

# **A WORLD OF WONDER:**

## **G.K. Chesterton and the Literary Imagination**



**A Collection of Papers presented at a conference of the  
Australian Chesterton Society**

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**Campion College Australia**

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# Introduction

## Karl Schmude

The 2016 conference was organised by the Australian Chesterton Society and took place, as in past years, at Australia's first Liberal Arts institution of higher education, Campion College in Sydney

The coincidence of these names – **Chesterton** and **Campion** - has an echo in Australian history, and particularly Australian Catholic history. It was in the 1930s that the Campion Society was created – as Australia's first lay association for Catholic adult education. In Western Australia, the name adopted for the Campion Society was, in fact, the Chesterton Club. So it is doubly fitting that the Australian Chesterton Society, which was founded in the West many decades later (the 1990s) – through the great initiative of Mr Tony Evans, now retired in England - should be hosting this year's conference at Campion College, which has happily served as the venue since 2007.

The theme of today's conference is '**A World of Wonder**', and our focus is on the literary imagination. It's worth recalling that Chesterton was an artist and a poet before he became prominent as a journalist and an apologist. His first books were collections of poems, and his first formal study – if one can regard Chesterton as doing anything formal! - was at the Slade School of Art. So Chesterton could capture reality in a few words, the way a poet does, and in words he could draw pictures of reality, the way an artist does.

This year's conference focuses on the literary imagination – the capacity of the imagination to capture truths and realities that are often obscured by cultural fashion, and can especially be deadened and distorted by familiarity. In the Introduction to *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton put it this way:

*We must invoke the most wild and soaring sort of imagination; the imagination that can see what is there.*

For Chesterton, the imagination was not a faculty of invention: it was a faculty of discovery - of perception, of penetration. It enables us to imagine the truth – not by making it up, of seeing something that is not there; but of recognising, more deeply and more intensely, what is there. Imagining what is not there would be a fantasy, but imagining – or re-imagining – what is there, in the way that Chesterton did, is to discover the truth – to connect with reality.

This is, I think, sharply different from our present-day understanding of imagination and creativity. We are inclined to see the imagination as a way to be original – and of 'creativity' as inventing something that does not exist. But Chesterton's view was

different. It was summed up in the way that he came to Christianity. As he explained in the opening chapter of *Orthodoxy* (1908), he set out to be original and create a heresy of his own; and after he put the final touches to it, he discovered, to his embarrassed delight, that it was orthodoxy!

In an image that has a special resonance for us in Australia, Chesterton recalled how he fancied he was an English yachtsman

*who slightly miscalculated his course and discovered England under the impression it was a new island in the South Seas. . . . What could be more glorious than to brace one's self up to discover New South Wales and then realise, with a gush of happy tears, that it was really old South Wales.*

At the heart of this was a sense of wonder, and among the most significant of Chesterton's gifts was his ability to experience wonder and to excite a sense of wonder in his readers. He felt this from childhood, and early in his literary career (1903), he wrote:

*Of one thing I am certain, that the age needs, first and foremost, to be startled; to be taught the nature of wonder.*

He never lost this sense, and it is a fundamental reason why his literary imagination remains so fresh and effective – in anything he wrote, whether fiction or non-fiction. And it's a fundamental reason for this year's conference.

# G. K. Chesterton: The Journalist as an Artist

Greg Sheridan

Thank you very much for inviting me to talk to you today. What a joy it is! Karl Schmude did invite me to come and address the Chesterton Society years ago, and I said "Karl, it's blatantly obvious that I'm not qualified. I'm a complete amateur. Your society is full of serious Chesterton scholars." And he said, "Don't worry, they'll forgive you your amateurism, that's okay!" You can see, when I was younger I had higher standards, I wouldn't subject you to my amateurish reflections.

I do want to thank Karl for organising these few days that my wife Jessie and I have been spending at Campion College. What a magnificent thing Campion is! The hardest thing in Western culture is to transmit the substance to the next generation, the young folks. Here, Campion has a hundred students and a hundred-fifty graduates or so. This is a spectacular achievement. Karl talked about the idea of Campion College for roughly the first hundred-fifty years of our acquaintance, and I presumed it was one of those happy topics of conversation - like I used to talk about how I was going to lose weight and get fit. But somehow or rather, *mirabile dictu*, it's like you're in Brazil and you've come across the lost city of El Dorado! Here it is, it's amazing.

I am going to talk about Chesterton the journalist, a subject I love to talk about. Although, I am a true journalist and I hate talking to an audience that knows more about the subject than I do. It's very tricky, so you'll forgive me if I make any mistakes. And if you disagree with me on anything that I say, I'd suggest only two things. I'd offer the response of Abraham Lincoln to his critics, "you may be right," and I'd invite you take up any troubles you have with my wife after the lecture!

Chesterton has been an inspiration to me as a journalist and as a human being. I don't want to make this a kind of American personal testament, but certainly Chesterton was one of the big influences in moving me into the career of journalism. Very young, just as my early memories of Karl are lost either in the shrouds of early onset of Alzheimer's or simply the mists of history because it is so long ago, I can't actually remember when I first came across Chesterton. He seems to have been always there. I guess going to a Christian Brothers' school in the early 1960s, Chesterton was part of the atmosphere. I can't remember what was the first thing of his that I read or when I read it, it's just something that I've always known. But he certainly was one of the reasons I went into journalism. And of course, I love his aphorisms. One in particular I've lived my entire life by - and I can say that in this

matter I have lived up to the Chestertonian ideal. I'll make this bold boast without any false modesty or indeed any true modesty, without any modesty at all. As Chesterton said – and I take this as my creed – “anything that is worth doing at all is worth doing badly.” I have fully lived up to Chesterton in all these years.

I take the liberty of telling you who are the writers who have most influenced my outlook on life. I would say they were Chesterton, George Orwell, P. G. Wodehouse, Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, American writer John P. Marquand, C. S. Lewis, Tolkien, and Malcolm Muggeridge. Really, that list is a bit middle-brow, isn't it? I don't think I'd qualify for a place in the academy with that list. But it's interesting that three of them – Chesterton, Orwell and Muggeridge – were journalists. Chesterton and Orwell, I think, operated on a different level to Muggeridge. As much as I love Muggeridge – and I think his memoirs, *Chronicles of Wasted Time*, are one of the great books of the twentieth century – Chesterton and Orwell were intellectuals operating on a different level from all the other people on that list.

There are some really interesting connections between Chesterton and Orwell. Orwell got most of his first journalism published in *G. K.'s Weekly*, and they had in a sense much of the same political outlook. As many of you know, Chesterton was an energetic liberal, and in his early days so was Orwell - and in his later days so was Orwell. Obviously, there were many things they disagreed on - for instance Orwell didn't believe in God - but their outlook and political temperament were quite similar. Not their personal temperament: Chesterton was a very happy fellow, whereas Orwell was a very glum fellow.

They both taught me how to think. Orwell was not so great a writer as Chesterton, but there was always a strength about his prose – a directness. This was something he shared with Chesterton: a love of physical observation, of concrete reality. Orwell is a great teacher to young intellectuals. He says, don't start with abstract ideas or abstract words, start with the concrete. Always root your thinking in the concrete, and then move on to the abstract after you've observed the concrete. I shouldn't say this in the confines of Campion College, but it's noteworthy that neither Chesterton nor Orwell attended a university. Their genius was not corrupted by Oxford or Cambridge, which even then had plenty of corruption to offer.

Chesterton, much more than Orwell, was a tremendous influence, and really I think he was the most extraordinary writer I've ever encountered, almost impossibly rich.

While I love and admire Chesterton, let me start by being disagreeable because I am, after all, a journalist, and we are paid to be disagreeable. Our job is to cause trouble. Our question is, “Where's the dynamite?” We want to throw the dynamite – that's our job. So let me say a few things about Chesterton the journalist that I disagree with. There's almost nothing with Chesterton the theologian or Chesterton the historian that I disagree with, I just learnt enormously from that. Chesterton was a wonderful journalist. He once said that he wanted to be the forgotten victor of a thousand temporary battles which were forgotten because they had been won, and

he didn't expect his journalism to live on forever. Of course, his journalism contains some of his cleverest writing and thinking. But, it also contains, I think, a number of mistakes. Those of us who love Chesterton just have to acknowledge the mistakes. (Apart from the mistakes, sometimes I have found Chesterton a bit too rich. It was like a cup of tea with too much sugar in it: you had to drink a sip and then go drink something a bit more tepid.)

But in his journalism I think that Chesterton did make a few mistakes. There is the question of his attitude to the Jews. Now Chesterton was not a virulent anti-Semite, but he did write things about Jews that I think were just wrong. There's no other way of getting around it, they were just wrong. He also opposed women's suffrage. His articles opposing women's suffrage are very eloquent and powerful on the role of women in the home. Of course, modern ideology is at war with human nature, trying to pretend that men and women are exactly the same, or even worse than exactly the same, somehow or rather interchangeable, and just exist in a fluid mix. Modern ideology has gone crazy, but I don't think I can go down with Chesterton along the line of saying that women shouldn't be allowed to vote.

I don't think he understood modern economics much at all, but of course his intellectual instinct, which was to favour the small against the large, to favour the small battalions, and to argue that mass society and mass production would be impersonal and alienating, that was a very profoundly good instinct. I remember sharply reading a column of Chesterton's in which he said it was essential for the future of England that every man own a cow so that he can produce his own fresh butter. Now, even in Chesterton's time, some millions of Englishmen lived in tiny, little terrace houses in London and Manchester and Birmingham and so on, and if they put a cow in the lounge room they wouldn't have had any room for themselves, and they wouldn't have had any food to feed the cow even if they would've got fresh butter out of it.

So I think that sometimes we, his admirers, can make a mistake in not acknowledging his mistakes. But, the mistakes are as nothing compared to the things that he got right, and the giant mountain of achievement of Chesterton.

What did Chesterton teach me specifically? Let me just list a few things. He might have taught you other things because there is such a rich compendium. He wrote so much - God bless him! He was a journalist in the core of his being for this reason. One of the reasons that he always wrote was that he always needed the money, and that sets a journalist apart from any other kind of scribbler. We really do need to be paid. We write to get to an audience and to be paid. Chesterton didn't want the money just for himself, of course - he was supporting a million other causes - but he was always meeting deadlines and pumping out columns. He was the absolute opposite of the sort of Cyril Connolly, "enemies of promise" kind of dilettante, sniffing the air, strolling through the garden, and inviting his soul. There was none of that about Chesterton. He was always busy staying up late, writing columns, meeting deadlines, all the rest of it, and that I think was actually an element of his genius.

Chesterton taught me a lot of things about how to think and about how to do journalism. He had basic insights which informed everything else. One thing that he taught me was that truth is always a living balance. You can't collect truth as a single static statement. It's always a balance of competing truths. The very nature, the essence, of truth is to achieve the balance somehow. Most heresy doesn't start with a lie, it starts with a truth that is held without balance against the other truths. So, fanatical nationalism starts with decent patriotism, but then it doesn't allow for any other truth to come in and qualify it. There's that very famous phrase of Chesterton's from his book *Orthodoxy* where he gives the image of truth as a chariot racing ahead. He sees, as the chariot swerves to the right and swerves to the left, "the wild truth reeling but erect" - a phrase that's always stayed in my mind.

Chesterton taught me, too, that faith is the basis of reason. There's that marvellous passage at the start of his autobiography where he says, "my name is Gilbert Keith Chesterton and I was born in such and such, the son of so and so." And he says, "I have no direct evidence of this, I accept this truth entirely on the basis of oral legend. I have seen no documentation. I have no rational, provable way of establishing this. I, in fact, believe it as a matter of faith." Of course, it's the sort of faith people have all the time. It's the faith in someone who has told them something. Now, I couldn't operate any machine, but I couldn't even do as little as I do without faith in the engineers who tell me that it's going to work. Faith is not, as our age sometimes asserts, the enemy of reason. It's the basis of reason.

