

# The Innocence of G. K. Chesterton

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THE PEOPLE who now know G. K. Chesterton most commonly know that physically he was gigantic and that he was adept at and fond of seeing most of life's situations as funny; what could be funnier, he asked, than a man starting off in full pursuit of his hat? But, Chesterton remarked, come to think of it, that chase is much like man's life: comic-tragic, man chasing and not sure he will ever catch up. But for all his funny side and indeed right through that side he was radically serious; he never made fun of anyone. Now at his centenary (1874-1936) is a good time to review the man and his works.

In his *Victorian Age in Literature* Chesterton said that any of several major figures in that arena, e.g. Dr. Johnson or Browning, was a Character, with a capital C. Everybody who knows Chesterton at all knows that in the line of character he would match any of those featured in his great work on great men and a great cultural event.

Big and fat and jolly—with these credentials he became an international household word, and several of his works were made available in foreign languages such as Spanish and Danish. But he had recommendations that meant more than these obvious ones, meant more to him and to his fans and devotees, and at least to his heyday, say from 1900 through 1936. When he came to Notre Dame University in the autumn of 1930 and spent nearly a semes-

ter lecturing on English history and English literature, people were captured even by minor mannerisms such as how he fondled his watch chain, how small a chair looked with G. K. on it, or how he would break off a more or less prepared lecture to recite a long poem, or to surrender to a fit of his own laughter. For my part, I could say with his countryman and friend, C. C. Martindale:

I remember best the moments when an idea would amuse him somewhere in the recesses of his soul; his face would slowly crinkle; his delight would work its way outwards till his whole huge frame shook with laughter.

Most commonly in and around this school, people remember him as an impressive presence, a magnanimous man, and not merely as a celebrity. He fell in love with the chauffeur, an unsophisticated Irishman as clever and charming as himself; it was a chore to get all of G. K. into and out of a car, and advised to try getting out sideways he quickly replied, "I have no sideways."

Of course, as a man of distinction who went on doing works of distinction, he was a phenomenon for at least the American public, and much more for the Catholic part of that public. American and Australian as well as English Catholics had long been in a state of siege, a fact well known to Chesterton, and for this man, a convert in 1922 to Roman Catholicism, to come

and not only lecture to and for us, but to live with us, was naturally a compliment, above all for a school then entirely undergraduate and with its emphasis on the humanities. We can understand why the publishers Sheed and Ward, launching their house late in Chesterton's life, would feature him: Sheed an Australian Catholic and Masie Ward Sheed of an old English Catholic family and each of them interested in apologetics and propaganda. Among us Chesterton was grateful for little favors and made great friends, for instance with Charles Phillips who was a popular professor. "I know one stranger at least, who will never forget him." Of course, Chesterton was just the man to warm the heart of an arts college at a time when there was much less demand than now for specialization and perhaps more joy in learning. Some of his local auditors were so taken that they were rereading him at his centenary. One local undergraduate, hearing G. K.'s contention that Darwin's answer raised questions, put a single entry into his notebook: "Darwin did much harm" and some years earlier an appreciative reader, no doubt an undergraduate doing an assignment, marked a page in a Chesterton volume with one word: "humor."

Chesterton, the man of great renown, at home in ancient as well as in English culture, author of volumes in prose and in poetry, the big funny man—it was as if he had always been that way, born full grown. Fortunately for many people and especially for him, he was born into an extremely happy home and had a happy childhood, he was proud of his father and during his whole life he was devoted to his brother Cecil, six years his junior, who was a casualty of World War I, called by the English the Great War; his sister died as a child. The boys went back and forth as day students to St. Paul's, a private school.

