

THE *CHESTERTON* *REVIEW* AT 40

AN APPRECIATION

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The year 2014 saw not only the 140th anniversary of the birth of the writer and critic G.K. Chesterton, but also the 40th anniversary of the unique and in some ways indispensable journal devoted to him: the *Chesterton Review*, now published under the auspices of Seton Hall University but for many years published by a small Catholic college in the wilds of Saskatchewan, Canada. British author John Beaumont noted recently that it is due to consistent interest in America and Canada that Chesterton remains known at all, since interest in Chesterton's native Britain has not reached the same level, much less the attention he received during his lifetime, when he was one of England's best-known writers. The *Chesterton Review* has been an important reason for that sustained interest. Two or three, now, generations of readers have discovered Chesterton through either the *Review* or projects such as the

republishing by Ignatius Press of Chesterton's *Collected Works* (now running to well over thirty volumes), among other presses keeping his work in print. Not to mention the various Chesterton societies. The publication of the 40th-anniversary issues, then, is an appropriate time to reflect on the success and legacy of the *Review*, and that of Chesterton himself.

The first and most obvious fact about the *Review* is its physicality: it is massive, with issues regularly weighing in at more than four hundred pages, in seeming rebuke to modernity's short attention spans. Yet skimming through them reveals that the issues are not as imposing as their bulk may suggest (comparisons with the famously rotund Chesterton are almost irresistible). Each contains essays, reviews, articles, excerpts, and poems of every type, length, and description, such that one can dip into each issue almost

at random and find something worth reading for the time available. Those typically include a selection of original Chesterton pieces (many of which over the years were first rediscovered here), commentaries on Chesterton, book reviews, and a vast miscellany of what can only be called Chestertoniana: reports from the worldwide fellowship of Chestertonians (since 2006, the *Review* has been translated into Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese), Chesterton-related events, mentions of Chesterton in publications or speeches across the world, and reprints of important essays or reviews. So, for instance, one recent issue includes a review by Ian Buruma of a selection of Simon Leys's essays, *The Hall of Uselessness*, which discusses Chesterton, an excerpt from an important piece on religion by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks of Great Britain, and reports from Chesterton conferences in Michigan, Australia, and Gibraltar.

All this attention might have been a little too much for Chesterton himself. In his own lifetime, Chesterton was well known for laughing at himself and taking delight in the sometimes-ridiculous figure he assumed. People who take themselves too seriously, he wrote, are most likely found in asylums. Nevertheless, the compendium of information provided in each issue of the *Review* serves several purposes. The first, of course, is to further interest in Chesterton's life and thought and to bring many of his lesser-known works to a public audience. The second is to expand the audience for writers in addition to its titular subject. Indeed, one of the primary goals in founding the *Review* was to return to public debate lost writers (most, but not all, Catholic) who engaged with and were influenced by Chesterton. The *Review* has long argued that the central questions that occupied Chesterton occupy us still.

The interest in Chesterton has spilled over into many important figures, some little known and almost forgotten before being found again by able editors of the *Review*. Thus, the *Review* has featured special issues devoted to Maurice Baring, Hilaire Belloc, Georges Bernanos, and Christopher Dawson. The Canadian influence is seen, among other things, in the 1985 special edition dedicated to the Canadian philosopher George Grant. The *Review* has also been willing to go further afield, with important pieces on non-Western cultures, such as a special issue on Japanese Catholic writers.

The dedication of much of each issue to the activities and writings of the contemporary scene that have a Chestertonian flavor suggests the third important purpose served by the *Review*. Over the past four decades, a broader theme, always implicit but made more clear over time, is in the nature of the *Review* itself. For its title indicates not only that it is a review of and about a person named G.K. Chesterton, in the way there are scholarly journals devoted to James Joyce and Jane Austen. It is also a *Chesterton* review—that is, it is a journal of a particular kind, one that looks at the issues of the day through the perspective of its namesake and his body of work.