Chesterton taught me about the absolute immutability and changeless nature of human nature; that, while culture is very important, the essence of humanity is always the same. He did this in the single marvellous image at the start of that great book, *The Everlasting Man*, where he says, "Well, what do we know about the most primitive being that we know of? We've got their cave paintings and nothing else. What do the cave paintings show us? They show us that primitive man liked to have artwork in his living room and was a bit of an artist in his spare time. So, very, very similar to middle-class Englishmen of the twentieth century." In that one image Chesterton captures a whole body of truth, and then you can kind of forget everything else, about social evolution and acculturation, and certainly any racial distinctions that people might like to make. Human nature is unique, divine, universal and immutable. Human beings are essentially the same as they were three thousand years ago, or forty thousand years ago for that matter.

He also taught me - and this is terribly important - that intellectual life, and above all, intellectual combat, is great fun. It's mortal, it's serious. You're conducting a serious battle against serious enemies, but it's enormous fun. No one entered controversy with more exuberant enjoyment and good will than Chesterton. Contrast this a little bit with his friend Hilaire Belloc. He commented ruefully once that there's something very sundering about Hilaire's hostilities. Chesterton had a few disputes in his life that became very bitter and personal, especially concerning his brother Cecil, but generally the people that he debated against were his best friends. He always had

the greatest concern and good will towards and from people who disagreed with him comprehensively (which of course didn't stop him from taking their arguments apart all the time.)

Chesterton also taught me - and this is something he shared with Orwell - to argue from first principles; that the most powerful arguments about public affairs come from first principles; that you can observe the world with an unflinching regard for reality, but also you can occasionally measure the events of today against an eternal standard. You shouldn't be embarrassed about doing this. You might make a mistake from time to time. In fact, you're bound to make a mistake from time to time; as I say, I think Chesterton made plenty of mistakes. Anyone who writes two or three columns a week is going to make lots of mistakes. The very first column on Hitler by the American foreign policy guru, Walter Lippmann, was full of praise of him. Not because Lippmann was a Nazi, but because he only had two tiny bits of information when he first wrote his first column. Of course, he corrected it in subsequent columns. The price of entering the debate all the time is that you're going to make mistakes, and you can't shield yourself from them by trying to make your arguments little. That just means that your mistakes are little, but so are your achievements. Chesterton's arguments were big. He would argue from first principles, he'd observe reality honestly, and he'd measure things against an eternal standard, and he did that for the secular press. That was a great achievement.

Chesterton had a superb understanding of journalism. He saw both the paradox and the romance of newspapers. There's that marvellous passage where he comments on how deceptive newspapers are. For someone who has worked for thirty-two years for *The Australian*, and forty years in journalism, I identify completely with his construction. Chesterton said, every day the newspaper comes out, and it is full of straight lines and orderly progressions and neat sections, and everything is in its place and there's a place for everything, and there's a cartoon in the same spot everyday, and the front page is not smudged, etc. But behind this facade of orderliness lurks a history of absolute chaos the night before, of desperate innovation, wild romance, furious dispute, impossible deadlines, a race to get something in on time, knocking out one front page story with another, pulling things together at the last minute, changing the front page after the print run has begun, and pulling papers back and putting new ones in, a terrible clash of egos between writers, huge clashes of views, furious arguments about what should be on the front page, what line the editorial should take! All of this tumult and romance produces this staid looking, orderly newspaper every day. Nothing could less look like the process that produces it than a newspaper. Chesterton, of course, could not have understood that had he not have been a journalist himself.

One of the great things about Chesterton and Orwell is not just that they were great writers who dabbled in journalism. They were great journalists. They were both immensely proud of being journalists and would have described themselves all their lives as journalists. Of course they were journalists who wrote books, but there is no

prohibition on journalists writing books. Lots of journalists write books, and I've even done a bit of it myself. But their identity was an identity as journalists.

I think Chesterton's greatness in part comes from his journalism, although he is remembered for his great books (i.e. *The Everlasting Man*, the *Autobiography*, *Orthodoxy*, the books about Thomas Aquinas, St Francis of Assisi, etc.). Nonetheless, an essential part of Chesterton's genius came from his journalism. Some literary critics have argued that if Chesterton had not spent so much time on journalism he would have written more great books, and they even produce some evidence and say that when he gave up editing for a while he was able to work more fully on a book. But, I think this is wrong on two levels. First of all, I think it was Chesterton's immersion in day-to-day realities in journalism which fed so many of his higher insights. He was rather a large person and didn't get around all that much in the way that Orwell did. Orwell went on his reporting assignments that produced *Down and Out in Paris and London*; he went to war in Spain; served in India, etc. Orwell was a traditional journalist, out and about seeing things with his own eyes. Chesterton saw a lot of things with his own eyes, but I think that, because he was a bit less mobile than Orwell, the very business of producing and editing all the journals that he was associated with, and the need to turn his mind to columns time after time after time, gave him that involvement in the day-to-day concrete reality which I think was an engine for his deeper writing, and gave him so much material for his deeper writing. I think that's true about the best journalists throughout history. I know you've had my colleague Paul Kelly - really, the leader of our profession - talk at Campion College once, and he, like the best journalists, has a lifetime of involvement in the weeds, which they can then take to higher insights.

I think, when history gives us a great genius, it's wrong to cavil about the shape of their lives and imagine that a differently shaped life would have been better. Shakespeare was the greatest poet our language has known, so should we lament that he spent so much time writing plays because we could have had another four hundred or so sonnets if he hadn't wasted his time writing plays? You just can't have that sort of argument with history.

Hilaire Belloc regarded P. G. Wodehouse as the leading prose stylist of the twentieth century, a judgement shared to some extent by Orwell and Muggerridge (although they expressed it a bit differently). I've never seen a comment of Chesterton's on Wodehouse (although there probably is one, I just haven't come across it). Wodehouse, like Chesterton and Orwell, didn't go to university. He finished high school, and his family lost all its money, and so he went straight into commerce. By the time he finished high school, he'd mastered Greek and Latin perfectly. He could write nonsense verse in Greek and limericks in Latin. Then he had to go into commerce. He hated working in a bank and wanted to make his living writing, so he started as a journalist, and like all the great writers I've mentioned he wrote because he needed the money. Then he became the greatest master of light comedy the world has ever known, and I think one of the world's great prose writers - with an

extraordinary ability to create images, almost unparalleled in English literature. If Wodehouse had gone to Cambridge or Oxford, we might have got another classics scholar and he would have been a very good one. But really it's the kindness of God that Wodehouse took the path that he did, and we shouldn't cavil with it. I think this is true of the shape of Chesterton's life that it produced Chesterton, so it wasn't so bad. I think his journalism was central to that.

Chesterton also taught me several particular techniques of journalism. One of his best journalistic insights, and one that I've practised all my life, involved this principle. Chesterton said, "If you want to achieve fame, notoriety and success as a journalist, here is a simple formula that never goes wrong. If you get asked to write an article by a serious newspaper, write something funny, and if you get asked to write an article by a comic newspaper, write something serious, and in both cases the audience will hail you as a genius because you're doing something unexpected." And of course, this is absolutely right. So you treat politics as a joke (but that is no longer inappropriate really), and you treat sport with all the earnest seriousness that it deserves. So you'll find that my articles about the prospects of the Bulldogs winning a premiership in the National Rugby League (NRL) are written with all the passion and commitment of Wilfred Owen in the First World War - there is blood and terror and tears and thunder there. Whereas today in *The Australian*, which I'm sure you're just about to read after lunch, you'll see an article about the Presidential race in the United States in which I begin, "double, double, toil and trouble, what a witches' brew is Obama, Trump and Clinton... fair is fowl, fowl is fair, breathe the filthy air," and then I say, "we're left with Clinton and Trump...eye of newt, toe of frog..." You can see I'm taking this Presidential election with all the seriousness that it deserves!

There's an even deeper insight into Chesterton's advice about being light to a serious audience and serious to a light audience, and that is, don't accept arbitrary boundaries in journalism. In academic and in most areas of life, it's terribly important. If you're a soldier you should be a soldier and not an academic, and if you're an academic you should be an academic and not, say, a gardener. But, if you're a journalist you can have a little bit of the gardener, a little bit of the soldier, and anything you like, as long as your audience finds you interesting and you're telling the truth. Chesterton would write about politics and bring in a reflection from the garden. I myself take the broadest possible view of what constitutes a legitimate subject for a foreign editor to write about, that is to say anything that interests the foreign editor. There was a time ten or fifteen years ago where I used to say to my editors, "I know this column about George Orwell or something may seem to be not exactly a foreign editor's purview, but it's relevant because of x, y, z," and finally the editor-in-chief, who was then Paul Kelly, said, "Look mate, don't give me any of this blood, just write whatever you like. You don't have to justify it, just write the damn column." And then a few years ago I started to write a section in the reviews section of the paper once a month, which comes out on a Saturday. (It used to be a thousand words. They re-designed the section and it's only seven hundred words or

so now). You can write about anything you like that's notionally about culture, and it's where I've often written about Chesterton. But I must say I've often put Chesterton in my main op-ed column as well. When I'm tempted to do it again I say, "I'd better stop, it looks as though I've only read the one author if I keep going on and on." Of course, Chesterton's endlessly rich. You're always tempted to steal another aphorism, another insight; but then I think, "Oh gee, I'd better drop some other names as well because it looks as though I've only read one author!"

The way that Chesterton did influence me as a journalist was just reading so many of his columns, as well as his full length books which are just so much fun to read. There must be dozens or hundreds of collections of his occasional articles, which are absolutely splendid and very similar to Orwell.

Many years ago I bought the four volumes of Orwell's collected journalism and essays and correspondence. Mostly, they are just collections of his columns, which are titled, *I Write As I Please*. There's a freshness to these columns. You think, at the time, these columns wouldn't have been absolutely right on the money. He's seldom arguing about the latest budget proposal at the House of Commons. Orwell was a bit more current affair-sy than Chesterton. Yet, like Chesterton, even though Orwell didn't believe in God, he was trying to measure things against a bigger standard and, therefore, the columns retain their life, their relevance, their interest, all these many decades later. Orwell also did something like Chesterton in writing humorously for serious audiences and seriously for humorous audiences. Famously he wrote the first great literary essay about a popular subject, his analysis of the politics of the "boys' weeklies" in British literature. This was marvellous in Orwell's hands, but it led, I fear, to a terrible academic fashion, to apply the most absurd academic critical theory to anything so that now in a typical literature course in a Western University, it doesn't matter if you're studying Shakespeare or the restaurant menu, you're going through the same tricks with critical theory and semiotics, etc., and that's a terrible disaster. They took the wrong lesson from Orwell. Orwell's lesson was that it was worth having one column about the "Boys' weeklies," and the modern academy has taken that to mean that there's no distinction between what is great and what is trivial in literature.

Orwell also expressed a sentiment which I'm sure Chesterton shared, which is that his literature was at its best when it was serving a political purpose, when it was a kind of journalism. Orwell, I think, was a better novelist than Chesterton. Chesterton was not really a great novelist. *The Man Who Was Thursday* - an extraordinary book - revolutionised English literature in many ways. Again, like Orwell, it led to some bad consequences because it introduced surrealism into mainstream literature. In the hands of Chesterton this was powerful, but in the hands of everyone else it just produced dross. In general, I don't think he was a great novelist, and he never claimed that his novels were his normal form. He said he preferred to hear ideas fighting it out directly rather than disguised as characters. Orwell was a somewhat better novelist than Chesterton, but not really a great novelist. His best novels *1984*

and *Animal Farm* were all about his deepest political ideas, just as Chesterton was always prosecuting his deepest ideas.

As Karl kindly reminded you, and it's part of Karl's generosity so to do, I these days lack Chesterton's girth, although once I was a good bit closer. Whenever I contemplate my new slim-line self, I'm reminded irresistibly of that great line in a Les Murray poem, *Hyperventilating Up Mt Parnassus*, "Never trust the newly thin."

I think Chesterton would've been ashamed of me really, now that I resemble a bit more - without overstating things - the gaunt visage of Orwell rather than the generous amplitude of Chesterton. Certainly I lack Chesterton's ability, and I've only written six books. What a slacker I am compared to either of these men, my journalistic heroes!

