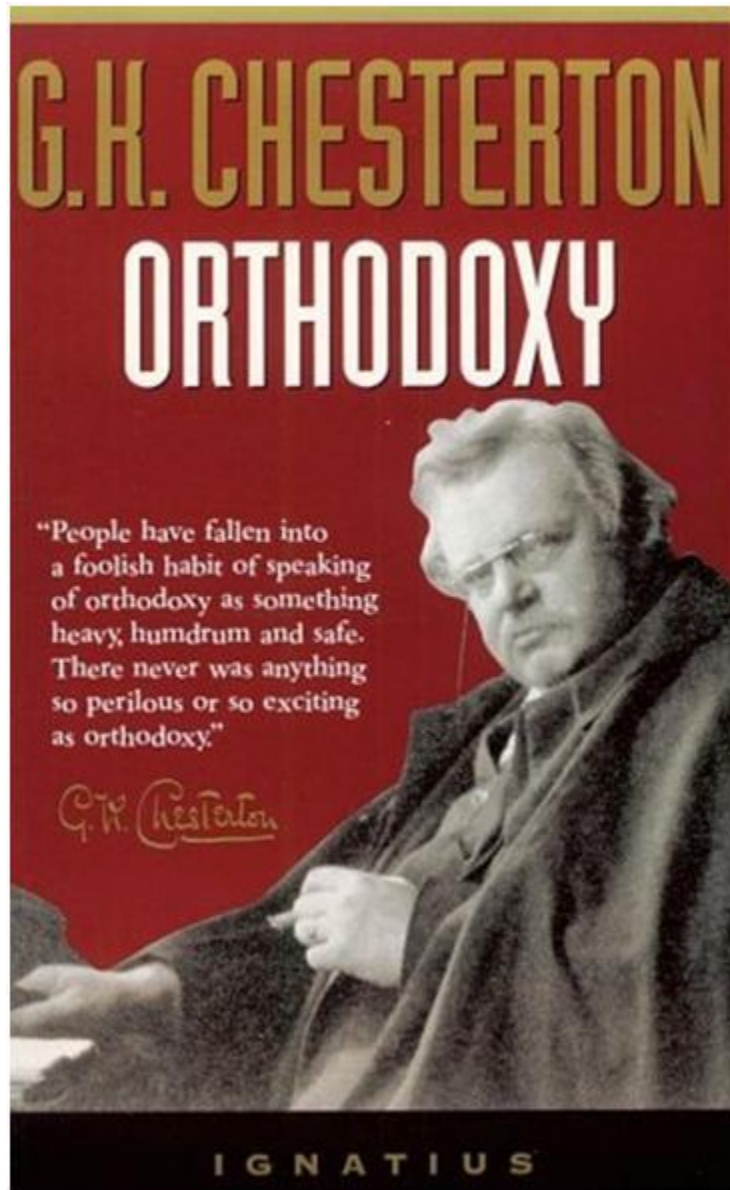


A Summary of Orthodoxy by G.K. Chesterton



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About the Author

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) was born in London and attended St. Paul's School. He never attended college but went to Slade Art School to become an illustrator. Writing magazine articles on art criticism sparked his interest in writing. So began his prolific career. He wrote essays, books, plays, poems, short stories. He wrote on art, society, literature, philosophy, and Theology. His writing influenced many people including C.S. Lewis and Gandhi. *The Ballad of the White Horse* and *The Everlasting Man* are two of his well-known works.

General Overview

G.K. Chesterton "was a pagan at the age of twelve, and a complete agnostic by the age of sixteen" (90). *Orthodoxy* is the story of Chesterton's personal discovery of Christianity. With his characteristic wit, he describes his convictions about the world, how modernity disappointed him, and how Christianity surprised him. Of his discovery of Christianity, he says, "Instinct after instinct was answered by doctrine after doctrine. Or, to vary the metaphor, I was like one who had advanced into a hostile country to take one high fortress. And when that fort had fallen, the whole country surrendered and turned solid behind me" (84-85).

Chapter One: Introduction in Defense of Everything Else.