What that perspective might be takes a little unpacking, since the legacy of Chesterton is in some respects too broad to summarize. Writers such as Ian Ker have praised Chesterton as a stylist, to be ranked with John Henry Cardinal Newman in his mastery of English prose. Chesterton is to many the prophet of common sense, who presciently saw the troubles of our contemporary times, in works such as *What's Wrong with the World*. For others he is the path of conversion to Catholicism, a path he himself took, and representative of a certain type of Catholic culture. The minority status of Catholics in Chesterton's time

has made him a perfect model for Catholics who feel themselves beleaguered in today's secular world. Many elites feel today about believers the way Virginia Woolf felt when she learned of Eliot's conversion: "I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God."¹ Chesterton's preferred mode of engagement—generally uncompromising but merry and charitable to his enemies—has been for some an appealing method of presenting the faith. For still others, he is the persuasive proponent of that economic-cultural amalgam called distributism, which rejected both the socialism and capitalism of his age in favor of broad ownership of property. At all times, however, he has found admirers across the ideological spectrum, another reason he remains uniquely relevant.

Chesterton thus occupies a curious position in the modern intellectual landscape. In the years leading up to the founding of the *Review*, he began to grow in stature among certain figures on the American Right. Garry Wills, then a conservative, wrote an important early book, *Chesterton, Man and Mask*, in 1961, and Chesterton was a reference for both William F. Buckley Jr. and Russell Kirk. The latter, for example, often quoted Chesterton's dictum on the "democracy of the dead" as part of his own defense of the importance of tradition and inherited wisdom. Chesterton's dazzling use of paradox aligned with the view of some postwar conservatives that they were at an angle to the modern world and that Chesterton's ability to pierce the nostrums of the age through paradox remained sorely needed. Books such as *Napoleon of Notting Hill* illustrated a defense of locality and "smallness" that conservatives have continued to find appealing (as have others; as one issue of the *Review* reveals, Lloyd George distributed the book to members of his cabinet).

But his fortunes have not always been even. Chesterton's position among the Right changed first, becoming more of an ideological check box, and then not even that. As Chesterton expert Dale Ahlquist has noted, by the time the *Review* was founded, the presence of Chesterton in public debate was minimal; he was "in eclipse."² Chesterton simply seemed further away from the challenges of the Cold War; his quixotic defense of small communities seemed to have little bearing on the worldwide struggle against communism and the emergence of a truly global capitalist order. In these years, Chesterton risked becoming simply a cult in some corners of the Catholic world, with no real connection to our own. And beginning in the 1980s, those conservatives who had come of age in the 1950s and who were within a generation of Chesterton's death were themselves passing from the scene, and with them the force of the Anglophilia and quasi-reactionary Catholicism that had energized many early conservatives.

But the *Review* endured, expanding its reach into different countries and building a groundswell of interest in Chesterton that now seems likely not to abate. So if at this point it seems that the reputation of Chesterton is assured, much of that is due to the *Review* and its longtime editor, Father Ian Boyd, CSB (along with Seton Hall history professor Dermot Quinn). Himself a noted expert on Chesterton's fiction, Father Boyd, a member of the somewhat exotic (to American Catholics at least) Order of St. Basil, has done more than any other living person to make the case for Chesterton. Father Boyd almost could not help being a messenger for Chesterton: his father was a subscriber to *G. K.'s Weekly*, Chesterton's own newspaper.

So as it enters its fifth decade, the *Review* encounters a world where Chesterton is again quoted and argued with, even if the heirs

of his ideological opponents too remain. Chesterton is being quoted in prominent places and his depth as a stylist and thinker is again being recognized, for example by recent books from academic presses. Perhaps the greatest example of his renewed prominence is the attempt by some of quite different sensibilities to co-opt him.

Thus, the writer Adam Gopnik, in an essay for the *New Yorker*,³ tries to fashion a Chesterton for the secular elite. Gopnik, a professed admirer of Chesterton, values him as a literary stylist and a first-rate aphorist; he even acknowledges a certain reasonableness, given Chesterton's commitments, of his turning toward Rome. But Gopnik tries to split him into a Chesterton amenable to liberals and a Chesterton who can safely be consigned to the reactionary, neofascist depths. In fact he argues that Chesterton's politics, and his perceived anti-Semitism, spoils the whole project. Gopnik asserts that Chesterton's constant state of wonder somehow renders him less serious as a thinker:

Chesterton writing about the Church is like someone who has just made his first trip to the post office. Look, it delivers letters for the tiny price of a stamp! You write an address on a label, and they will send it anywhere, literally anywhere you like, across a continent and an ocean, in any weather! The fact that the post office attracts time-servers, or has produced an occasional gun massacre, is only proof of the mystical enthusiasm that the post office alone provides! Glorifying the post office beyond what the postman can bear is what you do only if you're new to mail.