This must have been much better

academically than ninety percent of high schools in America, since although Gilbert Chesterton showed himself to be exceptional only in his ineptitude at any and all athletics, he became like a master of classical lore which, all during his productive life, he could use relevantly, and without looking up texts, sources and dates—the pedantry side of learning, foreign to him and despised by him. In fact, he prided himself on writing histories without recourse to as much as one date. He noted that his father had a command of and a love of English literature, a circumstance which gave the sons a running start at a school evidently revelling in English prose and poetry as another world of classics. G. K. Chesterton did not enter Oxford or Cambridge, or any university, and although he took to poetry and to literature generally with abandon and joy, it was decided that because he showed talent in art, he should go to Slade school where art was the chief concern. Most of his best friends, however, were made at St. Paul's; his letters all his life continued to be mainly with them. In his maturity, he was always critical of the pedants and sometimes sharply critical of scientists, but no one has suggested that he may have been envious of university men. The field in which he had, nevertheless, to be unofficially recognized as a man of learning (a title he would refuse) was English literature, his works on various authors such as Chaucer, Dickens and Browning as well as his volume on the Victorian age showing insight as well as appreciation. This volume which appeared in 1913 is a classic and is still used in some American high schools. It is a caution (not a G. K. word) how his books—both good and mediocre—have sold and do now sell. A day-to-day Chesterton reader came out in 1910, which suggests that there must have been a G. K. cult at that time since these snippets were, and he would have said

they were, next to mere nothings, and the cult produced a badly printed day-by-day G. K. book which came out in the 1940's.

What was it that this non-expert, the funny fat man, had to say? Why did his works become for many a sort of bible? How was it that an artist turned journalist was accepted as the idea man as well as the entertainer of people, a pleasure for many, the *bête noire* of others? He fought for and against and kept the sparks flying; at St. Paul's school, he was really formidable in the debating society, and for years afterwards he participated happily in a wrangler's club, many of whose members held views on faith and man and on England's salvation widely different from his own. Man was his central interest and concern, man the conundrum, the sage, the sinner, the stupid creature. For some time both while he was at the Slade school and for a few years afterwards, he suffered fits of depth pessimism and despondency, scepticism and near-nihilism. This was his dark night of the soul, a time of terror and peril about which his friends and biographers are able to tell us little. He spoke and wrote few words about this period of painful struggle, and perhaps the best way that anyone could hope to unearth the reality and meaning of it is by putting together more or less similar moments of despair attributed by Chesterton to characters in his dramas and novels.

The one mark left on him by this time of agony was his conviction that every man is a sinner, every man's sin standing in need of exorcism. We cannot think that the later and always jubilant G. K. Chesterton simply bounced out of this horrible state. But it is said that he began to find an interest in and through some contemporaries who strongly affirmed life, notably Walt Whitman and R. L. Stevenson, and on the latter he did a volume largely of appreciation. Whether through them or his own

natural drive, he soon and ever afterwards was pro-life. But the view went along as if integral to him—he couldn't shake it—that there is in man an evil surd presumably provoked more by man than by the devil. The individual person, Chesterton claimed, is a sinner, and the evils of society come not only from corrupt and corrupting institutions in church and state, the economy and school, but radically from evil men. Good, yes; good in every man; and man made for all good—Whitman and Stevenson could scarcely match Chesterton along this line. But said Chesterton, man is a sinner and needs the grace of God. The basic struggle, as he viewed it and felt himself immersed in it was not a struggle between species or of man against an untoward environment, but a strictly human struggle between good and evil. It was up to man, and to mankind, to see that good prevailed. In this connection, merely one aspect of Chesterton, it is clear that he was a forerunner of Graham Greene. With Chesterton, this struggle remained a kind of perpetual crisis; and man could make the situation harder, and the acme of making it harder was the imperialistic concentration of political and economic power.

When Chesterton began writing, he got a following whereas his work in art received little attention. From soon after the turn of the century he proved to be the social critic par excellence, and this he remained for a generation. He kept calling himself a journalist, as indeed in a literal sense he was, since he was to write literally thousands of pieces for London journals, pieces which—not editorials or news articles—are usually called essays and were put together in a dozen books, among them *What's Wrong with the World*, *All Things Considered*, *Tremendous Trifles*, and *Eugenics and Other Evils*. He was an extraordinarily happy person, often hilarious, incomparably good company, and yet he

was all the time a sharp and sometimes a caustic critic of what was said in the press and in books and of what was being proposed and done in public life.