I've always had two specific ambitions regarding Chesterton. One was that I wanted to write an article for the *Chesterton Review* one day. But I'll never have sufficient scholarly knowledge about him to do this. I just love him as an amateur, but there is a whole community, a whole worldwide industry of people who have a professional, serious academic interest in Chesterton. How could you discover something obscure enough to get into that journal? Apparently Chesterton once said something disobliging about Australia. Perhaps I could write *Our Great National Grievance*, or something like that for the *Chesterton Review*. In any event, that remains an unlikely ambition to fulfil.

But I do have another Chestertonian ambition: a little while ago, a very small publisher approached me and said they could do an edition of my columns if I'd like. So I went to the publisher that I publish with routinely and said someone else has offered me this, what do they think? And they said, "Well, write another proper book for us first and then we'll give you your self-indulgence for a book of your columns (because books of journalists' columns don't really sell. They sell well among the journalists' family, and that's about it). But if I ever do achieve this book of my columns, I'm going to give it the title with which I'm sure you'll all be familiar, and which I think is one of the great titles in publishing history, and which indeed is an expression of the central purpose of all journalism. And the title, of course, is, "What's Wrong With the World?"!

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**Greg Sheridan** has been Foreign Editor of the *Australian* newspaper for more than two decades. He first worked for the *Bulletin* magazine in 1979, reporting on Vietnamese boat people who came to Australia in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Born in Sydney in 1956, he studied at Macquarie University and the University of Sydney before joining the *Australian* in 1984. He served as a correspondent in Beijing and Washington and later Canberra, and was appointed as Foreign Editor in 1992.

He is the author of several books, chiefly on Asian politics, such as *Living with Dragons: Australia Confronts Its Asian Destiny* (1995) and *Asian Values, Western Dreams: Understanding the New Asia* (1999). Most recently he has produced a memoir of his early years in politics and journalism, *When We Were Young and Foolish* (2015).

# God is Dead: Chesterton, Dostoevsky and Modernity

Symeon Thompson

There is a little known Columbian thinker called Nicolas Gomez Davila, nicknamed Don Colacho. Don Colacho is regarded as one of the most intransigent and reactionary of thinkers. He was not a conservative, as he saw conservatism as merely conserving the last revolution, preferring instead to consider things in light of the perennial philosophy. While he might seem to hark back to some glorious golden age, this is not the case, as he saw that there were always problems, and these problems always came back to human nature. Moreover, while he was opposed to Modernity, he saw it as something that one must nonetheless accept because one can no more live outside of one's time than out of one's skin. But this does not mean accepting the rationale that Modernity provides. He thinks there is a model fundamental rationale as part of reality itself which is something distinct from our take on it. Don Colacho goes so far as to say:

'The death of God is an interesting opinion, but one that does not affect God.'

In this paper I will seek to look at the issue of the death of God - how it was approached by Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and G. K Chesterton.

While my title does include the term Modernity, I will not be dealing with it exhaustively. With the Middle Ages one can point to a certain unity-in-diversity where religion, philosophy, politics, art and so forth were in a sort of sync. This is not so doable with Modernity as it is almost defined by the competing claims and counter-claims of multiple religions and religious understandings, philosophies and political systems. It is not for nothing that Charles Baudelaire, the arch-decadent French poet who is credited with coining the term, described it as the fleeting ephemeral experience of living in urban cities. Thus, I will use Modernity to cover the gamut of thought from the Reformation and the Enlightenment up to and including Darwinian systems and communist philosophies, liberal democracy and modern capitalism, all the way to the post-modern turn of the last decades which has undermined all of it.

In the late nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche announced the death of God. Nietzsche was not the first thinker to propose this idea, but he has become the one most associated with it. Nietzsche was the son of a Lutheran pastor and initially studied theology with a view to going into ministry. However, he found that scholars had discredited the history and central teachings of Christianity, and he dispensed

with it, instead focussing on philology and classics, while also immersing himself in the thought of Arthur Schopenhauer, the philosophical pessimist par excellence.

Over time his views would evolve and change as he struggled to make sense of the world in the absence of God, in the absence of all commonly-held understandings, as he tried to both describe how the world worked and propose a model by which people could live. His conclusions are a matter of some debate, as his writing style tends towards the polemical and the poetical. This is further complicated by the role his sister played during his madness and after his death, where it seems likely that she re-worked certain works to better suit her own anti-Semitism and German nationalism.

When Nietzsche writes of the death of God, he also states that “we have killed Him”. By this he does not mean that we have literally killed God, but that developments in philosophy and the natural sciences have rendered God obsolete. Rather than the existence of God being fact in its own right, God’s existence has been used for a long time as a foundation for other things - be they ethics or morality or civic order or art or philosophy or even the natural sciences themselves - and that, as these other things have been enhanced and improved upon, they no longer need the God they once rested on. Thus God disappears from the equation.

The problem is that God doesn’t disappear completely. Human beings still operate from premises that require a God, or are based on understandings that themselves rely upon things that themselves have God as a crucial feature. Moreover, the death of God as the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong can lead individuals to believe that they are free to do as they wish, and that the only thing standing in their way is society itself. When Nietzsche says that God is dead, it is not a trivial matter, nor a simple declaration of atheism; rather it is a starting point for the reconstitution of the whole of society and human experience.

Fyodor Dostoevsky would agree. Although the exact phrase “Without God, everything is permitted” is likely apocryphal, it nonetheless sums up his greatest fear about atheism and nihilism and radicalism - that it leads to death and destruction and pain; that, far from liberating us and making us better, it makes us lesser, nastier beings. Nikolai Stavrogin, the tragic anti-hero of *The Demons* (aka *The Possessed*) embodies this fear. The name comes from the biblical passage about the Gadarene swine, where Christ exorcises a man possessed by a legion of demons and sends the demons into a herd of pigs who then rush to their death off a cliff.

There are two main intertwined threads in the novel. There is a nihilist group seeking to bring about a revolution and preparing for death, and there is the story of Nikolai Stavrogin, a charismatic young noble and intellectual.

Stavrogin is sophisticated and decadent, a man without fear of God or love of man. He indulges in his basest instincts, all the while feeling less and less, with only more and more extreme actions triggering a response. Stavrogin could have been a great man, but he has been educated from his earliest days by Stepan Verkhovensky, a

Russian intellectual immersed in the latest and most radical of European thought. These ideas have allowed Stavrogin to largely rationalise away whatever pangs of conscience he has as he commits more and more grievous sins. Verkhovensky himself, while a preacher of radicalism, lives a staid middle-class life. He is employed and supported by Stavrogin's mother with whom he has a close relationship. Stavrogin is not the only person to act on Verkhovensky's ideas. Verkhovensky's son, Pyotr, uses his father's teaching as the basis for establishing a revolutionary group dedicated to the overthrow of the existing order. Pyotr's aim, while first appearing to be justice for the underclass, is ultimately revealed to be domination and control.

Stavrogin is conflicted - he can understand and accept both the arguments for Christianity and Nihilism - but he cannot commit completely to either. His sins weigh him down too much for him to completely embrace nihilism, but he has come to identify with them so much that he cannot renounce them. His solution is to commit suicide, but this "solution" is nothing more than the embodiment of his problem, and the sign that he could find no resolution.

An actual resolution to the dilemma of sin and suffering is proposed by Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*. The story is about the young, intelligent and penniless student Raskolnikov who believes himself to be a special, more important person. He describes himself as being 'a Napoleon' after the all-conquering emperor. Raskolnikov is in dire need of funds. He decides to rob and murder the nasty moneylender Alyona, thinking his life being of more value than hers, and that he will be able to use the money for good works. However, he bungles it, and also kills Alyona's innocent half-sister who walks in on him. Overcome with guilt, and suffering in the oppressive St. Petersburg summer, Raskolnikov steadily loses the plot, alternating between an icy, near-manic self-control and fevered anxiety.

As the novel progresses Raskolnikov begins to develop a relationship with Sonya, a pious young woman who has been forced into prostitution to support her family. As they become closer, and Raskolnikov becomes more and more overwhelmed with guilt, he confesses to Sonya what happened. She urges him to confess, but he doesn't wish to; however, other circumstances intervene, and he eventually confesses. Raskolnikov is sentenced to hard labour in Siberia and as he does his time, supported by Sonya, he atones for his sins and comes to redeem himself.

Nietzsche was an admirer of Dostoevsky, describing him 'as the only psychologist from whom I was able to learn anything'. This is unlikely to be because of Dostoevsky's strong Orthodox faith. It is more likely that Nietzsche saw in Dostoevsky a kindred spirit, of a sort. Both men considered God and religion to be an anchor point that restrained individuals from barbarism, and both saw that the developments of the Enlightenment cast doubt on that reality. They differed in whether they saw the death of God as a good or bad thing, but both thought that chaos would result from its widespread acceptance. Nietzsche, however, saw this as part of the progress that would lead to the *ubermensch* or overman, a being who was 'beyond good and evil' as it was usually understood. This contrasts with

Dostoevsky who did not think that would be any such 'progress', and that all that would happen would be the reinforcement of savagery and domination.

G. K. Chesterton was also an admirer of Dostoevsky, describing him as 'one of the two or three greatest novelists of the nineteenth century'. In Chesterton's writings we see a similar approach to that of Dostoevsky. Chesterton takes philosophical debates and dramatises them, turning them into literary thrillers. Chesterton is not, however, seeking to engage in the sort of psychological depth that is a hallmark of Dostoevsky's work. He remarks in his Autobiography: 'In short, I could not be a novelist; because I really like to see ideas or notions wrestling naked, as it were, and not dressed up in a masquerade as men and women.'

The risk in having an approach such as Chesterton's is that an author can resort to straw men that are not representative of the ideas they are supposed to embody. This brings with it a further danger - that readers might assume the straw man to be a real representation and are thus unequipped to deal with actual proponents of such ideas. They may think they stand for one thing, when they actually stand for something else, and, by challenging them where they are not, fail to strike and lose.

It can also lead to the dehumanising of one's adversaries. Instead of being sincere, if mistaken or uninformed, persons, they are coloured in such a way that they are fundamentally wrong in themselves, and one can be secure in one's own rightness, and indeed, self-righteousness. Furthermore, whole classes of persons who hold to particular points of view can be dismissed as being wrong, or less than worthy, merely by virtue of believing in something that we do not. At its worst, people can be dismissed as being not like us, and therefore, not worthy of consideration or respect. This aspect of popular and polemical writing is one we are all familiar with, either when it is levelled at us, or levelled at those we disagree with.

Dostoevsky manages to avoid this due to the emphasis he places on understanding the person who would adopt such a view, and presenting him as roundly and humanly as possible. His efforts to depict people, rather than use them solely as signifiers of some idea or other, give his created universe a depth and breadth, even if it still has a particular philosophical end in mind. This is specifically aided by the amount of detail he puts into his world-building, giving it the appearance of reality.

A similar approach can be seen in the works of Victor Hugo. Hugo goes into so much detail about his characters, such as Quasimodo or Claude Frollo, that one cannot but empathise with them. The reader has little option but to accept the person they are, as they would a friend in their own life, even if they are appalled by their actions, because they've spent so much time with them, and can see all the little reasons that add up to explain them.

Chesterton's fiction tends to be somewhat shorter than Dostoevsky's, and so he cannot rely upon the same level of detailed world-building. This coupled with his stated interest in the ideas themselves may make it seem more likely that he would fall into this trap. However, the point of creating straw men is, as it were, to burn

them at the stake or blow them away in the wind. And this is not what Chesterton does.

As much as Chesterton claims his interest is in the ideas, he is not a philosopher inasmuch as he is a poet. That is to say, he is interested in how ideas play out in life, in how they are lived out by those who have them. He is interested in their causes and their effects, which means he is interested in the persons who have such ideas. As such, for his art to work, even for him, it must be, in some way, realistic in how it depicts its characters and their circumstances. At the very least it must be plausible, and indeed, believable. If it can't be believed, it won't work.