Imagine, then, a yachtsman who lands in a strange new world suddenly discovering that this strange new world is, after all, his own harbor: he experiences all the wonder of adventure combined with all the comfort of home. Chesterton finds that he is like the yachtsman; he found his truths, but he found that they were neither new nor his. They were Christianity's.

Simultaneous security and terror, comfort and adventure, wonderfulness and homeliness is what Chesterton calls romance, and he finds orthodoxy very romantic. It is to the common man who desires romance that he offers his book.

Chapter Two: The Maniac

One day, a companion of Chesterton's remarked that one particular individual "will get on; he believes in himself." "At that moment, a bus headed for Hanwell, the insane asylum, drove past. Chesterton realized suddenly that the fact that moderns believe in themselves means nothing; the men who most believe in themselves are found in the asylum. Since modern man has denied sin – the old starting point of argument – Chesterton will start with insanity which moderns have not yet denied.

Who are the madmen? The rational. "Imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. Poets do not go mad; but chess-players do" (21). Poets seek only to gaze; logicians seek to grasp, and it drives them mad because it is too much to hold. The marks of madness are first, "logical completeness" and second, "spiritual contraction" (24). Logical completeness: he can answer every objection you raise. Spiritual contraction: the madman's answers explain, but they leave out so much! For example, if a man believed that all men conspired against him, you cannot persuade him otherwise. After all, you also are a conspirator. But grant that all men are secretly interested in you and you deny that they can happily be strangers. Insanity cannot be broken by argument; it must be broken like a spell. The madman must be somehow made to see men as friends and not merely as conspirators.

Many modern thinkers exhibit the same narrow-minded consistency as madmen. Consider materialism which, in covering everything, leaves everything out. The blind and inevitable workings of the materialist cosmos

may indeed explain the cosmos, but what a sad cosmos it is! Chesterton is not proving materialism false, but is rather showing how unsatisfactory it is.

Materialism cannot allow fairy dust into its machine. There is no room for the wonderful. Furthermore, there is no incentive for human action, imagination, or virtue. Fatalism, which materialism often leads to, has no need of free will. Materialism has not freed man.

What keeps men sane? Mysticism, mystery. “The morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The mystic [ordinary men are mystics] allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything else becomes lucid” (33). The symbol of the first is the doomed and sterile circle. The symbol of the second is the cross at the heart of which is mystery and whose four arms shoot out healthily and freely.

Chapter Three: The Suicide of Thought

“The whole modern world is at war with reason” (37). The world’s humility is misplaced: rather than doubt man, the world doubts truth. By casting doubt on a man’s aims, this humility kills action. The thought that stops all thought (i.e. skepticism) “is the only thought that ought to be stopped (38).

Religious authority was (and is) not executed for the suppression of reason, but for her defense. Protection of the bishop’s miter is the protection of every man’s head. Reason and faith are “both methods of proof which cannot themselves be proved” (39).

Chesterton briefly looks at a few thought-destroying philosophies of the modern age including evolution. If, he says, all things are in motion it means that nothing is itself; hence there is nothing and nothing to think about. These suicidal modern trends have defeated themselves. They have run their race. Their time is expired.

Seeing reason defeated, the philosophers of the Will have therefore given will, and not reason, ultimate authority. The point is no longer to think, but to *do*. A thinker such as this “does not say, ‘Jam will make me happy,’ but ‘I want jam’” (43). In this way, they hope to escape the fated circle of rationalism.

The doctrine of pure will also proves self-destructive and paralyzing. You cannot will everything. Action is determined by *restrictive* choices. To will to sit is to will *not* to stand. Furthermore, you cannot will a thing to be other than what, by nature, it is. You are “free to draw a giraffe with a short neck;” but then you have not really drawn a giraffe (45).

Chesterton recalls Joan of Arc who chose a path and bolted down it. He compares her with some of the modern thinkers and he finds them pale in comparison. Joan has about her something paradoxical, for she is both gentle and ferocious. Here, Chesterton cannot help but remember Christ, also meek and magnificent. He reflects that the moderns have torn the one from the other (meekness from magnificence) though, in truth, they cannot be separated.