But this overly sophisticated position overplays Gopnik's hand. Chesterton, of course, wrote this way not only about the Church but about the post office itself, in fact. It *is*

amazing we can post letters, and the decision to post a letter, which along with marriage Chesterton calls one of the few remaining "irrevocable" decisions, is an act of romance. In other words, Chesterton asks us to wonder why there is a post office (which he calls a "sanctuary of words" in *Heretics*) rather than nothing, which is simply the entry point to the deepest philosophical question of why there is anything rather than nothing. We should look at the post office with wonder, Chesterton tells us, as we look with wonder at any aspect of creation, and not with the attitude of a Gopnik, who disdains to think of such things, or if he does, thinks only that such magnificent operations are there for his personal benefit.

The basic facts of Chesterton's life are well known. Born in 1874 to an upper-middle-class family with Unitarian leanings, Chesterton studied art at the Slade School, where his modest liberal progressivism received a shock that changed his life. The details of his encounter at the school remain unclear to this day, but they shook him deeply, almost, as he says, to the point of madness. Father Boyd recounts that Chesterton's experiences in the 1890s had brought him in contact with true nihilists, who showed him a spiritual abyss from which he ultimately recoiled.

He later was to work through this madness in his novel *The Man Who Was Thursday*, subtitled *A Nightmare*, published the same year as *Orthodoxy*. Chesterton learned in this period in a very personal way that evil was not simply the absence of goodness but what he called in his *Autobiography* a "positive badness" for which his mental outlook and upbringing to that point had not prepared him.⁴ It took him some years to recover; by the time he came to write *Thursday*, he had been happily married for

seven years, had found some commercial success, and was finding stability in his wife's Anglo-Catholicism. Chesterton had begun a journey that lead him away from the views of his fellow art students and the more fashionable elements of British society to what he first called simply orthodoxy, then into the Roman Catholic Church.

His first books were largely biographies—of Tennyson, Thackeray, and Dickens—until 1904, when he published his first significant work of fiction, *Napoleon of Notting Hill*. This defense of what may be called the greatness of small things has become one of Chesterton's hallmarks. In 1900 Chesterton had made the acquaintance of Hilaire Belloc, who would have an important influence on his work. He also became good friends at this time with Father John O'Connor, who was the reported inspiration for the series of *Father Brown* detective stories, the first book of which was published in 1911.

Chesterton became a Catholic in 1922, although as he wrote in his classic *Orthodoxy* (1908), he was already inclining toward an orthodox Christianity but had not known what to call it. *Orthodoxy* was a companion volume to his 1905 book, *Heretics*, where Chesterton happily skewered various thinkers of his day for their rejection not just of orthodoxy but of even the conviction that finding truth is important. "There is one thing that is infinitely more absurd and unpractical than burning a man for his philosophy. This is the habit of saying philosophy does not matter, and this is done universally in the twentieth century. . . . [A man] may turn over and explore a million objects, but he must not find that strange object, the universe; for if he does he will have a religion, and be lost." This rejection of true philosophy, the search for wisdom, has also corrupted language. As Chesterton notes, the word *heretic* is now a badge of honor rather than a mark of shame.

"The word 'heresy' not only no longer means being wrong; it practically means being clear-headed and courageous. The word 'orthodoxy' not only no longer means being right; it practically means being wrong."

In *Orthodoxy*, he was to propose his own philosophy, which he foolishly believed was original but that he soon found was merely an "inferior copy" of the Christian tradition of the West. In his famous opening passage, he writes that "I wish to set forth my faith as particularly answering this double spiritual need, the need for that mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar which Christendom has rightly named romance." This emphasis on the newness of the familiar is a regular Chestertonian theme. Against its cultured despisers, Chesterton's Christian orthodoxy took the wonder of creation as its basic premise.

