *St Thomas Aquinas*, rated by the historian of mediaeval philosophy, Etienne Gilson, as the most acute short examination of Thomism ever written.[39] Theologically, *The Everlasting Man* is his best work. Here Chesterton argued that humanity looks unique as viewed against other animals, which can neither paint nor laugh, just as Christianity looks unique when viewed against other religions, which cannot rival a God who became a child. In a cave at Bethlehem, the myth of a God who was human became fact – as C. S. Lewis, who admired Chesterton, liked to formulate the Incarnation claim.[40] In the Church, myth, that is, imaginative experiment, and philosophy, the work of reason, finally meet – as Balthasar, who had read Chesterton, put it in the fourth volume of his theological aesthetics, *The Glory of the Lord*.[41] *The Everlasting Man* is a diptych consisting of anthropological and Christological panels.[42]

Personally, Chesterton practiced his religion assiduously though not fanatically.

> 'Although a habitual late riser, on Sundays and weekday Holydays of Obligation Chesterton would force himself to get up early, as there was then only one early morning Mass at Beaconsfield, and on one occasion he was heard to say, "What but religion would bring us to such a pass,"

[38] Ian Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, op. cit., p. 489.

[39] See Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1944), p. 525.

[40] C. S. Lewis, 'Myth became Fact', in idem., *Undeceptions. Essays on Theology and Ethics* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1971), pp. 39-43.

[41] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics, IV. The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1989), p. 216.

[42] Aidan Nichols, O. P., *G. K. Chesterton, Theologian,* op. cit., pp. 127-131 (anthropology), 150-159 (Christology).

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> and on another, "Only the devil could have done this to me." But he never missed a Holyday of Obligation either at home or abroad. He always dedicated the day's work to the glory of God, "by a cross on the top of the age, and even on the line below his signature, and by a sign of the cross made as he entered his study". According to his secretary Dorothy Collins, he did not go often to confession, but when he did he could be heard all over the church'.[43]

Chesterton died of heart and kidney failure on 14 June 1936. The friar, Vincent McNabb, a fervent Distributist and a good theologian, was at his death-bed. On leaving, he picked up Chesterton's pen and kissed it. McNabb was rather given to melodramatic gestures. Their intention is usually obvious. He meant to indicate the holiness of a lay 'doctor of the Church'.

William Oddie, who has written the best study of Chesterton's early period, thinks Chesterton's holiness was based on faith, hope, and charity. As to *faith*, once Chesterton discovered Christianity as not just a cultural phenomenon but the expression of divine truth, which in effect he did in 1903, it transformed his view of all real things. As he wrote that year, 'With this idea once inside our heads a million things become transparent as if a lamp were lit behind them'.[44] As to *hope*, attack on decadence and pessimism, which are enemies of hope, was the motor driving much of his writing. He ascribed decadence and pessimism to the disappearance of gratitude for the cosmos, gratitude for existence itself. By contrast, Chesterton's 'heart was filled by a hope that welled up from his unfailing gratitude for the gift of life'.[45] And as to *charity*, that was apparent in his controversy with the followers of the doctrine of the Superman where a hope of sorts was expressed by his opponents, but could only be a false orientation to the future since, through the importance it gave to eugenics, it lacked charity towards existing humankind. His own charity embraced his opponents, whose errors he hated but whom he loved for themselves. Shaw testified after his death, 'Nothing could have been more generous than his treatment of me'.[46]

For Ian Ker, Chesterton's *humour* is essential for grasping Chesterton's concept of holiness and how Chesterton himself was a saint.[47] In Chesterton's view, there can be no humility without humour and no humour without humility. One has to be able to laugh at oneself, which requires humility, before laughing at anything else. Humour and

[43] Ian Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, op. cit., pp. 545-546.
[44] Cited William Oddie, 'Introduction', art. cit., p. 6.
[45] Ibid., p. 9.
[46] Cited ibid.
[47] Ian Ker, 'Humour and Holiness in Chesterton', in William Oddie (ed.), *The Holiness of G. K. Chesterton*, op. cit., pp. 36-53.