Chesterton does this by sketching out the characters and their circumstances, instead of providing a superabundance of detail. While one wouldn't normally describe Chesterton as a minimalist, due to his life and the painterliness of his prose, he is actually a minimalist in his approach to storytelling. He describes a few key attributes of his characters and their surroundings, so as to plunge the reader into a certain atmosphere. The reader fills in the details within their own imagination, thus turning the sketch into a picture.

If I may quote an example from *The Poet and the Lunatics*:

The inn called the Rising Sun had an exterior rather suggesting the title of the Setting Sun. It stood in a narrow triangle of garden, more grey than green, with broken-down hedges mingling with the melancholy reeds of a river; with a few dark and dank arbours, of which the roofs and the seats had alike collapsed; and a dingy dried-up fountain, with a weather-stained water-nymph and no water. The house itself seemed rather devoured by ivy than decorated with it; as if its old bones of brown brick were slowly broken by the dragon coils of that gigantic parasite. On the other side it looked on a lonely road leading across the hills down to a ford across the river; now largely disused since the building of a bridge lower down. Outside the door was a wooden bench and table, and above it a wooden sign, much darkened, with the gold of the sun's disc faded to a brown; and under the sign stood the inn-keeper, gazing gloomily up the road. His hair was black and flat, and his face, of a congested purple, had all the sombreness, if not all the beauty, of sunset.

The only person in the place who exhibited any liveliness was the person who was leaving it. He was the first and last customer for many months; a solitary swallow who had conspicuously failed to make a summer; and the swallow was now flitting. He was a medical man on a holiday; young, and of an agreeable ugliness, with a humorous hatchet face and red hair; and the cat-like activity of his movements contrasted with the stagnant inertia of the inn by the ford. He was strapping up his own bag on the table under the sign; and neither his host, who stood a yard off, nor the single servant, who moved heavily and obscurely within, offered to help him; possibly through sulkiness, possibly merely through dreaminess and disuse.

Chesterton began as an illustrator, and his style has an effect a bit like that of looking at a drawing versus looking at a photograph. The photograph captures everything,

and therein is its realism. The sketch artist captures a few key points that resonate with the viewer and therein is its realism. Since Chesterton is trying to capture the reality of a person who could hold a particular idea, he must, as a matter of course, capture the person, and not just the idea. This is not to say that he always succeeds, as he does not. But nor does the detail-oriented realist always succeed, as he may get all the details right but put them together wrongly.

But in capturing the person, Chesterton thus draws attention to the person as a person, and not just as a placeholder for an idea. In doing this we are confronted with the fact that the person is the source of the problem - the source of all problems, in fact. By this I do not mean a specific person, or a specific type of person - I mean all persons. I mean fallen humanity itself.

What many of the philosophies - which include all manner of modern philosophies, including modern twists or adoption of older or oriental philosophies - that Chesterton challenges have in common is that they locate the cause of humanity's problems as being something that is extrinsic to, or outside of, human nature. They, quite correctly, identify that something is wrong, but they mistake the cause of that wrong. They point to religion, or economics, a particular sort of political order, natural law, or fate, or civilisation itself as being the problem. They may even point to specific sorts of people - who are never the same sort of person as the one proposing them - as being the root cause of the trouble. And then they propose their solution, which often involves ridding the world of those very things.

Such a process resembles the theory of scapegoating proposed by the great French philosophical anthropologist Rene Girard. Girard proposes that the human response to strife and suffering is to identify an Other, someone within the community, or even outside of the community who is different in some way, and who is guilty of something, but is not necessarily the cause of the particular strife and suffering, and sacrifice that Other, believing that in so doing they will rid themselves of that particular strife and suffering. Fundamental to Girard's theory is the notion of mimesis, specifically mimetic desire. This is the process whereby we internalise the desires of another as we seek to imitate them. Girard identifies this as one of the root causes of conflict, in that by desiring the same thing, persons clash over who should have it.

The significance of Girard's thought is not only in how it identifies the problem - the same problem that both Dostoevsky and Chesterton identify, the problem of the human person looking for a solution - but in his solution. Girard proposes that the solution to violence is to be found in the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ, as the entirely innocent victim who takes upon Himself the sins of humanity, is the model that we should follow in our own lives. This is not to say that we should aim to mimic the life of a first century Jewish man, but that we should internalise His life within ourselves, as ourselves.

The significance of this is not just that we should be Christian, and believe Christian things, attend Christian liturgies, and live a Christian life, but that that very life is also a human life, in the best sense of the world. And the human part of that life, with its understanding of right and wrong and good and bad and beauty and ugliness, is one that does not rely on the Incarnation for its precepts. The Incarnation elevates it to a whole other level, but the human aspect relies upon the fact that it is part of the natural order of things. It is the idea that God is not an arbitrary tyrant who rules by whim and decree, but who has imbued the nature of things with His own self, and in so doing gives us access to part of the story without specific need of His Word.

And it is this that provides the ultimate challenge to Modernity and modern thinkers - that their thought does not change reality. It may change how they interact with reality, it may lead them down the garden path to cavort with the strange things that wait there, but it doesn't actually change things. Dostoevsky shows how things go wrong for those who think it does, as does Chesterton. But Chesterton also shows in a few instances how things can go right.

In *The Ball and Cross* he depicts the constantly interrupted duel between the atheist Scot Mr. Turnbull and the Catholic Jacobite Highlander Evan Maclan. Mr. Turnbull is opposed to religion, seeing in it human suffering, but he is otherwise a good decent honourable gentleman - and one who takes his beliefs seriously. It is for this reason that he wishes to duel with Mr. Maclan, but it is also because of this that he has resisted the various Luciferian temptations that come his way, and rejects the totalitarian blather that is proposed as the best solution. He believes people matter.

Likewise with Mr. John Braintree, the revolutionary trade unionist in *The Return of Don Quixote*. Mr. Braintree is in favour of action against the ruling class, and is opposed to its cant, because he sees how the poor are exploited and ground down because of it. Part of the plot involves a scheme whereby the ruling class decides to exploit a medieval turn in the society to crush the unionist, thinking that the hierarchical and aristocratic nature of the Middle Ages will work in their favour. They, and Mr. Braintree, are shocked to discover that medieval principles properly understood and applied by the Librarian made King-at-Arms that they installed is much more pro-worker than even the revolutionary's ideas.

In conclusion, Chesterton and Dostoevsky see the death of God as something that both does and does not matter. It may change how people act, it may provide a whole list of excuses for them to act terribly, but it does not change the nature of things, and it is first by re-engaging with the nature of things that one becomes more receptive to God. As Don Colacho puts it: The Death of God is an interesting opinion, but not one that affects God.

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**Symeon Thompson** is a graduate of Campion, from where he went on to study at the Australian Film Television and Radio Schools. He is a member of the Film Critics' Circle of Australia, and *News Weekly's* Film and Culture critic since 2012.

# In Quest of Inklings: Some Notes (and a Few Trophies) From A Bookman's Hunting Log – Collecting and Writing about Chesterton and Lewis

Iain T. Benson

## Introduction:

I would like to express my thanks to Karl Schmude of the Australian G.K. Chesterton Society for the delightful and astonishing invitation to give this paper to your Society today and to President Morrissey of Campion for his kind introductory remarks. I say “delightful” because it is a joy to share with knowledgeable people who presumably share my addiction to Chesterton and Lewis and speak the same sort of dialect without translation; and “astonishment” because to be asked to talk about adventures in relation to hunting books by the two great writers in my title is about as close to the core of what I would love to do this morning, here, in this place, as I can imagine - and how often does one get invited to do *exactly what one would like to do*? I know that, as a lawyer, and sometimes as a Professor, that fit between desire and performance is not always, shall we say, exact.

In fact, the term “addiction” that I just used above is not far from the truth in relation to GKC and CSL and my life of skulking around in bookstores searching for the books and pamphlets and ephemera of these great writers (and the wider group known as the Inklings), buying them and taking them home.

There is something of weakness and divinity that gathers around this kind of addiction to books.

I am an admirer of the program called “AA” and have not had to join a group, though were one to exist for what Holbrook Jackson called “Bibliomania”, I would imagine it would operate in this manner:

I would begin this talk to a group like this saying: “Hello, my name is Iain, I am a *Bibliomaniac*” and you would all respond: “Hello Iain”. That wise organization has managed to cure many addictions by drawing to people’s attention their weakness and the need for divine assistance. For those of us interested in these two great religious writers, both the weakness in relation to their books and divine assistance in dealing with it are united in a real and poignant way.

According to AA we should begin like this:

1. We admit we are powerless over books--that our lives might even have become unmanageable.
2. We come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.
3. We make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand Him.
4. We make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves and, I assume, our bookshelves.

I will not belabour the point; you get the idea.

In my case, this collection mania also took the form that I became a facilitator for others - - I sold books - - yes, I confess it! For some years I sold books to pay for my own habit and led others into that direction of the dark side. The book business I ran, on the West Coast of Canada, was called "Benison Books" a clever play on my name and the old word for "blessing" suitable for a Christian book business, I thought. In any case, that little book business led to friendships over many years and helped me to stay close to the pulse of the books I was searching for.

The fact is, that for those of us who "caught the bug" of books and collecting, perhaps, as I did at an early age, it is a matter of gratitude and not a little wonder when we look back and reflect upon the following sort of things:

1. the number of hours spent in searching, first for perhaps obscure bookstores, then, in them, for equally obscure books;
2. the friends made in this mad pursuit, the bags, backpacks, suitcases, carried in trains, buses, on planes, boats of varying sizes (and some, as Hilaire Belloc would have approved, under sail), bicycles, motorcycles and once, in Greece, on a donkey;
3. the adventures shipping, mailing, carrying, cajoling others to carry, pick-up, transport and even smuggle;
4. occasions when a particular book was rumoured to exist at a location then found to have narrowly escaped, sometimes by mere hours, or when a signature, thought to look not genuine, turned out to be, in fact, genuine....;
5. those occasions when a book was passed over as the price seemed "just a bit high" and one realized, too late in retrospect, that that price was not, after all, too much. By then, of course, the book was long gone and often unlikely to be seen again (such as, in my sad case, GKC's "London");
6. Those times when a friend or friendly dealer told you of seeing a book "title forgotten" in a shop that might have been "either in New York or Detroit" or

comments in passing: “did I tell you that I saw a whole shelf of Chesterton first editions in San Francisco?”;

7. Recalling a time when the books bought on a six week tour of bookshops in Britain, resulted in barely enough room for the child-seat containing ones’ child. Fortunately, invidious decisions did not need to be made and all went to the airport..... that little child is the eldest of the seven and works as an eye surgeon in Leeds UK!

There is an adventure in book-hunting; this “gentle madness”<sup>1</sup>, this “bibliomania” adventure continues but in a different form now that the internet has taken some of the serendipitous fun out of it.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once opined: “When Providence places a good book in my path, I bow to Its decree and purchase it as an act of piety”. On this reading, purchasing (and selling) the right sort of books is an act of piety and certainly a vocation. In the brief time this morning, I would like to share some very specific stories with you in relation to some books I have here with me. There are some other books that will interest you that I do not have with me in Australia, but that I will refer to simply because they and the stories related to them are worthy of note.