It is difficult to classify Chesterton, he does not fit into any usual stereotype. He was a poet who produced a dozen volumes, some of them still read in American schools. He was, as we just said, the most voluminous essayist, social critic and lay philosopher. He was a dramatist, a biographer, an historian of England and English literature, a novelist, a satirist, the author of popular detective fiction, the famous "Father Brown" series, the interest in which is perdurable; he was a powerful defender of England in and after the Great War, a perpetual and severe critic of England in peace, a lecturer although never a professor, and he was a perpetual debater on public platforms with friends and foes. He authored more than a hundred books, at least sixty of which are now available in hard cover, and many in paperback. Of course, ideas in the essays, hammered out almost day by day, often repeat themselves, and the reader willing to go through them several decades after the occasion for their appearance has to realize that he is reading social history, some of it now quite dull, and he may have to turn several pages to find one nugget; some of the humor must have been strained and flat in the first place. The completest G. K. devotee must grant that G. K.'s travel books were his least impressive productions, and he had the good sense to see that travel and comment on travel was not his forte; the published results fail to ring a bell. Among these books the deadest is *The Resurrection of Rome* (1934), hardly a dozen pages of which merit a rereading today, and a sincere inquirer would be let down now in reading Chesterton's *What I saw in America* (1922) and would wonder why this volume ran through five printings in four

months. He saw for the most part what he was told to see, and the good and semi-glamorous passages are those telling the public something about Chesterton, especially about his strong attachment to Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence and to American democracy. This he thought the most genuine and most defensible of all democracies.

He, as we said, had no great expertise in any field, was not a scholar in the ordinary sense of a person sure of sources and dates, of who at what time said what, and of where to lay his hand on documents. He was a maverick, an independent freelancer, he was G. K. no more, no less. As could have been predicted he was disliked by some popular figures all those decades while he was praising what he called the common man and often concurrently scathing half-hearted churchmen and especially those big political and financial fellows whom he was fond of rating as public enemy number one. He had immense fun in doing all this, laughed and had people laughing, though those who knew him well said that he was full of charity and would not to save his soul make a deliberately false or unkind attack on anybody. For instance, he was often into public debate with and against George Bernard Shaw, but first and last he and Shaw were friends; what he detested in Shaw was Shaw's espousal of the Nietzschean superman; and if the superman is dead in the 1970's, this was not the case two generations ago. For his trouble, Chesterton was thought a malcontent and a rabbler-rouser, if not an outright revolutionary; he agreed that at times he was a tub-thumper. Chesterton had so much fun in propounding his views that Dean Inge, a man not given to lightheartedness, called him a mountebank. Joseph McCabe, a pessimist and cynic, practically challenged Chesterton to appear with affidavits for the latter's appeal to humor in

serious matters, and Chesterton was delighted to supply them—in terms of “divine frivolity.” Years before he became a Roman Catholic, he was called a dogmatist and a medieval throwback, charges more or less true and little resented by him.

The man who got so much done was a man without practical ability. He could not keep track of where he was or of what he was supposed to do; either Mrs. Chesterton or his competent secretary had to accompany him and look after him. Once on returning from some lectures, he reported that he had lost his pajamas; his wife asked why he didn't buy a pair. Surprised, he answered: “Oh, are pajamas something you can buy?” He was impecunious with no sense for coining money or meeting bills. For twenty years he carried the work and worry and debts of his deceased brother's never flourishing magazine, at successive times called the *Eye Witness*, the *New Witness*, and *G. K.'s Weekly*; he had to go over-worked and under-financed to keep this up on sheer devotion to his brother and against his wife's advice and good-sense entreaties. He made no cult of being an impractical and impecunious ne'er-do-well; it was simply a fact of his life. But his custom of wearing an immense cloak and carrying a cane and of thereby having a cloak-and-dagger look, a custom kept up for years, must be seen as an affectation. He eventually described the pose in these words: “that Falstaffian figure in a brigand's hat and cloak, which appeared in many caricatures.” He did one of these caricatures himself at a bazaar in 1912 where the production was raffled off to the one guessing which line of Tennyson's poetry was illustrated, and there is extant a charming photo of him and his friends, Lord Howard, J. M. Barrie and Bernard Shaw, playing cowboy in an Essex field.

He criticized England severely and continually, but he loved England: it was his

home and country, the fatherland; he thought it needed criticism and was worthy of it. On two points, he kept up his fusillading. The main and basic one was his dual conviction that England, *i.e.*, Englishmen, had lost the theistic and Christian faith and that the loss was bad for England. He had come out of an unbelieving home, but in his Slade school probably and in his early public life had become conscious of the vacuum and considered it to be like personal and national death and damnation. In his *Autobiography* (1936, p. 177) he summarized this decisive matter as it hit him and as he thought it hit England:

I have been granted, as it were, a sort of general view or vision of all that field of negation and groping and curiosity. And I saw pretty much what it all really meant. There was no Theosophical Brotherhood, there were no Ethical Societies, there were no New Religions. But I saw Israel scattered on the hills like sheep that have not a shepherd, and I saw a large number of the sheep run about bleating eagerly in whatever neighborhood it was supposed that a shepherd might be found.