In essays and books such as *What's Wrong with the World* (1910), Chesterton presciently limned the errors of the modern age, so much more pointedly than the paladins of endless secular progress, who then and now dominate contemporary debate. That book, in particular, continues to inspire and surprise with its prophetic insights on issues from economics and property, to its bracing defense of the "wildness of domesticity." Among others, the Catholic media critic Marshall McLuhan said that the book changed his way of thinking about religion.⁵

And what is wrong with the world for Chesterton? "What is wrong with the world is that we do not ask what is right." In other words, the evils are plain, but to solve them we must know what is the good that will correct these evils. As Chesterton put it in his opening chapter, "The Homelessness of Man,"

We agree about the evil; it is about the good that we should tear each other's eyes out. We all admit that a lazy

aristocracy is a bad thing. We should not by any means all admit that an active aristocracy would be a good thing. We all feel angry with an irreligious priesthood; but some of us would go mad with disgust at a really religious one. Everyone is indignant if our army is weak, including the people who would be even more indignant if it were strong. The social case is exactly the opposite of the medical case. We do not disagree, like doctors, about the precise nature of the illness, while agreeing about the nature of health. On the contrary, we all agree that England is unhealthy, but half of us would not look at her in what the other half would call blooming health.

At a stroke, Chesterton anticipates—and refutes—the proponents of what is sometimes called the neutrality of liberalism. Such a program focuses on means, rather than ends, process, rather than substance: thus American political culture is inundated with talk of rights, but little discussion of what rights might be for. We have built remarkable bureaucracies to solve problems, but without providing a description of what solutions to those problems would look like. Joined to this lack of what may be called (but Chesterton does not) teleology is an ideology of innovation. The reformers in Chesterton’s day were convinced that the future held endless possibility and was to be preferred over the dysfunctional present or the boring past. He writes:

We often read nowadays of the valor or audacity with which some rebel attacks a hoary tyranny or an antiquated superstition. There is not really any courage at all in attacking hoary or antiquated things, any more than in offering to fight one’s grandmother. The really courageous man

is he who defies tyrannies young as the morning and superstitions fresh as the first flowers. The only true free-thinker is he whose intellect is as much free from the future as from the past. He cares as little for what will be as for what has been; he cares only for what ought to be.

Chesterton applies his analysis to mistakes modern reformers make about man, woman, and child, and concludes with “the Home of Man.” His focus on the family unit is crucial because for Chesterton the family is the center of human society, and we must understand what the family is before we can help it. He defends the family against both the socialists who would end the family in favor of the state, as well as the capitalists, who would destroy it in the name of individualism. Indeed, in his incisive parable about Hudge the socialist and Gudge the capitalist, both positions amount to the same thing in terms of their damage to the family.

Chesterton confronted liberalism in its heyday, when progressives thought they were at the vanguard of a new world. Tradition and religion were hidebound and destined to disappear. Chesterton criticized the illusions of social engineers, capitalist economic redistribution, a fetish for technology, and a misplaced reliance on the moral authority of science. But where Chesterton could at least invoke the common history and morals of the West in his debates with progressives, today that kind of common language has almost been lost. Chesterton used his amazing facility for paradox and wordplay, on display in every page of *What’s Wrong with the World*, to showcase the flaws in modern ideology. But Chesterton was as concerned to remind the West that it is as important to know what is right with the world as it is to know what is wrong.

As Adam Schwartz points out, Chester-

ton serves as a turning-point figure in British Catholicism. He looks back toward Newman and the Oxford Movement but also toward that new generation of Catholic writers that Schwartz has dubbed “the Third Spring,” which included figures such as Dawson and David Jones. Chesterton connects them both through personal influence or through his world. Dawson, for example, credited Chesterton’s poem *Ballad of the White Horse* for “the breath of life to this period for me when I was fed up with Stubbs and Oman and the rest of them.”⁶ The poem inspired Dawson to knock down the edifice of “Whig history,” which portrayed history as proceeding from the irrational ages of religion to ages of reason or science, with the Whig historians placing their own civilization at the apex.

The weakness Gopnik thinks he perceives is one strong theme that the *Review* has emphasized. Wonder at creation is in a sense the center of a Chestertonian outlook. From that follows Chesterton’s love of the earthly things of life and how those connect to the transcendent, from his defense of the family to his preference for the little and the local over the big and the distant. He felt that those who saw only the abstract were seeing only half, and not necessarily the better half, of human existence.

But the *Review* has also maintained a strong interest in the application of Chesterton’s insights to contemporary problems. For example, there is that question of distributism; the *Review* was essentially made the manner in which Chesterton and others such as Father Vincent McNabb analyzed economic questions relevant again. There are now other journals devoted to what Chesterton and his friends called “distributism,” and the return of a specifically Christian way of looking at contemporary economics owes much to Chesterton and therefore to the *Review*. In

What’s Wrong with the World, Chesterton called for a new way of thinking about economics. This would require a renewed focus on property, but not the acquisitive property of the capitalist or the socialized property of the socialist, but rather a widely distributed property for the citizenry as a whole.