Chapter Four: The Ethics of Elfland

Now we shall look at some fundamental ideas which Chesterton discovered for himself. Like the yachtsman whose new world turned out to be the old world, when Chesterton discovered these ideals he found that Christianity had discovered them long before him.

Chesterton states, at the beginning of this chapter, two principles of democracy. The first stresses that what men have in common is more important and more amazing than what distinguishes them. “Having a nose is

more comic even than having a Norman nose” (52). The second principle of democracy is that one of the things which men have in common is the political instinct. Chesterton next defends tradition as “the democracy of the dead” (53). In other words, just because a man is dead does not mean we should disregard his contribution!

Fairy tales! Fairy tales have a certain way of looking at the world, that is, an “ethic and philosophy” (55), which Chesterton imbibed. For instance, look at law in fairyland. It is an inescapably necessity that “[i]f Jack is the son of a miller, a miller is the father of Jack” (55). That is a law. But that trees bear fruit is not, though science calls it a law. In fairyland a tree does not bear fruit because it *must*, but because it is *magical*. This magical way of talking about the world is not irrational; but science is. “A forlorn lover might be unable to dissociate the moon from his lost love; so the materialist is unable to dissociate the moon from the tide. In both cases there is no connection, except that one has seen them together” (58).

Fairy tales spring from wonder. They are born of the world because the world truly is an amazing, surprising place. Chesterton felt the adventure and romance of life and was grateful before he knew to whom he owed his gratitude.

We continue on to the second ethic of fairyland, “the Doctrine of Conditional Joy” (60). The happiness of those in a fairy tale depended on a tremendous “if.” “They may all live in glass houses if they will not throw stones” (61). This “if” condition, often incomprehensible and bizarre, never seemed unfair to Chesterton. After all, the whole world was bizarre! Keeping a rule seemed to him a small price for being able to walk the precious earth.

Modern thought shocked Chesterton by contradicting the ethics he learned from fairy tales. This shock gave birth to two convictions, one regarding divine will and the other regarding preciousness. The determinists assert that things are the way they are because they cannot be otherwise. But to Chesterton, to whom the existence of things was magical, the fact that all elephants had trunks seemed rather a conspiracy than a necessity. Perhaps the sun rose every day because God asked for an encore. Chesterton already believed the world magical; now he began to suspect a magician.

Modern thought also clashed with Chesterton’s acceptance of limits. He loved the smallness and the preciousness of the world but the moderns loved an empty largeness which only promised more of the same. Man, according to the modern, was either fated or incapable. In either case, the world was a big prison, but still a prison.

Chesterton sums up his attitudes at this point. First, that the world is magic and that the account of the moderns is unsatisfactory. Second, that there was meaning and personal will behind the magic. Third, there was beauty in the meaning. Fourth, that the proper form of thanksgiving was restraint. Lastly that all good had been saved as if from a wreck and was to be held sacred. “All this I felt and the age gave me no encouragement to feel it. And all this time I had not even thought of Christian theology” (70).

Chapter Five: The Flag of the World

In this chapter, Chesterton discusses different attitudes towards the world. His was one of loyalty and patriotism and not of either optimism or pessimism, which are critical attitudes. An optimist is loyal to the point of blindness; a pessimist feels no loyalty towards that which he chastises. The problem is being able “to hate [the world] enough to change it, and yet love it enough to think it worth changing” (77). True devotion to a thing makes that thing great and beautiful. One must swear allegiance to the world before one can transform the world. “Love is not blind...Love is bound” (76).

Christianity enters Chesterton's considerations when he deliberates upon the difference between a suicide and a martyr. The one is horribly indifferent to all external things, the other desperately in love with an external thing, and both throw their lives away. Did Christianity also feel "this need for a first loyalty to things, and then for a ruinous reform of things?" (79).