I had a vision! But as thus assessed, the vision was negative, the seeing of something that was really not there, the lack of something which Chesterton thought needed to be there for the good of England and also was needed for his own good. He wrote of what he took to be a hiatus, and the condition as thus described kept disturbing him personally and as a citizen for more than a quarter of a century. What was bad for England was bad for him, and what was bad for him was not good for England; his private prolonged sickness was part of a social sickness. So far from his ever being anti-English or a revolutionary he was pro-English, radically national and even nationalistic, as his virulent anti-German views made clear during and after

the Great War. Throughout his life he kept singing the glories of the martial virtues:

Redder and redder the sword-flash fell,  
Our eyes and our nostrils were hotter  
than hell

and his defense of a nation's right to defend itself is the best defense of war I have ever read, and he foretold almost to a letter both the fact of World War II and of how the war would come. Yet it would be stretching a point to agree with his savage attitude toward Germany. At bottom, what he not only disliked but feared in England was what he saw as an emptiness, a weakened faith in ultimate meaning, lack of faith in an over-world and a divine underpinning for the ordinary and everyday experience. England was good and great, but cut off, in its convictions—or lack of them—and in its life from the God of the fathers; it was not up to English par, not half up, and was in a perilous as well as a not genuinely English condition. Deliver me, deliver all of us from a totally secular salvation—this was the prayer repeated in a spread of several million G. K. clever and teasing and challenging words, the tireless and no doubt tiring tune that expressed the basic negative side of G. K. Chesterton. We must come later to the almost obvious positive corollary.

The second point with Chesterton was, to put it at once in one word and positively, his Distributism; under this heading, he became rather widely known and is now perhaps chiefly known. But in such a connection what was he really against? He had no heart for imperialism in politics or finance and he saw that a vast imperialism in both lines ruled England and the Empire. He first declared against bigness in politics early in the century on the occasion of the Boer War, but he showed no sympathy for the blacks who were being killed by that Dutch and English en-

counter; he was solidly but merely anti-imperialistic in politics, and in fact in all his prolonged and gallant fight for the common man, he never came to know much from experience about that man; he never sat at supper with him or spent a day in a poor man's cottage. Empathy, yes; experiential knowledge, no. Nevertheless, we must in passing say that, for all his quasi throw-back to another age, he had not a Quixotic desire for the fixtures and furniture of the good old days. To prove this point, notice how he consorted with Henry James. He was a neighbor of Henry James whom he once visited. Then Henry James descended on the Chestertons, and was expecting to see walls covered with pictures of lords and ladies of an earlier century. Chesterton was amused by James, and, if slightly embarrassed, was further amused when a well-known voice shouted, "Gilbert! Gilbert!" It was the voice of G. K.'s friend, Belloc, who with a companion had gone broke on a hiking expedition and reappeared at this inopportune moment, the two of them looking like hippies in the midst of the James-Chesterton seance.

The first installment in Chesterton's social philosophy was based on two elements: a positive one which was his love for England and the national good, and a negative one, his feeling against imperialistic bigness and generally against big units which he thought bad for England and for man. *The Mind of Chesterton* (University of Miami, Florida Press, 1970) is an invaluable study, but its distinguished author, Christopher Hollis, separates Chesterton's anti-imperialism from his pro-England love. Regarding the Boer matter, Hollis rightly says: "He objected only to the British imperialism because it was the rule of an anonymous imperialism." I would not hate thee, imperialism, so much, loved I not England more. When Chesterton allowed a line of poetry to say, "God's scorn for all