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<sup>1</sup> The love of books soon spawns the love of books on books!: see, for an example from my shelves, Nicholas A Basbanes, *A Gentle Madness* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995); Holbrook Jackson, *Of the Uses of Books* (New York: Limited Editions Club, 1937); *The Anatomy of Bibliomania* (New York: Farrar Strauss, 1950); *Bookman’s Holiday* (London: Faber & Faber, 1945); *The Reading of Books* (London: Faber & Faber, 1946); *Bookman’s Pleasure* (New York: Farrar Strauss & Co., 1947); G.H. Powell, *Excursions in Libraria: Being Retrospective Reviews and Bibliographical Notes* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1895); Herbert Maxwell, *Rainy Days in a Library* (London: Elliot Stock, 1896). Graham M. Griffith, *Bookmen on Books* (London: Hills and Co. Ltd. nd.); Andrew Lang, *Adventures Among Books* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 2nd ed., 1905); Arnold Bennett, *Books and Persons: Being Comments on a Past Epoch 1908-1911* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1919); Stuart Kelly, *The Book of Lost Books* (London: Viking, 2005); Frank A. Munby, *Publishing and Bookselling* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930); Anthony Blond, *The Book Book* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985); Maurice Sendak, *Caldecott & Co.: Notes on Books and Pictures* (London: Reinhardt Books, 1988); E.S.P. Haynes, *Life Law and Letters* (London: Heinemann Ltd., 1936); Rick Gekowski, *Tolkien’s Gown & Other Stories of Great Authors and Rare Books* (London: Constable, 2004); Allen and Patricia Ahearn, *Book Collecting 2000* (New York: G.P. Putnams, 2000); J.T. Hackett, *My commonplace Book* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1923); John Drinkwater, *A Book for Bookmen* (London: Dulau & Co. Ltd., 1926); Frederic Harrison, *The Choice of Books* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1888); Frederic Harrison, *A Book About Books* (London: John Murray, 1943); John Hill Burton, *The Book Hunter etc.* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1898); Gustav Flaubert, *Bibliomania* (London: The Rodale Press, 1954); Augustus Muir ed., *The Intimate Thoughts of John Baxter, Bookseller* (London: Methuen, 1942); Charles Knight, *Shadows of the Old Booksellers* (London: Peter Davies Ltd., 1927); [William Young Darling] *The Private Papers of a Bankrupt Bookseller* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1932); Austin Dobson, *A Bookman’s Budget* (London: Oxford University Press, 1917); John Carter, *Taste and Technique in Book-Collecting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949). Books on books are their own category of compulsion

## Part 1: Collecting Chesterton and Lewis

The world of book-hunting and buying changed dramatically with the invention of the internet. It could be said that there is a division that ought to be labelled: “BC” (before computers) and “AD” (After Distraction”), or for those who don’t like this division, “BCE” (Before Computer Education”) and “CE” (Computer educated).

In any case, prior to the internet there were not lists of bookdealers and their stocks on line and search engines such as “ABE” to find rare books in a matter of seconds. What we had was not a search engine but, rather, if we were fortunate, a book catalogue or a list of bookstores. We could go to a town and seek out a good used book dealer, and they in turn might have a list of dealers in the same town and one would begin the hunt.

One would then commence the delightful interrogation by asking a dealer, “Do you have any books by Chesterton or Lewis?”, and they might or might not know. A good dealer always knew his or her stock and a less informed dealer or one who had hired a local person with little knowledge of the stock, might not really know what they had. That was always a particular sort of treat, particularly if one saw that the quality of books was high.

Shelves would be scoured, and there, from time to time, one would spy a rarity - one got to know the rarities over time because those were the books one never saw! Sometimes, when one got the mania really badly, one had read about the rarity in the Bibliographies or Biographies. For Chesterton, this was Sullivan and the Supplements including that by my old friend and Inklings dealer extraordinaire, Aidan Mackey, and then the lists in the Biographies of the other writers (and those published by Kent State Press for Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis, JRR Tolkien and the one on Dorothy Sayers’ writing by Colleen Gilbert<sup>2</sup>).

These lists, maddening in their detail, pointed out just how many things one still “needed”, and so the hunt continued for the missing and elusive volumes, which, like migratory birds, often seemed to be in other lands or other seasons.

One such elusive book for most Chesterton collectors and that deemed by John Sullivan to be the rarest Chesterton item is GKC’s short booklet *Lord Kitchener* (1917)<sup>3</sup>. Sullivan said, simply, that “several American collections have, what I have been unable to locate...” and the implication was that one would never see this volume. Aidan Mackey impressed upon me its rarity and said if I ever saw one I should purchase it with all haste “no matter what it cost”. That got my attention.

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<sup>2</sup> Colleen B. Gilbert, *A Bibliography of the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers*, (London: MacMillan, 1979)

<sup>3</sup> Geir Hasnes, in the process of producing what many imagine will be the definitive G.K. Chesterton Bibliography, tells me in a communication from Norway that the rarest Chesterton item in existence is actually a pamphlet (two pages) of a poem he produced as an appeal for the Red Cross. Geir was aware of two of these (both in British library collections). I was able to tell him that I have a third, again obtained many years ago from an English dealer.

Well, one week before Easter, a book-dealer in Vancouver Canada, Don Stuart of McLeod Books, said casually to me one afternoon as I went over his well organized and always worthwhile shelves, that he had recently been in San Francisco and seen a “rather large Chesterton Collection” at Brick Row Books in that city. He said it was a “huge” collection and had been for sale for some time.

I phoned the bookstore that very afternoon and they said they would “fax” me the list and they did so, to my place of work, then a legal job in downtown Vancouver. The list of books arrived and it was, indeed, large, and there, listed, was *Lord Kitchener*. I just about fell over.

It was, of course, Maundy Thursday and they were shut until, horrors, the next week after the Easter long weekend. I recall the exquisite pain of that Holy weekend as I imagined, between the trivium, hoards of people with evil eyes purchasing that rare volume so many miles to the south in San Francisco, and me helpless to anything about it.

The thing I did not tell you was that if I purchased the entire collection (some 50 first editions of the collection they had bought from a priest) then they would give it to me for half price! The cost, however, for a young lawyer with a burgeoning family was large - amounting to a couple of thousand dollars (we’d go on to have seven bean rows, as my late friend the writer Marion Montgomery once called them).

However, with *Lord Kitchener* in that group I was confident that it alone would be worth the cost.

Came the next week, I called the bookstore and, lo, that slim volume *Lord Kitchener* was present and accounted for, had been missed by others, and I became its proud possessor. Also there were many first editions including *Greybeards at Play*, Chesterton’s first book. Later, unbelievably, I was able to locate a second copy in South Africa while a friend demonstrated to me the new thing online - ABE.com. I punched in what I was sure wouldn’t surface and, lo! The mystery of its rarity was solved when Aidan Mackey found a letter to GKC from John Buchan of the Foreign Office written sometime during the First World War, thanking Chesterton for his book which was being translated into Russian and sent there in an effort to get the Russians into the First World War.

The year, you will recall, was 1917, and no copy of the book in Russian has ever, as far as I know, been located. Two copies each in English were lodged in the copyright libraries of the colonies, and then, as with my South African copy, eventually purged from these libraries many years later.

There were two in the UK (one in the Manchester Reading Library and one in the British Library), but when Sullivan wrote his essay, none in private hands in the UK. That might have changed by now, but most collections will never have a copy of this book.

Similarly, *The Turkey and the Turk* illustrated by Christopher Derrick's father Thomas Derrick is a great rarity and I possess Chesterton's Proof Copy of that with his own encilled comments in the margin.

With me here today, I have several books owned by Chesterton and all containing his doodles – he was very hard on books. One, a two volume novel, *Philip*, by William Thackeray was given to Chesterton when he was 16 years old by his grandparents<sup>4</sup>. It is filled with hundreds of pencilled doodles in various colours of pencil. The story of this two volume set and how I came to reunite the two separated volumes is worth telling in brief.

I bought one volume from Aidan Mackey in Bedford. Some years after that, touring the Chesterton Collection then at New College Oxford with my friend, the late Stratford Caldecott, I noticed the other volume on a shelf.

I expressed my astonishment to Strat, and, later, wrote them a letter, telling him that I proposed that what God had joined together mere time and circumstance should not split asunder. The authorities agreed and in exchange for some other books, they sent me their volume. I have both here today. Where ever they end up in future, they shall be together.

Also here with me is GKC's own copy of *Orthodoxy*. It, I suppose, along with Tolkien's copy of C.S. Lewis' "*The Abolition of Man*" which I own but don't have in Australia, is probably my most treasured Chesterlewis item (if there can be a Chesterbelloc, why NOT a Chesterlewis?); Walter Hooper, whom I got to know quite well some years ago, told me that he considered *The Abolition of Man* Lewis' most important book.

GKC left his library in his will to his adopted daughter and secretary Dorothy Collins, and she was instructed to leave the books eventually to the British Library. What they did not want were offered to Aidan Mackey and he, in turn, offered some to me - - including G.K.C.'s *Orthodoxy* which you will see has both Dorothy Collins' signature and GKC's bookplate designed, I believe, by GKC's Father who was a gifted artist. That bookplate contains, ironically, a quotation from the poet Monkhouse, that reads:

*But whether it be worth or looks  
We gently love or strongly,  
Such Virtue doth reside in Books  
We scarce can love them wrongly  
To Sages an eternal School,  
A Hobby harmless to the Fool<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> I thank Geir Hasnes who informed me that "A and S Chesterton" were GKC's grandparents as they were the parents of GKC's father.

<sup>5</sup> The bookplate (of which I have several examples) says, wrongly, "C. Monkhouse" when the poet's name was William Cosmo Monkhouse (18 March 1840-20 July 1901) and the poem quoted on the bookplate (as above) is the last half of the third stanza from "De Libris" see: <http://www.poemhunter.com/best-poems/william-cosmo-monkhouse/de-libris/> (accessed October 28, 2016).

This book and GKC's *The Everlasting Man* can justly lay claim to be amongst the most influential books on the Christian faith written in the 20th Century.

Both Chesterton and Lewis wrote how important the Scottish 19th Century novelist George Macdonald's works played in their own lives. Chesterton wrote the Preface and Introduction to a very hard-to-find book *George MacDonald and His Wife* written by Macdonald's son, the physician Greville Macdonald, and C.S. Lewis called Macdonald "his Master" and wrote a difficult-to-find book on Macdonald.

I was thrilled to find a signed copy of Macdonald's book, much admired by Lewis, *The Diary of an Old Soul*, and a set of the collected works of Macdonald - difficult to find in any edition - I found mine in Sterling Scotland and still remember the shock of seeing it on a shelf and the delight in checking through the volumes to determine that all were present and accounted for.

So much for the thrill of the chase - what about writing about these great writers.

## **Part 2: Writing about Chesterton and Lewis**

Sometime in the 1990's I became acquainted with New York banker and man-about-town George Marlin. Later I was to visit him high in his office atop the World Trade Centre. He was then the Head of New York's largest employer, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. He lost his job some time before 9/11 so was not there on that fateful day, but I well remember visiting him in his office and then writing a poem about it. It is called "The View from the Top" and someday I hope to publish it.

George, long before he took on this appointment from the Governor of New York, had also written, with some friends, two lovely volumes published by Ignatius Press, *The Quotable Chesterton* (1986) and *More Quotable Chesterton* (1988). He asked me, over lunch in Seattle, if I would be willing to edit one of the volumes of *The Collected Works of GK Chesterton* then being planned by Father Joe Fessio's wonderful Ignatius Press out of San Francisco. I was honoured, and accepted. He offered me several volumes, and for reasons I cannot remember but I think had something to do with George thinking that one of the books was very philosophical, I chose Volume VII, three novels: *The Ball and The Cross* (1909), *Man Alive* (1912) and *The Flying Inn* (1914). I accepted; years passed, life got busy, jobs came and went, children were born and then, in or around 2002, I was told by Ignatius that Volume VII was now conspicuous by its absence - the volumes on either side having been published. I was given a gentle ultimatum....."either give us the manuscript within six months or we shall have to ask someone else to do that volume".

That provided the incentive I needed and so I got a sabbatical from the think-tank I then directed, and we rented a house close by the castle in Lourdes in France. There in a garden shed I began what turned out to be not just a labour of love but the joyful and difficult task of finding the meaning and sources to the many obscure

references with which Chesterton peppered his novels – particularly *The Ball and the Cross*, that most philosophical work.

Of another novel in that volume, some years earlier, in a chat with former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, he told me that “*Man Alive*” was his favourite book. He told me how difficult it was to find a copy and how thrilled he was to find one at a bookstore in the United States. I recommend *Man Alive* to anyone suffering from depression.

I’m pleased to say that Volume VII of the Collected Works was duly published in 2004 with a 30 page introduction, several hundred footnotes and just short of 700 pages of three of GKC’s most delightful novels.