Pantheism, the blind love of the world, ends in nature worship, and nature has her dark, destructive side. On the other hand, Stoicism preaches indifference to the world. At this point, enter Christianity, bearing a sundering sword. Christianity's God is a creator, someone separate from His creation and who, in a sense, flung away His creation. "He set [the world] free" (84). He wrote for us a play and we screwed it up. Here, in Christianity, is the solution to the dilemma of blind love versus carelessness. Christianity allows one to love and to chastise the world for the world's sake – to love it destructively and to hate it creatively.

With joy, Chesterton heard Christianity's key fit the lock. And bolt after bolt clicked. Now he knew the world was magic, because he had found the magician. The Doctrine of Conditional Happiness described the Fall. The world is small and dear to its artist. Most of all, Chesterton discovered true optimism. "The optimist's pleasure was prosaic, for it dwelt on the naturalness of everything; the Christian pleasure was poetic, for it dwelt on the unnaturalness of everything in relation to the supernatural. The modern philosophy had told me again and again that I was in the right place, and I had still felt depressed even in acquiescence. But I had heard that I was in the *wrong* place, and my soul sang for joy...I knew now why grass had always seemed to me as queer as the green beard of a giant, and why I could feel homesick at home" (86).

Chapter Six: The Paradoxes of Christianity

Life is complex. And a bit irregular. Just as one is about to assume, say, that man is completely symmetrical, one finds a heart only on his left side. If there is something odd in Christian theology, it is because it coincides with the oddness that exists in life.

The modern anti-Christians Chesterton read in fact led him back to Christianity. They confused him by accusing Christianity of contradictory faults. The same teachers, who told him that all men everywhere have always held morality in common, discredited Christianity. Her meekness is unmanly, yet her wars drenched Europe. The Church was too austere, and the next moment too extravagant. If Christianity really was this way, Chesterton reflected, it must be wicked beyond wickedness, a superhuman evil.

Suddenly, he wondered: suppose Christianity was right and the moderns wrong? Suppose the sickness was the critics' and not Christianity's? He came to realize that, for example, Malthusians attacked Christianity "not because there is anything especially anti-Malthusian about Christianity, but because there is something a little anti-human about Malthusianism" (97).

How was it that Christianity appeared insane and was, in reality, quite balanced? Quite simply, "Christianity got over the difficulty of combining fierce opposites, by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious" (101). The martyr loves life with such intensity that he throws his life away. We must sincerely love the criminal and sincerely hate the crime. The fact that Christianity upholds both propositions provides structure for them both to "run wild" (102). Some Christians are monks and some Crusaders; they balance each other without diminishing each other. To make the lion and the lamb lie down together without making the lion lamb-like or vice versa is difficult, but it is feat of Christianity.

Chapter Seven: The Eternal Revolution

We have spoken of esteeming the world in order to make it better, but what does better mean? We cannot get our ideal from nature because she has no standards. We cannot get them from pure time because today's standards are outmoded by tomorrow. We cannot listen to the fatalist, for whom things will get better anyhow.

We must have a *vision* towards which we progress. The blunder of our age is that it keeps changing its vision. Consequently, progress becomes impossible. You cannot reform without a form.

The requirements for freedom are three. A fixed ideal is indispensable. Action and endurance depend upon it. A fixed point existed in Christianity: Eden. Christianity says that if a thing is sinful, it must be thrown off. So saying, it makes possible revolution, which is also restoration.

Second, the ideal must be composite. If we are to create a work of art, we need a balance of mastery and respect, of energy and restraint. Christianity professed the proper attitude towards Nature, and she knew the personal, artistic, ordering God.

Lastly, watchfulness. We must guard the ideal. Since things tend towards disorder, one must be alert. Human institutions constantly turn against their benefactors. And lo! Christianity had always taught that men were inclined to evil. Christianity admonishes us to take care: evil lies not in institutions but in man, and anyone, especially the rich and comfortable, may fail at any moment.

Christianity is democratic in the sense that it seeks out the lowly. The saving quality of English aristocracy is that it takes itself lightly. It does not assume a man morally upright because he is an aristocrat. Chesterton concludes that equality is necessary in his Utopia. Once again, he found that Christianity supported his conclusion.