men governing," he was not revolutionary and anti-England but was declaring for what he called the secret "People of England which never had spoken yet." He was against not only global political imperialism, but vigorously against being ruled by financial giants at home or abroad. I am sure he was consciously speaking as a concerned citizen as well as a poet and philosopher when in *Orthodoxy* (1908) he declared against gigantism in a manner which the most obtuse could scarcely miss. Suppose, he said, an evolution along Nietzschean lines—"superman crushing superman in one tower of tyrants until the universe is smashed for fun." But who wants this consummation? What we want is restraint and respect, balanced by energy and mastery. Chesterton loved fairy tales and their implied wisdom, and here he remarked that in the fairy tale "the prince must wonder but not get scared, be un-humble enough to wonder, and haughty enough to defy"; so our attitude to "the world" must combine delicacy and contempt. "We must have in us enough reverence for all things outside us to make us tread fearfully on the grass. We must also have enough disdain for all things outside us, to make us, on due occasion, spit at the stars." The combining and balancing of bigness and littleness would seem, he said, to be a good-sense formula for personal and social as well as biological development; in no area, he was emphasizing, is it correct to say "The bigger the better" or "The smaller the better." Yet the former axiom is effectively exemplified in industrial and political life as if it were a truism. Against the assumption, in theory and practice, of "The bigger the better," Chesterton was bold enough and paradoxical enough to pit two factors, his Distributism and what he called the common man, the two closely united, at least in Chesterton's desired social order. What he meant by Distributism

is easily understood, and in its basic elements had been expressed in far more detail by William Cobbett (d.1835) and, because of the latter's historic moment, with more relevance than Chesterton's expression of it could muster; the immediate prompting came from Belloc and not from Cobbett. What we think is Chesterton's best statement of Distributism is contained in his Preface for an edition (1928) of Cobbett's *Cottage Economy*. He noted first that Cobbett was the finest English example of the noble career of agitator, and then proceeded to express his own and Cobbett's basic premise for that economy and/or for Distributism. The premise is that the cottager should own something, that he should own a cottage, and perhaps a patch of land—"forty acres and a mule!"—because, according to those social philosophers, without property there is no freedom, and, secondly, without thrift there will not long be property. The logic goes like this: Man wants and needs freedom, he cannot have this if he has not property, and cannot maintain property without thrift. These ideas, at least as espoused by Cobbett and Chesterton, were often considered out of date, a throwback to medieval times. But in America we got an invitation and in some cases an introduction to them in the Depression; people were then happy if they could get "back to the land"; in the 1940's, social theorists, among whom the author was proud to be one, formed "The Friends of the Land," and, long before the present stir for conservation, were avowed conservationists of resources in the form of health, soil and water. An *ad hoc* magazine called *Free America* ran for some years; good books appeared, the most popular of which was Ralph Borsodi's *Flight from the City*; and two or three of President Ford's points for conserving and extending food and energy are an appeal to cottage economy, to possible aids to survival techniques

through the creative home and garden. Neither the President nor Cobbett or Chesterton originated these ideas which are as old as mankind.

Oddly enough, this Chesterton, who, as we said, had little or no first-hand knowledge of the common man, was constantly and vociferously for him. He had no great faith in the run of Anglican and Protestant clergymen or in scientists and experts, in those who would now be flying to the moon or those who in his day were always making it to the North Pole, "that insidious habit"; he had no faith at all in big business, big politics, or high finance, and, as he said, not an overpowering faith in "that troublesome class to which I myself belong." Those exclusions narrowed the field. He had to come down to or up to the common man; he said he did not turn his liking for the common man into idolatry, but that he would go with him in preference to going with intellectuals; and although he was not a scientist and had little sympathy for what a scientist hopes or does, he did once score heavily against those scientists whom he trusted least: those who held that man came by way of lower animals. He took the crudest and least scientific statement of this theory, namely, the one which pictured the cave man, club in hand, prepared to beat his wives (a notion still appearing in picture books for American children). The thing we know for sure about the cave man, Chesterton said in *The Everlasting Man* (1925), is that the cave man was an artist. In the context, Chesterton was anxious to defend the theory of man's divine origin, but in stating that early man was an artist, he was doing what Chesterton, sometimes called the discoverer of common sense, always wanted to do, namely to declare for man and to take a crack at those whom he thought too fond of rushing on toward a hypothetical superman.