The most difficult writing I’ve done to date on Lewis was a paper, *C.S. Lewis and Roman Catholicism*, that I was invited to give to the Oxford CS Lewis Society in the 1990’s. I knew the Society would be made up largely of Anglicans and some of those have a rather large bee in their Akubra’s about Catholicism, and so I was very careful to back up everything I would be saying about Lewis and his failure to deal properly with Roman Catholicism in his writings. I shouldn’t have worried as the audience seemed remarkably receptive to the criticisms and perhaps a period of prickliness to “crossing the Tiber”, as they used to call it when someone “Poped” or became a Catholic, was receding. I’m not sure but that experience went well and there was a chuckle when I mentioned a phrase I had heard somewhere about J.R.R. Tolkien saying that C.S.Lewis failed to become a Catholic owing to “*Ulterior* motives.” That paper was detailed and quite long and was available on the internet for years but I cannot now find it. Perhaps it has gone, with missing socks, to join the rings of Saturn?

Beyond that, I wrote three entries to the Zondervan publication entitled the *C.S. Lewis Encyclopedia* - those entries on “Truth”, “G.K.Chesterton” and “Roman Catholicism” were in one of the early books devoted to a systematic listing of Lewis’ thoughts on particular topics.

Finally, time spent with C.S. Lewis’ own library when it was in the Manor house at Wroxton in Oxfordshire, before it went to Wheaton College in the United States gave me the opportunity to go through all the Chesterton books that Lewis owned and make a detailed list of all the annotations Lewis had made in the books. That led to an article published by the Chesterton Review dealing with *The Influence of the Writings of G.K.Chesterton on C.S. Lewis: The Textual Part*<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Iain T. Benson, *The Influence of the Writings of G.K. Chesterton on C.S. Lewis: The Textual Part*, *The Chesterton Review* (1991) 17 (3/4):357-367.  
[https://www.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/purchase?openform&fp=chesterton&id=chesterton\\_1991\\_0017\\_40606\\_0357\\_0367](https://www.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/purchase?openform&fp=chesterton&id=chesterton_1991_0017_40606_0357_0367)

### Part 3: Teaching Lewis

Arriving in Australia to become a professor of law at Notre Dame Australia less than a year ago, I knew that to teach the techniques of law in relation to its end – justice - I needed to overcome two things: 1) chronological snobbery; and 2) cultural relativism.

I begin all my law classes with two books to deal with these: Sophocles' important tragedy *Antigone*, written in the 5th century BC to show the students that the tension between the immanent and divine law is ancient, and secondly, C.S. Lewis' *The Abolition of Man* to overcome the idea of a cultural relativism by showing that there are common principles by the shared laws of human communities globally and across vast spans of time (which Lewis terms "the Tao" or "Way" - and lists according to various legal categories as "Illustrations of the Natural Law").

I point out the shared categories of laws Lewis groups together under various headings (laws of general and special beneficence; duties to parents and elders; and laws of justice, mercy and magnanimity). Taken together, these show that simplistic arguments about cultural relativism are not only false, but leave us particularly open to the "pernicious doctrine" (as A.P. D'Entreves called it in his book *Natural Law*) that "might is right."

Lewis' strong argument remains a powerful case for natural law. It was, after all, an argument influential to many including the BBC Brain's Trust philosopher of an earlier age, noted atheist, C.E.M. Joad, who credits Lewis' argument with his own return to the Christian faith, in a similar manner to which C.S. Lewis himself credited Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* with his coming to Christian conviction as he began to understand the Christian view of history. Thus, Lewis recommends Chesterton's book in a letter from 1950 to Sheldon Vanauken as "the best popular apologetic" he knew."<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion:

What more can one say about hunting for and reading the books of these great and influential men? What can one say that gets anywhere close to the joy of book-hunting, book-reading and book-buying? Perhaps a few words from both writers about books might be a good way to conclude:

From C.S.Lewis on the presence and influence of books in childhood:

*I am a product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics explored in solitude, distant noises of gurgling cisterns and pipes, and the noise of wind under the tiles. Also of endless books.*

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<sup>7</sup> C.E. M. Joad, *The Recovery of Belief* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952) 81; C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955); in Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1977) Letter from C.S.Lewis to author, 14 December 1950, pp 89-90 "Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* [is] the best popular apologetic I know".

*My father bought all the books he read and never got rid of any of them. There were books in the study, books in the drawing room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the cistern attic, books of all kinds reflecting every transient stage of my parents' interest, books readable and unreadable, books suitable for a child and books most emphatically not. Nothing was forbidden to me. In the seemingly endless rainy afternoons I took volume after volume from the shelves. I had always the same certainty of finding a book that was new to me as a man who walks into a field has of finding a new blade of grass.<sup>8</sup>*

And from G.K. Chesterton a warning:

*It seems to me a very dangerous precedent in the reprinting of famous books, that the publisher should cut out what he chooses and never tell us that he has cut out anything. It seems intolerable that the reader should not only remain in ignorance of what he is losing, but remain in ignorance of having lost anything at all. There are people who read old books, and people who refuse to read old books. There are also people who have not read old books but say they have. But it will be worse if we add another class; of people who have not read old books but think they have.<sup>9</sup>*

Thank you for your attention, and may you have much good fortune on the hunt for books and the joy it brings. Remember that “the books we shall have in Heaven” are, said Lewis somewhere in his voluminous *oeuvre*, “the ones we lend in life.”

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**Iain T. Benson:** PhD (Witwatersrand), JD (Windsor), MA (Cambridge), BA (Hons. (Queen's)); Professor of Law, University of Notre Dame, Sydney, Australia; Extraordinary Professor of Law, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. The author would like to acknowledge the kind invitation of Karl Schmude, President of the G.K. Chesterton Society of Australia for the Invitation to give this paper at the Society's 2016 Conference “A World of Wonder: G.K. Chesterton and the Literary Imagination”, Campion College, Sydney, October 29 2016.

iainbenson2@gmail.com

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<sup>8</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Bles, 1955) 10.

<sup>9</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Illustrated London News*, December 12, 1928 quoted in George J. Marlin, Richard P. Rabatin and John L. Swan (eds), *More Quotable Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988) 57-58.

# G.K. Chesterton and Flannery O'Connor: the Irruption of Grace

Gary Furnell

'The only two things that can satisfy a soul are a person and a story; and even the story must be about a person.' As soon as I read that sentence I underlined it. It is in Chesterton's essay *The Priest of Spring*, and it is a neat summary of his philosophical and fictional focus.

'To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.' As soon as I read that sentence I underlined it, too. It's in an essay from Flannery O'Connor's prose collection, *Mystery and Manners*. It was O'Connor's response to a question about her violent stories featuring bitter, proud or petty characters caught in extraordinary and traumatic circumstances, often of their own making. She said she wrote the way she did in order to convey a vision of sin and grace to a secular culture that was 'hard of hearing' and 'almost blind' to these two most basic Christian truths.

Like O'Connor, Chesterton also wanted to convey a religious vision to a culture that had little time for sin, grace or even wonder. We can learn a great deal from both Catholic writers.

Sharing something of O'Connor's brief life is appropriate because she is not well-known in Australia. Born in 1925 in Savannah, Georgia, Mary Flannery O'Connor was educated at local schools, attended Georgia State College for Women, then went to the School for Writers at the University of Iowa. She used her second name – Flannery – because she thought Mary O'Connor sounded less like an author and more like an Irish washer-woman. Her father died of lupus when she was fifteen. Flannery was diagnosed with disseminated lupus – an incurable disease with hereditary links – in 1951, aged twenty-six. She coped with this condition and others – including rheumatoid arthritis, anaemia, and a uterine tumour – all of which robbed her of energy and limited her mobility, eventually leading to her death in 1964. She was only 39 years old. She lived the last thirteen years of her life with her mother on the family's five-hundred-and-fifty acre farm near the small town of Milledgeville, Georgia. Her attitude to her illnesses is captured in a 1953 letter to her friend, the poet Robert Lowell: 'I am making out fine in spite of any conflicting stories... I have enough energy to write with and as that is all I have any business doing anyhow, I can with one eye squinted take it all as a blessing. What you have to measure out, you come to observe more closely, or so I tell myself.'

After her death in 1964, Flannery O'Connor was the first American fiction author to be honoured by the Library of Congress with a special edition of her complete works, and that honour recognises that her fiction has a liveliness, a deep sense of all the human realities, including spiritual and philosophical realities, and that she possessed a unique prophetic vision that needed to be celebrated.

She published two slim novels and two slim collections of short stories; after her death, a volume of letters, *The Habit of Being*, and a collection of addresses and essays, *Mystery and Manners*, were published. Despite the modest amount of fiction she published, I can think of no other twentieth century writer - not even Chesterton, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh or C.S. Lewis - who has as much to offer a contemporary fiction writer with a religious worldview as this sardonic Georgian peafowl-fancier. To anyone interested in writing fiction as opposed to studying fiction, *Mystery and Manners* is a book of very rich practical and aesthetic value, and the best of her short stories are examples of brevity given depth.

When I first read her second collection of stories, *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, I frequently finished each story with a sharp intake of breath. Often the stories ended with a violent event that I didn't anticipate. Nor did O'Connor when she wrote them: she didn't see how a story would resolve until she reached the climax - the violent resolution was as much a shock for her when she wrote it as it is for the reader.

She uses violence for a variety of purposes: to bring characters back to reality; to express a clash of values; and, not least, to explore the mysterious friction that results when the spiritual and the physical collide. One of the aspects I'll explore in this paper is the value of violence in fiction for the writer with a religious philosophy of life, and the differences between Chesterton's use of violence and O'Connor's use of violence.

O'Connor writes, 'Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them.' Her characters, through death, injury or accident, are forced into sudden and agonizing re-appraisals of themselves or their values because they weren't expecting either sin or grace to enter their nicely-ordered lives.

In her short story *A View of the Woods*, a grandfather wants to sell a parcel of land near a highway so a gas station can be built. Grandpa is a go-getter: he believes in Progress, Opportunity and Business. He doesn't get along with the rest of the family but his obvious favourite among the surly lot is his young grand-daughter, whom he idealizes as his one true image-bearer. But she doesn't want him to sell the land, nor do any of her family - their feeling is that the land, even though it's just an unattractive block of poor pasture, provides the context for the family's history. However, the arrogant grand-father persists in his vision of progress and prosperity and sells the land. He and his beloved grand-daughter argue over the sale, and then they fight when he tries to give her a spanking for sassing him. But the spirited girl attacks her grand-father, viciously scratching and biting him. Knocked to the ground, grandpa fights back, gets on top of his grand-daughter and repeatedly bangs her head against the dirt, not knowing the soil hides a sharp rock. He kills his favourite grandchild. He bashes her to death. And for what? Progress? To spite her bitter father and sour siblings? To demonstrate his power over the family and the land? The story ends, as do many of O'Connor's stories, in a moment of personal trauma that allows a grasp of the elemental and the real. And there is no numbing of this traumatic experience for the characters in the stories: the pain is acute and undeniable. In fact, denying the state of their own heart is what they've been doing for too long.

In his book *The Name of God is Mercy*, Pope Francis says this:

*The corrupt man often doesn't realize his own condition, much as a person with bad breath does not know they have it. And it's not easy for the corrupt man to get out of this state by feeling inner remorse. Generally, the Lord saves him through life's great ordeals, situations that he cannot avoid and which crack open the shell that he has gradually built up, thus allowing the Grace of God to enter.*

O'Connor says something very similar in *Mystery and Manners*. She says:

*'...in my own stories I have found that violence is strongly capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept that moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world.'*

In contemporary Australia, we too - it seems to me - are losing our sense of spiritual, moral and economic reality, and if a Christian writer wants to address this loss and to dramatise in fiction, film or play how a return to reality may occur, then like O'Connor, he or she will probably have to use some kind of personalised violence in their stories. It isn't parenthetical but central to this argument to note that Islamists also believe that secular Westerners must be returned to moral and spiritual reality, and the Islamists too have recognised that violence - in their case real violence not fictional violence - is one method to get people's attention and get it quickly. For a religious fiction writer, can I suggest that violence is one dramatic tool that is too little used, whereas it seems sentimentality and miraculous coincidence are dramatic tools that are too often used?

