

G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy: A Centenary Edition*, introduced and edited by Sheridan Gilley (South Orange [NJ]: Chesterton Institute, 2008).

The introduction alone is worth the price of the book. Given the price—\$140 (*sic*)—my use of this cliché is a compliment to Sheridan Gilley who prepared this splendid edition of a book that has long been a classic of Catholic apologetics, although Chesterton was still an Anglican in 1908, when the book was first published; he entered the Church only in 1922.

“Orthodoxy,” it need hardly be stated, refers to the teachings of traditional Christianity “summarized in the Apostles’ Creed” rather than to the Greek Church. It is therefore surprising that Chesterton has little to say about the contents of the creed. His concerns are more basic: the human condition, the limitations of logic, the reasons for belief, the credibility of Christianity. There are thus striking similarities between his approach to faith and that of his great predecessors Blaise Pascal and John Henry Newman as well as what we find in his intellectual heirs such as C.S. Lewis and, today, Peter Kreeft. Like Pascal and Newman, Chesterton found the doctrine of Original Sin an inescapable conclusion to any realistic examination of the human condition: “The Christian optimism is based on the fact that we do *not* fit into the world; . . . man is a monstrosity.” The effect of this realism is the immediate jettisoning of all utopian schemes from Marxism to theosophy, whose conflicting ideologies inevitably leave the *status quo* unaltered. Chesterton uses a brilliant image to make the point: “It was Karl Marx, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Cunninghame Grahame, Bernard Shaw, and Auberon Herbert, who between them, with bowed gigantic backs, bore up the throne of the Archbishop of Canterbury.”

Like Pascal and Newman, Chesterton uses logic to illustrate its limitations. Pascal’s famous wager, so often misinterpreted, is really about the need for a moral conversion to precede intellectual assent to Christianity. And Newman again and again returns to this theme: “It is as absurd to argue men, as to torture them, into believing.” In one of the best-known passages of *Orthodoxy* Chesterton agrees: “The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.” In other words, the flaw with irreligion is not that it is illogical but that it is too small to contain the human spirit. Nature speaks to man not as the master in a deterministic universe, but as a sister coming, like man, from the creator. Obedience, in the moral as well as the physical order, is therefore the hallmark of the sane man. Anyone familiar with C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* will recognize his debt to Chesterton in the crucial chapter at the end of Book I, “We Have Cause To Be Uneasy.”

There is a sense of release, of exhilaration, throughout the book. In Christianity Chesterton found a cause uniquely worth defending, worth dying for. “Uniquely” is the operative word, for his critique of relativism is more than ever relevant today, a hundred years later. For all our cult of diversity, there is a deadening uniformity in the ethos of our schools, governments and arts. “Diversity” has now come to mean that everyone looks different but thinks the same. Chesterton, defending the uniqueness of Christianity, reverses the terms, noting that things that look the same can be very different. Consider two newspapers, the *Church Times* and the *Freethinker*: “they are alike in everything except in the fact that they don’t say the same thing.” The same is true of religions. There

are a certain number of postures and constructs available to express religious sentiment: “They agree in the mode of teaching; what they differ about is the thing to be taught.”

This handsome volume contains a critically edited text, but also an index, a chronological list of Chesterton’s writings, excellent endnotes that identify the likes of Cunninghame Grahame and Auberon Herbert, and, of course, the priceless forty-five-page introduction, an insightful, engrossing, and highly informative examination of the setting, the achievement, and the effect of Chesterton’s great work. Gilley’s meticulous scholarship could not be more different from Chesterton’s reckless disregard for the paraphernalia of academic research but, paradoxically, they both have the same effect on the reader, namely, a thrilling recognition that truth matters and that it can be supremely found in religion that has Jesus Christ as its founder. 