On many occasions, he was singing a poem to man, and most notably when, in answer to a challenge, he wrote *Orthodoxy* (1908). His *Heretics* had appeared three years earlier, its chapters, some of them permanently interesting, a statement in great good humor of why he disagreed with various popular contemporaries such as Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells, and, as the title suggested, the book said in sum what G. K., by that time becoming a formidable public figure, did not believe. Critics replied that "it was all very well for me to tell everybody to affirm his cosmic theory," but that G. K. had not followed his precept through. "You first," they said; "perhaps an incautious suggestion," G. K. said, and he complied with *Orthodoxy*, which I with many others rate as his greatest work. It is positive, full of humor and high spirits, and it has two other yet more important qualities: it is creative and richly poetic. If it needed other recommendations, we may add that it deals with a great subject: with man in relation to God, and it does this, not by beginning this or that of its topics with reference to impressive scientific discourse, as H. G. Wells was so successfully doing, but by a journey to the nursery and to fairy tales. This maneuver was not a trick or an attempt to get the laugh on people; Chesterton had always loved fairy tales, was at home in them, and thought that *Mother Goose* had something to say. The problem was, so he thought, 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 . . .  
this world give us at once the fascination  
of a  
strange town and the comfort and hon-  
our of being  
our own town?

Paul Elmer More, the great American

humanist, remarked that he many times re-read Homer in the original "with unclogging pleasure." Some of us could say the same about rereading *Orthodoxy* whose form is prose but the content and sense of which are poetry. We recast as a prose poem his case for democracy:

*The Mere Man*

I was brought up a Liberal  
believing in democracy  
a self-governing humanity,  
"That the things common to all men  
are more important than the things  
peculiar to any man,"  
ordinary things more valuable  
than extraordinary things,  
man is something more awful than men,  
something more strange.  
The sense of the miracle  
of humanity should be more vivid  
than any marvels of power,  
intellect, art or civilization,  
the mere man on two legs  
more heart-breaking  
than any music and more  
startling than any caricature.

The essential things are  
those men hold in common  
falling in love is more poetic  
than dropping into poetry,  
and helping to rule the tribe  
is like falling in love,  
a thing like writing one's own  
love-letters, a thing we want  
a man to do for himself  
even if he does it badly.

The most important things  
must be left to ordinary men,  
the mating of the sexes, the rearing  
of the young, the laws of the state.  
This is democracy, and in this  
I have always believed.

He had a deep conviction that humility and gratitude are almost one virtue. The following recast lines are his way of writing a declaration of gratitude:

*Legs in my Stockings*

The goodness of fairy tales  
was unaffected if there were  
more dragons than princesses:  
it was good to be in a fairy tale.  
The test of happiness is gratitude  
and I felt grateful  
though I hardly knew to whom.  
Children are grateful when Santa Claus  
puts gifts in their stockings.  
Couldn't I be grateful  
when he put in my stockings  
two miraculous legs? Could I  
thank no one for the gift of birth?

The power to see life as wonderful as a fairy tale was the special charism of Chesterton. Even in *Heretics*, which says what he did not believe, he eulogized man. Here is a sample of what at a later time he was happy to summarize as the dignity of man:

*The Most Terrible of Beasts*

God made our next-door neighbor  
who comes to us clothed  
in all the careless terrors of nature,  
strange as the stars,  
reckless and indifferent as rain,  
Man, the most terrible of beasts

Fairy tales were the joy of his childhood, and he never got over the joy and what he thought the truth of them. The sun is an incandescent globe giving off heat and light; but for Chesterton and St. Francis of Assisi, it is Brother Sun, and water is Sister Water. It is not surprising that Chesterton took to St. Francis, a soul after his own heart, the man who threw riches away, and, as Chesterton said in *St. Francis of Assisi* (1924), threw off his clothes and went singing through the frosty woods, a free man with God for his father. G. K. liked Francis above all other saints. Francis the happiest, simplest, most open to the goodness of earth and ready to sing, to dare, to have nothing between him and God, a man, said Chesterton, hung like the earth on empty space.

Francis was the saint who discovered nature and was like a citizen of elfland; he touched reality as we cannot and was more familiar, more free and fraternal toward nature. In Chesterton's view we are to honor every man: is not any man we meet born, as we are, of a woman, and like us destined to die? But in St. Francis he found the Dignity of Man elevated, and writing a chapter about the Franciscan *Jongleurs de Dieu* Chesterton felt that God and fairyland were brought together, and he rejoiced in seeing Francis so happy to be taken not simply as a buffoon, but as a fool. "There was not a rag of him left that was not ridiculous." Cobbett was dedicated to the common man, and by empathy Dickens was the man in the street: G. K. said Dickens was the mob, but he felt that Francis more nearly was man. Chesterton said that the camaraderie and spirit of equality, so marked in St. Francis and his followers, were founded on courtesy and civility, qualities which Chesterton, for all his love of democracy, took pains to emphasize.