O'Connor explores the extraordinary moments in ordinary lives, moments in which grace or reality violently intrude. But O'Connor's violence is never gratuitous; it is used to reveal fundamental human concerns. She said:

*With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially, and I believe these are times when writers are more interested in what we are essentially than in the tenor of our daily lives. Violence is a force which can be used for good or evil, and among other things taken by it is the kingdom of heaven. But regardless of what can be taken by it, the man in a violent situation reveals those qualities least dispensable to his personality, those qualities which are all he will have to take into eternity with him; and since the characters ... are all on the verge of eternity, it is appropriate to think of what they take with them.*

O'Connor insists that violence or comedy – and both are found in equal measure in her work – are natural consequences if a writer attempts to link a concrete image with mysteries that are invisible, yet as real to the writer as anything that everybody sees. This is the violence born when the distance between the mysterious and the familiar is suddenly compacted. It is the violence that comes when the spiritual and the physical collide. It is everywhere in Scripture, for example. When God's spirit is present, oceans roar and mountains melt like wax, as expressed by the psalmist; when Christ confronts evil spirits, thousands of swine run headlong off a cliff and drown themselves in the sea, as described by the gospel writer. At the resurrection of Jesus, there is an earthquake, the temple curtain is torn in two, rocks are

split, tombs are opened and the righteous dead walk about as Saint Matthew recorded. It is a form of violence perhaps best expressed by the terrible, holy pronouncement, 'No man can see My face and live.' When the spiritual meets the physical, there is violence of some kind; it is either psychological violence or physical violence, but violence will be present to some extent.

Soren Kierkegaard, one of my heroes in the faith, says this in a journal entry from the last years of his life:

*As the fisherman, when he has cast his net makes a noise in the water in order to chase the fish in that direction and make a good haul, as the hunter with his beaters covers the whole ground and disturbs the game so that they concentrated at the point where the guns are placed: so God, who desires to be loved, catches men with the help of unrest.*

*Christianity is the most intense, strong, and greatest possible unrest. No greater can be conceived, it aims (just as Christ's life did) at disturbing human existence to the very depths, at shattering and breaking everything.*

*So God makes use of unrest, he applies unrest in order to catch men who wish to love Him. But the difference from the fisher and the hunter is that God does not apply unrest in order to catch all the more. He does it not for the sake of numbers, but for the sake of intensity; that is to say, when the greatest possible unrest is applied there exists in a man, in the tension, an intensity which brings him to real love of God.*

*But what a man loves is rest, security. Yet it is certain that no one can become a Christian in rest and security. Nor is it less certain that no Christian can remain in rest and certainty. Where a man becomes a Christian, there is unrest; and where a man has become a Christian, there will be unrest.*

The use of fictional violence will cause difficulties for the writer among some of his fellow-believers but the fiction writer does not write for people who have not educated themselves to appreciate good fiction; the fiction writer writes for people who *have* educated themselves to appreciate good fiction. This is what O'Connor wrote about the well-meaning but incorrect expectations of church-people who were in no way qualified to criticise fiction. It is from her essay *The Church and the Fiction Writer*, and it's in *Mystery and Manners*:

It is popular to suppose that anyone who can read the telephone book can read a short story or a novel, and it is more than usual to find the attitude among Catholics that since we possess the truth in the Church, we can use this truth directly as an instrument of judgment on any discipline at any time without regard for the nature of the discipline itself. Catholic readers are constantly being offended and scandalized by novels that they don't have the fundamental equipment to read in the first place, and often these are works that are permeated with a Christian spirit.

In the face of this offense, the writer's sense of vocation will sustain them despite this ignorance and misunderstanding, just as it did for O'Connor who was always being asked to write about nice Catholic people who did good things. She had a better understanding than her fellow church-goers of what an artist in the modern world needed to achieve, and feel-good sentimentality wasn't one of them. O'Connor also had a very strong sense - which she

articulated in her letters - that her vocation was to write fiction rather than non-fiction, and that her particular talent, her vocation within fiction, was to create strange, comical and grotesque characters rather than pleasant and righteous people. In fact, in her fiction, pleasant people are usually unmasked as being well-meaning but deluded and in need of truth, while righteous people are usually unmasked as self-righteous and in need of grace.

This firm grasp of one's vocation together with an equally clear discernment of the type of fiction one can best give life to is critical if the writer isn't to be side-tracked and distracted by demands that they pursue another, more acceptable type of fiction. Fortunately, for her and for us, O'Connor had a strong sense of her vocation as a fiction writer and an equally strong sense of the type of fiction she could best bring to life.

The return of humanity to the real and the elemental is also one of Chesterton's primary themes, with the novel *Manalive* being a perfect example. Chesterton uses a far jollier type of humour and much more farcical story-lines than O'Connor does to highlight how far mankind, especially proudly intellectual mankind, has departed from the real and the elemental. *Manalive* is concerned with almost nothing else but this return to the elemental wonder, delight and appreciation which is humanity's native and best territory. In this fun-filled novel the violence is almost fit for a pantomime as a man sneakily breaks into his own house to get a fresh vision of the wonderful bounty of his possessions, and where he playfully pretends to shoot a life-denying man in order to get the man to a better appreciation of his own existence. It's great to read, and it makes its points in a witty way that hurts no one; however, I don't think it has the piercing quality of O'Connor's portrayal of individuals being returned to reality through her use of violence bringing truth or grace or the results of sin to fully-realised characters.

To get a glimpse of the different uses of violence in Chesterton and O'Connor we can compare the violence of the grandfather inadvertently bashing his grand-daughter to death in O'Connor's story with the brawl scene in the Chesterton's *Club of Queer Trades*. There, six robust men fight in the lounge room of a house: fists are flying and the men body-slam each other; they club each other with bits of furniture but no one seems to get really hurt or to get really angry and vengeful. It's more like a playful scrum between rival rugby players than a real fight with contusions, boiling emotions and sudden pitiless enmity. And right there is one key difference between O'Connor and Chesterton: violence was not incidental to O'Connor but central to her purpose of getting humanity's attention to the great issues of life and death. But for Chesterton, violence was more incidental and the action of grace was largely cerebral, as in many of the Father Brown stories where a dead body is discovered and the story then revolves around Father Brown's observations and thought-processes. It's a more rationally-based elucidation of some aspect of grace rather than a traumatic and intuitive stab of grace. In O'Connor's fiction, violent *bodily* trauma alerts the person's dull spirit to its own lost condition. In Chesterton's fiction, a crisis of *conscience or reason* alerts the person to the need of grace or truth.

I think these two different approaches, Chesterton's approach being more rational, playful and gentle and O'Connor's being much more violent and visceral, reflect their respective cultures as much as differences in temperament and talent. Chesterton wrote, and I'm applying a broad brush here, for an urbane, sceptical, and highly literate readership; that was his common environment as a journalist. Flannery O'Connor's common environment

was in rural Georgia, still strictly segregated along racial lines. She lived on a cattle farm run by her mother; and Georgia's biggest juvenile delinquent detention centre was located nearby. In fact, if any of the boys escaped they would be hunted down, with hound dogs, across the O'Connor property. The tenant farmers on her mother's property were itinerant white-trash agricultural labourers, or barely educated negro house- and farm-hands. And, of course, the woods were thick with all kinds of hillbilly evangelists, Protestant sects and Pentecostal prophets and healers. There are also cultured intellectuals but they, in the late 1940s and 50s, were anomalies in Southern rural society. In O'Connor's fiction, the self-styled intellectuals scorn the rural people, while the rural people merely tolerate the pretentiousness of their college-educated sons and daughters who return home to do nothing but sneer at their surroundings. O'Connor gives these young nihilistic upstarts a consistent beating in her books. It's good to see, and it's one reason I like her stories.

So, Chesterton wrote in and for a society led by an elite who were hell-bent on secularism and with a declining understanding of Christianity, and certainly there was little interest in the doctrines of the fall of man, the devil and his works, or the need for redemption. In Chesterton's England, rationalistic progress was the intellectual fad, until the carnage of WW I exposed that fad as a fraud. In contrast, O'Connor knew she had the great advantage of living and writing in the southern United States where large segments of the population still had a significant appreciation for man's fallenness and a strong feeling for spiritual realities. It allowed her to be more direct and particular in her portrayal of strange Christ-haunted characters, whether those characters were members of Protestant sects obsessed with Christ's truths or secular Liberals who defined themselves by rejecting Christ's teaching. *In Mystery and Manners*, in an essay called *The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South*, Flannery O'Connor wrote:

*The Catholic novelist in the South is forced to follow the spirit into strange places and to recognize it in many forms not totally congenial to him. He may feel that the kind of religion that has influenced Southern life has run hand in hand with extreme individualism for so long that there is nothing left of it he can recognize, but when he penetrates to the human aspiration beneath it, he sees not only what has been lost to the life he observes, but more, the terrible loss to us in the Church of human faith and passion. I think he will feel a great deal more kinship with backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than he will with those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development.*

In that same essay, she observed:

*The opportunities for the potential Catholic writer in the South are so great as to be intimidating...He lives in the Bible Belt, where belief can be made believable. He has also here a good view of the modern world. A half-hour's ride in this region will take him from places where the life has a distinctly Old Testament flavour to places where the life might be considered post-Christian. Yet all these varied situations can be seen in one glance and heard in one conversation.*

This close proximity of the oddly spiritual and the proudly secular also allowed her to be comedic and extreme in her portrayal of religious people who are right in heart however eccentric in practise they might appear. Such characters might seem highly unlikely and deeply unusual for O'Connor's New York book reviewers but many people in the South had a neighbour or a family member who was a religious eccentric; it wasn't unusual for them even if the neighbour or family member was an unwelcome embarrassment. The presence of these strange people in her society gave O'Connor both inspiration and permission to explore their beliefs and rituals, to contrast them with unbelievers, and to put them in conflict with sceptical culture. In other words, the presence of religious oddballs was a particular benefit for O'Connor's fictional purposes, and part of O'Connor's talent was the ability to make these oddballs both real and worthy of a grudging but deep respect.

In the short story *Greenleaf*, one religious oddball, is Mrs Greenleaf, a farmer's wife. She practises a strange type of healing prayer ministry. She cuts out newspaper articles dealing with celebrity divorces, murders, disfiguring accidents, train wrecks and plane crashes, and takes them to a lonely paddock, digs a hole, puts all the newspaper clippings in the hole, replaces the dirt, and then spread-eagles herself on the dusty mound and flays her arms and legs as she prays for healing for the people whose afflictions had been reported. (It's a practice I'd like to see the senior staff at Campion College make a daily routine, perhaps in a discreet corner of the college grounds!) Mrs Greenleaf works herself into a state of tears, wailing and filth, and it's at this point that her neighbour passes by and sees her. The neighbour, Mrs May, about the same age as Mrs Greenleaf, is disgusted by the self-humiliating scene as Mrs Greenleaf continues her healing prayers despite her sceptical neighbour's presence:

*"Oh, Jesus, stab me in the heart!" Mrs Greenleaf shrieked. "Jesus, stab me in the heart!" and she fell back flat in the dirt, a huge human mound, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth.*

*Mrs. May felt as furious and helpless as if she had been insulted by a child. "Jesus," she said, drawing herself back, "would be ashamed of you. He would tell you to get up from there this instant and go wash your children's clothes!" and she had turned and walked off as fast as she could.*

Mrs May was appalled by Mrs Greenleaf's absurd prayers, but the impression I get is that Flannery O'Connor didn't share that feeling. The faith and passion on display were real and vital, even if the particular expression of intercessory prayer was madly astray. Odd people doing the right thing but in weird ways: it's a theme dear to both Chesterton and O'Connor.

