New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12147

Comment: *GKC*

Orthodoxy came out in 1908, dedicated to his mother, Marie-Louise née Grosjean, Swiss though since her mother came from Aberdeen that is why he got his second name: Gilbert Keith Chesterton, born in 1874, was 34 years of age. It's surely the best single book by any Christian apologist in modern times. Years later, in 1922, he became a Catholic. For decades now, the Chesterton Society, an international body with representation well beyond the English-speaking Catholic community, has campaigned for his beatification. In 1995, for instance, a letter to Cardinal Basil Hume from Argentina signed by politicians, diplomats and clergy, including Jorge Bergoglio's predecessor as archbishop of Buenos Aires, called for the 'initiation of the formal procedures towards the canonization of Gilbert Keith Chesterton'. He is remembered liturgically on 13 June by the Episcopal Church (USA), a feast adopted provisionally at their 2009 General Convention. With such books as *Heretics* (1905) and *The Everlasting Man* (1925), as well as *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton counts incontestably as the greatest lay Christian thinker in the English-speaking world of last century. As every Thomist knows, the great French medievalist Etienne Gilson regarded *St Thomas Aquinas* (1933) as 'without possible comparison the best book ever written on St Thomas'.

There are issues, in the way to beatification. Chesterton was among the first to denounce Hitler's rise to power. He did, however, believe there was a 'Jewish Problem' in Europe. In Britain, granting that a Jew might become Prime Minister (after all Disraeli was, albeit a Christian), he argued bizarrely that 'every Jew must be dressed like an Arab [. . .] The point applies to any Jew, and to our own recovery of healthier relations with him. The point is that we should know where we are; and he would know where he is, which is in a foreign land'. In several articles in *G.K.'s Weekly* he carried his love of irony well beyond a joke. In 'The Judaism of Hitler' (1933), for example, he maintained that 'Hitlerism is almost entirely of Jewish origin'. More paradoxically still, in 'The Crank' (1934), we read: 'If there is one outstanding quality in Hitlerism it is its Hebraism', indeed 'the new Nordic Man has all the worst faults of the worst Jews: jealousy, greed, the mania of conspiracy, and above all, the belief in a Chosen Race'. In *The Everlasting Man*, medieval stories about Jews ritually killing Christian children might plausibly have some historical basis, Chesterton says. He would not be the first candidate for beatification with a somewhat ambivalent record about the 'Jewish Problem'.

© 2015 The Dominican Council. Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2015, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While he has an attractive sense of the natural roots of religion, Chesterton does not hold back his dislike of non-Christian traditions. In expounding the doctrine of the Trinity in *Orthodoxy*, for instance, he contends that 'The complex God of the Athanasian Creed may be an enigma for the intellect; but He is far less likely to gather the mystery and cruelty of a Sultan than the lonely god of Omar or Mahomet': 'out of the desert, from the dry places and the dreadful suns, come the cruel children of the lonely God; the real Unitarians who with scimitar in hand have laid waste the world' (Chesterton was born into a less than enthusiastic Unitarian family; of course there was an Ottoman Sultan in 1908). Chesterton is as unecumenical about Buddhism as about Islam, though much less censorious: 'introspection, self-isolation, quietism, social indifference — Tibet'. He makes fun, in this chapter, of self-styled 'liberals' who prefer any religion to Christianity, especially Mrs Annie Besant (1847–1933), socialist, theosophist, women's rights activist, writer and orator and supporter of Irish and Indian self-rule — in her own way as significant a figure at the time as Chesterton himself.

As he recounts his 'elephantine adventures in pursuit of the obvious' — in this book which, as he says, is a joke against himself — Chesterton's focus is on 'the main problem for philosophers': 'How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it? How can this queer cosmic town, with its many-legged citizens, with its monstrous and ancient lamps, how can this world give us at once the fascination of a strange town and the comfort and honour of being our own town?' — 'that mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar which Christendom has rightly named romance'. 'We need so to view the world as to combine the idea of wonder and an idea of welcome', as he goes on to say.

According to Gilson, he was 'one of the deepest thinkers who ever existed': that would not make him a saint but perhaps it means that Chesterton is already a Doctor of the Church?

Fergus Kerr OP

© 2015 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12147 Published online by Cambridge University Press