Chesterton closes with a comparison of his Utopia with that of the Socialist. Socialists want complete liberty. He desires the freedom to bind himself. There is no adventure and no romance in life if there are no consequences for one's actions. Christianity, in promising consequences, promised adventure.

Chapter Eight: The Romance of Orthodoxy

Chesterton now makes it his burden to show us how “liberal” (132) theology would result in illiberality and in alliance with oppression. Consider the following matters, beginning with miracles. If one is to be liberal, one cannot believe in miracles. But disbelieving in miracles amounts to believing in unalterable fate. This may be logical, but it is not truly liberal, for it denies the freedom of God.

The second point is made through a comparison of Buddhism and Christianity. It is said by liberals that religions are the same in creed and different in appearance, and they say this even about Christianity and Buddhism. But reality is otherwise. Buddhism and pantheism join hands in declaring that all are one and worthy of love; Christianity declares personality, which requires separation from oneself and makes love possible. Christianity bears a sundering sword. Because of this, the Christian can look about him at the separate world in astonishment and with vigilance. But the Buddhist's eyes are closed. Action, like dethroning tyrants, requires that all things are not equally desirous. No tyrants are dethroned if all is one and good. Therefore, “[i]f we want reform, we must adhere to orthodoxy” (141).

The third matter under discussion is unity v trinity. Here we find that believing God is a society is much healthier for human society than believing in a lonely God.

Fourth: predestination. The story of life is terribly exciting because it can end as its hero decides. If the story is to end well, if moral reform is to have any effect, it must be willed and active. The God of Christianity Himself was a rebel, passing with tremendous courage through agony, doubt, desertion and death. So then, orthodoxy proves itself the “natural fountain of revolution and reform” (145).

Those who fire their arrows at Christianity find themselves wounded by their own barbs. They cannot take heaven; they only succeed in destroying earth.

Chapter Nine: Authority and the Adventurer

Thus far, Chesterton has given shown us how he believes Christianity supplied him with answers in regard to reform, liberty, and order. But the question may be posed: why not take these comprehensible answers and leave behind the rest of Christianity, the incomprehensible doctrine? Why must Chesterton be a Christian?

He answers, for one, for the sake of logical consistency. “I find, for some odd psychological reason, that I can deal better with the exercise of a man’s free will if I believe that he has got it” (149). Moreover, he discovered that objections to Christianity were good objections, but false. Thus a modern might say that men are merely animals; really they are gapingly different. The modern man objects that religion grew out of the darkness of pre-history. How would he know? It’s pre-history. Again, they object, Jesus was gentle and ineffectual. But Chesterton read the Bible and found the real Jesus full of violence and might.

The question is not, for Chesterton, why be Christian? Rather, his question is, where do I find a satisfactory explanation of man and the world? The answer is creation and the Incarnation. Chesterton is Christian for a multitude of reasons.

It remains to defend the “objective occurrence of the supernatural” (156). He believes this on the strength of “human evidences” (157). Not to believe in miracles would be like “reject[ing] the peasant’s story about the ghost either because the man is a peasant or the story is a ghost story” (157). The one objection is undemocratic, the other materialist. Other objections directed against the miraculous are circular.

Christianity is Chesterton’s living teacher; any day he could be taught a new truth. When he was a child, he found his mother proved right again and again. The Church has done the same with the addition that she *cannot* do otherwise. Like his father, the Church may any day make sense out of the marvelous world’s oddities. Her doctrine may be unattractive, but it leads to energy and happiness. Those who deny meaning to the world (authority), deprive themselves of romance (adventure).

The “primary paradox of Christianity is that...the normal is abnormal” (165). The Fall means that what is natural to man is something he has never fully known. The only proof of this is life.

Here we find a final word on joy and sorrow. The earth delighted pagans. They rejoiced in things, and those things were small. They could not look happily heavenward. Modern man does the same. This is because he is upside-down. Yet grief ought to be small, and joy ought to be cosmic. It is for the Christian. The pagan joy is small but flaunted; the Christian joy is cosmic but hidden. God showed us His tears and His anger. The emotion too mighty for Him to show, the emotion He took with Him into deserted places, could it be His mirth?