Property is the keystone for him because it enables participation in the divine act of creation. “Property is merely the art of democracy. It means that every man should have something that he can shape in his own image, as he is shaped in the image of heaven. But because he is not God, but only a graven image of God, his self-expression must deal with limits; properly with limits that are strict and even small.” He realizes that some revolution in property ownership is unlikely, though it may happen. Instead, he writes that “there are two ways in which it [distribution of property] could be done, a cold administration by quite detached officials, which is called Collectivism, or a personal distribution, so as to produce what is called Peasant Proprietorship.” Thus, he writes, “the Socialist says that property is already concentrated into Trusts and Stores: the only hope is to concentrate it further in the State.” Capitalists, on the other hand, seek to concentrate it in a few hands only, preferably their own.

Chesterton acknowledges that he is talking about ends and not necessarily the means. It was not until 1926 that Chesterton published *The Outline of Sanity* as a kind of blueprint and defense for distributism as a viable social, political, and economic program. Unfortunately, although Chesterton (and his fellows in distributist thought, such as Father McNabb and the great Hilaire Belloc) was not short of ideas, the principle of distributism has often foundered on its supposed lack of practicality, what Chesterton himself in *The Outline of Sanity* called “romantic picture making.” Now,

picture making, even of the romantic kind, is absolutely essential to move people who are not moved by reason alone. But such picture making would not be enough to effect practical change.

Although this essay is not an analysis of distributism, it should be noted that one can trace the growth and development of distributist thought through successive issues of the *Review*. The May 1986 issue, devoted to Belloc, has a number of essays exploring the themes of property and freedom in his thought, based on Belloc's great work *The Servile State* (1912). The Winter 2002 issue reprints an essay, "The Enemies of Property," that Chesterton first published in the *Daily News* in 1909, which is an early version of the chapter of the same name that appeared a year later in *What's Wrong with the World*. The essay continues Chesterton's attack on bigness, either private or public, and argues that "we shall never re-establish the idea of property until we re-establish small properties." In fact, the capitalist, in wanting all property to himself, is equally an enemy of property as the state, which also wants all property to itself. The same issue also features reports from the front, as it were, including the resistance of peasants in Peru and Chile to confiscation of their land in preference to large mining and industrial interests. And the Fall/Winter 2008 issue had a lengthy symposium on the then-emerging financial crisis.

Given Chesterton's denunciations of a certain kind of capitalist who likes property so much he wants it all concentrated in his

own hands, the financial crisis would not have surprised him, based as it was on a few large financial institutions mostly separated from local communities. As Philip Blond writes, the financial crisis was precipitated not by the technical elements of due diligence needed to extend mortgages but "in a failure to secure the conditions for a widespread distribution of property."⁷ This was caused in turn by the growth of a credit economy, of which mortgaged homes are the most obvious example. This credit economy extends and intensifies the subservience of people to abstract capital, while giving them the illusion of "choice." Although how Chesterton would have responded to the crisis is of course unknowable; nevertheless, as Blond and others show, his insights and those of the other distributists remain available as a critique and correction to mainstream economic thinking.

The *Review* has for forty years been able to maintain this keen interest in a historical personage without getting trapped in antiquarianism, and continued reinterpreting Chesterton's thought in new forms. In reading through the *Review*, one cannot but join in the infectious enthusiasm and Christian hope for which Chesterton was well known, even when fighting the most monstrous of his ideological adversaries. That message—say not the struggle nought availeth—along with the permanent return of Chestertonian thinking, may be the *Review's* greatest legacy. †

- 1 Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, February 11, 1928, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 457–58.
- 2 Dale Ahlquist, "Chesterton on Shakespeare," <http://www.chesterton.org/lecture-85/>.
- 3 Adam Gopnik, "The Back of the World: The Troubling Genius of G. K. Chesterton," *New Yorker* (July 7 and 14, 2008), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/07/07/the-back-of-the-world>.
- 4 G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, in *Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 16:73–78.
- 5 Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1998), 28–30.
- 6 Christopher Dawson, "Letter to G. K. Chesterton," *Chesterton Review* 9, no. 2 (May 1983): 136.
- 7 Philip Blond, Symposium on the Financial Crisis, *Chesterton Review* 34, nos. 3 and 4 (Fall/Winter 2008): 591–92.