A major reason for Chesterton's early break with secularism was that the secularist mind, so commonly (he thought) exemplified in England in the first quarter of the century, brushed sin aside. He was also displeased with much of the religion around him; this was sad in its sermons and songs, whereas he thought that the Good News was a happy story. The two elements needed to be joined, a confessedly sinful man, and a happy St. Francis jongleur type of believing Christian man. Nor could he see and live religion as an arm of nationalism; this, he said in 1913, was what Tennyson, for example, did, "treating as true universality a thing that was only a sort of lukewarm local patriotism." He was recollecting such matters when he related in the *Autobiography* (1936) what he had said years earlier to a friend as they watched harassed crowds pouring through the subway, the

occasion for quoting to his friend Kipling's words about a disabled battleship:

For it is not meet that English stock  
should hide in the heart of an eight-day  
clock  
the death they may not see

"But I always retained a dim sense of something sacred in English stock, or in human stock, which separated me from the mere pessimism of the period. I never doubted that the human beings inside the houses were themselves almost miraculous; like magic and talismanic dolls." All this in spite of what he said was the unbelieving life of his well-beloved father and mother, and what he considered the sad and lukewarm religious expression in his time, and the scepticism of intellectuals. ". . . my brother was frankly anti-religious and I had no religion except the very haziest religiosity."

That is what he then thought, and would to the last think that he had thought. Nevertheless, we read his life and works to say that a religious virus was working in him from his early manhood years. For one thing, he was pleased by not only the democratic gesture in Chaucer, but in the overworld reference he saw as basis of it: Chaucer has persons of various origins meeting casually on a social level, and this democracy, Chesterton claimed, is possible only when man is seen "against the sky." Chaucer was therefore regarded as a better guide and philosopher than Ruskin, for instance, who went for everything in churches except the altar, and better than Hardy who had to be anthropomorphic out of sheer atheism.

Long before Chesterton became a Roman Catholic, he was obviously Christian in his theism, his view of man's dignity and genuine significance; in his humility and gratitude for the gift of two legs. If there ever was a soul naturally Christian, he was that

man. He had to find himself in relation to God; and for him, God was the traditional Western God, existing, a person, ultimate and absolute. Rereading him now, one wonders whether G. K. did further specify what he saw as God, and these notes seem justified:

1. God is the fulcrum round which the world turns and crucially round which the human world turns.
2. God is the one fixed star in the cosmos.
3. God is the meaningful, the guarantee of meaning.
4. God is sin-forgiving.

All this was as if obvious to Chesterton, and it would not occur to him to go about justifying his belief in God and in Christ. The logic of the whole is simple: thrift is for property, property is for freedom, freedom is for man, man is for God. An item little noticed by commentators is Chesterton's lifelong search for anchorage, for standards of morals and standards generally, for what we have called a fulcrum, and this for him had to be God or warranted by God. The question of standards first disturbed him seriously when as a young man he got into debates with sceptics who did

not believe there was any fixed basis of truth in any matter. In which case, Chesterton said, discussion is impossible: we cannot check against any accepted principle, and good and evil become meaningless terms. As if he were meeting a latter-day situationist, he said: "It is useless to argue at all, if all our conclusions are warped by our conditions. Nobody can correct anyone's bias, if all mind is all bias," and though he granted that his disputants held some truths, even these they held "less firmly than they might have done, if there had been anything like a fundamental principle of morals and metaphysics to support them." As early as 1913, he made this strong, simple statement: "There can never be any clear controversy in a sceptical age," and as late as 1929 in an article of his in the *Forum* on "The Sceptic as Critic" he said, against Mencken's relativist position on literary quality, that Mencken's position would close all debate. The only biographer I have found relating Chesterton's confirmed orthodoxy to his belief in fixed standards is Maurice Evans who in *G. K. Chesterton* (1939) speaks of G. K.'s ability to examine theories and developments in the light of norms.