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humility are the two great weapons against the pride that lies at the root of original sin, the aboriginal human catastrophe.

The Oxford priest-theologian, John Saward, thinks that Chesterton followed (albeit unwittingly) a version of the so-called 'Little Way' recommended by St Thérèse of Lisieux, a French Carmelite nun born in 1873, a year before him, and canonised during his lifetime. Signs of it were not only his humility but his understanding of children and the centrality he accorded the mystery of Christmas, or what Saward calls 'the littleness of God incarnate'.[48] As Saward admits, however, Chesterton is on record as unenthusiastic about this saint whom his wife greatly admired.

Oddie, Ker, and Saward were born far too late to have known Chesterton. What did those who knew him personally think? In *Return to Chesterton*, Maisie Ward, his first biographer, set out to gather some personal testimonies from those still alive in 1951. The actor, Rann Kennedy, who had been his neighbour in Overstrand Mansions, had the most interesting comment in the perspective of Chesterton's holiness. He said: 'We must explain him like the hermits. So obviously, burningly led by the Holy Ghost that he had no time to think of his own soul's salvation… Gilbert had innocence, simplicity, down-in-the-dirt humility, he had an excessive calm of soul… Gilbert, busy with the other world, was ministered to by angels like Our Lord'.[49] One might think that reference to angels 'over the top', but strangely enough the adjectival form, 'angelic', occurred in Jack Scarisbrick's statement about Chesterton's holiness from which this article began.

In 2009 the Durham historian Sheridan Gilley proposed Chesterton as the patron saint of journalists. Chesterton's dates, 1874 to 1936, coincide with the rise of newspapers to the status of a Third Estate in Britain, but Chesterton was dissatisfied with Fleet Street. As Gilley explains, his 'very style, its verbal brilliancy, its evocation of the strangeness of things, its love of paradox, its genius for metaphor, was directed at the flabbiness of contemporary journalistic prose and its substitution for the awe and wonder of the cosmos of a false flat view of the external world'.[50] There is, Gilley went on, a real need for a saint for journalists. The popular press has become largely entertainment, while the serious press, like most of the high culture, is dominated by an elite that is hostile to Christianity. Yet despite their huge influence, journalists have currently a low reputation, ranking towards the bottom

[48] John Saward,'Chesterton's Sanctity: The Spirit of Childhood and the Metaphysics of Wonder', in William Oddie (ed.), *The Holiness of Chesterton*, op. cit., pp. 20-35, and here at p. 26. For an anthology of excerpts see: G. K. Chesterton, *The Spirit of Christmas*, ed. Marie Smith (London: Xanadu, 1984).

[49] Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1952), p. 237.

[50] Sheridan Gilley, 'Chesterton: The Journalist as Saint', in William Oddie (ed.), *The Holiness of G. K. Chesterton*, op. cit., pp. 102-123, and here at pp. 108-109.

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of the hierarchy of social respect along 'with estate agents and politicians', to cite Gilley again. Chesterton's writings are still often quoted but almost always this is by fellow journalists, not by academics. So there could be a response.

In July 2013 the bishop of Northampton, in whose diocese Beaconfield lies, began the process of opening Chesterton's cause. If it is successful, he would be the second English saint called Gilbert and of the two the more likely to survive in the popular mind.

In August 2019 Bishop Peter Doyle announced he had declined to proceed, giving as reasons the lack of local cultus, the absence of a pattern of personal spirituality in Chesterton's life, and the suggestion of anti-Semitism. Internet images appeared showing Chestertonians massed at the writer's grave. Competent students offered to exhibit the 'pattern' in question. The five hundred page study by Ann Farmer, *Chesterton and the Jews: Friend, Critic, Defender*, if it had reached the bishop, was evidently insufficient to sway him.[51]

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[51] Ann Farmer, *Chesterton and the Jews: Friend, Critic, Defender* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2015).

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