Chesterton, of course, also had his goofs and eccentrics. The retired judge that everyone thought was nuts in the *Club of Queer Trades* is one example; the anthropologist, also in the *Club of Queer Trades*, who tries to invent an alphabet of movements for a dancing language; Adam Wayne in *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, and my favourite Chesterton eccentric, Innocent Smith in *Manalive*. They're all oddballs but in the great majority of cases Chesterton's oddballs are consciously using their odd behaviour to make a point. It's a deliberately-chosen form of oddity, and the comedy attached to their oddity is part of their strategy to remind people of life's neglected fundamentals. But in O'Connor, the oddballs and eccentrics are driven by their religious instincts, there is nothing contrived about it. They are deadly serious even if we laugh at them, and they don't mean to turn anyone else

toward the spiritual truth but to gain it for themselves first and foremost. It's their own souls they seek to save, not anybody else's soul.

In the first of her two slim novels, *Wiseblood* - and the title itself is a recognition of the importance of religious instincts to O'Connor and her fictional protagonists - the main character is a demobilised soldier, named Hazel Motes, who travels in a bomb of a car around small Southern towns. He's a sort of street-preacher, but not for Jesus, rather *against* Jesus. Instead of yelling on street corners that people need to be redeemed, he yells at them there ain't no redemption, the afterlife is a lie, Jesus' resurrection never happened, and he tries to launch his anti-church, The Church of Truth without Christ, where the blind don't see, the lame don't walk, and them that are dead stay that way.

Do you think you've been redeemed? There ain't no redemption because there was no Fall, so there ain't no sin, so there's nothing to be redeemed from.

Do you believe in sin? Sin is a trick they tell to fool the uneducated.

I know you have a good car. I'm here to tell you, a man with a good car doesn't need anything more than that to be justified.

Such is Hazel Motes' nihilistic message.

But Hazel Motes has his moment of grace - a violent one, of course - which changes him deeply, and his forms of penance are as extreme as his former nihilistic preaching. He blinds himself by smearing quicklime in his eyes, he puts sharp stones in his shoes and wraps barbed wire tightly around his chest, all of which greatly alarms his landlady who discovers the rocks in his shoes and sees the blood on his sheets. She begins to reprove him for his strange behaviour, but Hazel Motes tells her that he may be blind, but she's the one who can't see. Again, like Mrs Greenleaf, polite society considers Hazel Motes a pathetic crazy-person, but O'Connor seems to portray him as a man who in a strange fashion has a strong grip on invisible realities, a man who is attentive to the demands of the spiritual. It is exactly how Chesterton sees Father Brown and Innocent Smith in *Manalive*, but the means of portrayal adopted by O'Connor are very different from those of Chesterton, even if the point they want to make is largely the same.

I'm not defending the self-harm practiced by Hazel Motes, I only note that another of my heroes, the French polymath Blaise Pascal, deliberately ate very plain food and sometimes wore, around his chest, strapping with metal studs in it as a means of self-mortification. Better that than complete indifference to the realities of holiness and sin and the sacred centre of our lives. In one of my own short stories, *The Ravens Fed the Prophet*, published in *Quadrant* three years ago, I tried to explore the idea in contemporary Australian society of a religious odd-ball who repels people but who nevertheless has hold of something vital. I don't mention this because I think the story is great, but because I can't think of another example in recent Australian literature. A fiction writer with more talent than me might find this field - and this idea - a fruitful one to explore.

The reason I think it is a good field to explore is because the idea of someone doing something strange that's also something right comes straight from the mouth of Jesus. It was confronting and full of dramatic possibility two thousand years ago, and it is still today. Turn the other cheek so you can be slapped again, carry the oppressor's load an extra mile,

pray for your enemies, cut off your hand and pluck out your eye rather than enter hell with your limbs and sight intact. Make yourself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven. Cheer when you're tormented. Rejoice when you're abused. It is the case, as Flannery O'Connor said, that 'You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.'

What gives this type of odd but right behaviour dramatic weight in both Chesterton and O'Connor's fiction is the knowledge that man is not what he should be, nor is the world what it should be. Because both are fallen, both are currently abnormal, and so a return to something like normality is going to look strange. This is in large measure the reason Jesus' teaching did and still does cause offense. This emphasis on present abnormality and the fact that a return to normality is going to look strange, is the unique perspective of the Christian writer, and it adds, or should add, an extra level of rich complexity to religious writing. O'Connor wrote that she was able to portray grotesque characters because she had a vision of what normal humanity should look like. The anthropology of the Church gave her this picture of human normality. In other words, in order to identify abnormality, you have to know what normality looks like, and it won't look like much that you're used to. In a similar vein, Chesterton said, 'The world is so topsy-turvy, that turning things upside down puts them on their feet for the first time.' It turns out that what is commonly accepted by secular culture as normal and desirable is in fact abnormal and grotesque. Critics of religion routinely insist that their feet alone are on the ground but, as Chesterton observed, they say this while standing on their heads. It's no wonder that their perspective is so frequently skewed. Both O'Connor and Chesterton provide a corrective to this distorted secular perspective by turning things upside-down and thus portraying humanity standing properly on its feet, and it is the main reason why their fiction is strange compared to the fiction of their secular peers.

There is an additional reason that a sacred orientation is a challenge - or appears strange - to many people, especially in a secular culture: there is a tendency to see oneself, and to compare oneself, only in relation to other people in the same condition with the same worldview. The result is complacency and self-satisfaction. Kierkegaard provided a scenario to highlight the short-sightedness of this inadequate comparison.

*Imagine a prison, with all the prisoners gathered together – and a man steps forward and addresses them thus: 'My right honourable gentlemen, I request the favour of this respectable assembly's attention and lenient judgement' and so on, then is it not true that all the prisoners would burst out laughing and regard the man as mad for calling them a respectable assembly?*

*The ludicrous element lies in the contradiction between prisoners and 'this respectable assembly.'*

*So they laugh at the ludicrous side of it, and they will have their fun with this speaker; but they will not think of anything else.*

*And why not? Because as prisoners they are surrounded by a much more numerous world which possesses the power to tell them, You are [guilty], thieves, etc.*

*But now imagine this gathering of prisoners as a world for itself, where there is therefore no world round about it which enforced upon them the truth that*

*they are thieves – imagine this gathering of prisoners as a world for itself: do you believe that they would still burst out laughing if someone stepped forward and addressed them and used the words ‘this honourable assembly’? No, not in the least. On the contrary, they would understand it thus: it is quite true, we are the world, so we have power to impose the idea that we are fine, respectable, virtuous men. How should it occur to us to laugh when we are called honourable? No, this is just what we want: to describe us in this way shows that the speaker himself is a serious and honourable man, and to speak in any other way would be ridiculous and foolish.*

*So also with the world: if this world was surrounded by another world, if it were a little world within a world which compelled us by overwhelming power to see the truth about what we are, namely rogues, then we would all laugh every time a man stepped forward and addressed us as this honourable assembly and so on. But this world is itself the overwhelming power, and that is why we are not mad enough to laugh; no, we have it in our power to impose the view that we are a fine world. (Journals, 1853-55)*

O’Connor said, ‘The sharper the light of faith, the more glaring are apt to be the distortions the writer sees in the life around him.’ O’Connor justified her grotesque and weird characters in her essay *The Fiction Writer & His Country*. She wrote:

*The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience.*

O’Connor knew the difficulties the modern religious fiction writer faces when confronted by a hostile audience. First, the message of Christianity is inherently offensive, and second, compounding the first, the writer’s audience is likely to have little understanding or patience for the strange vision presented by the writer. O’Connor said that she believed, quoting Pascal:

*“...in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and not of the philosophers and scholars.” This is an unlimited God and one who has revealed himself specifically. It is one who became man and rose from the dead. It is one who confounds the senses and sensibilities, one known early on as a stumbling block. There is no way to gloss over this specification or to make it more acceptable to modern thought. This God is the object of ultimate concern and he has a name.*

*The problem of the novelist who wishes to write about a man’s encounter with this God is how he shall make the experience – which is both natural and supernatural – understandable, and credible, to his reader. In any age, this would be a problem, but in our own, it is a well-nigh insurmountable one. Today’s audience is one in which religious feeling has become, if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental.*

O’Connor found the help she needed to address these two difficulties in the philosophy of art expounded by the great but neglected French Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain.

And it is the love that both Chesterton and O'Connor had for Thomas Aquinas that is my final point in this paper. O'Connor, born fifty years after Chesterton, had the benefit of reading Maritain's Thomist philosophy of art, whereas to the best of my knowledge, Chesterton did not. Maritain moved to the USA after World War II and taught in American universities for some decades until his retirement. In her letters and essays O'Connor makes frequent mention of Maritain's work, especially his 1921 masterpiece *Art and Scholasticism*. It's a work that anyone who wishes to follow a vocation in art would be well-advised to read, despite its difficulties. O'Connor thoroughly digested it and recommended the study of it to others. I'm a librarian and even through library networks I found it hard to obtain, but it is online, so I down-loaded it to a USB, took it to Printworks and had them print and bind it for me. Voila - my own copy for \$16!

O'Connor not only read Thomist thinkers like Maritain, she also read Aquinas himself and found great value in the study. She read him at night before she went to sleep. O'Connor's mother, probably prompted by concern for Flannery's frail health, would approach her daughter and suggest she turn off the light and go to sleep. O'Connor told a friend in a letter that she would respond:

*I with lifted finger and broad bland beatific expression would reply, "On the contrary, the light being eternal and limitless, cannot be turned off. Shut your eyes."*

One important benefit for her art that she gained from St Thomas was the conviction that the senses were crucial to man's understanding. And so, when writing fiction, she had to describe things in a way that honoured man's senses as he encountered the particulars of reality. If a writer did not pay close attention to the sensible particulars of the world and describe them in his fiction, then he was guilty of 'weak specification.' She is not guilty of 'weak specification.' The attention to particulars apprehensible through the sense gives her writing immediacy and vibrancy. In *The Nature and Aim of Fiction* she said:

*The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal to the senses through abstractions.*

In another essay she said:

*Fiction is about everything human and we are made of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't try to write fiction. It's not a grand enough job for you.*

Chesterton, of course, has strong specification in his fiction; he didn't scorn getting himself dusty. His writing is filled with things and the sensations they engender and I suggest that he, in part at least, got this delight in created things from his interest in Thomism. The Father Brown stories in particular are full of closely observed and described particulars. The idea that the world is full of a wondrous multiplicity of good things that are a delight to our senses is, of course, a deeply Thomistic idea. He shares this Thomistic vision with Flannery O'Connor.

The other important benefit for her art that O'Connor gained through the Thomism of Maritain was the idea that an artist has to honour the autonomous identity of the artwork

he was struggling to bring into being. An artist should not twist the natural trajectory of a story, for example, into a direction that makes the point the artist would like to make but at the expense of the integrity of the story. An artist has to create what they are given to create; there is but one form that a story can legitimately take and the writer is not free to manipulate the story in any direction he pleases. O'Connor said, 'Stories don't lie if left to themselves.' But the temptation is always to make the story say something that the artist wants to say, rather than find the natural form of the story and let it speak for itself.

Chesterton was aware that this principle was something he violated in his novels, and that's why they may be great to read but they are not all great novels. He admitted as much. He said his novels were 'not as good as a real novelist would have made them.' Chesterton recognised that his characters and their stories were subordinate to the ideas he wanted to express; with the result that he pushed the story where he wanted it to go rather than where the characters would have led it themselves if they were fully-realised figures. In his novels, at least, he didn't sufficiently honour the autonomy of the artistic creation but instead sought to manipulate it, and he knew this meant he produced less than fully-formed novels. He said: 'In short, I could not be a novelist; because I really like to see ideas or notions wrestling naked, as it were, and not dressed up in a masquerade as men and women.' I think that this short-coming was exposed in his novels because of their greater length. It doesn't mar his Father Brown stories because their brevity gives Chesterton less opportunity to manipulate, and so they emerge with greater autonomy and substance.

In *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain expounded a practice of art that emphasised that an artist always worked for the good of his art object; to bring as fully as possible into being what was inherent in the thing he was trying to create. Having any other aim would compromise the creative process and that meant a loss of power and integrity in the art produced. I think this was Chesterton's mistake in his novels; it is why they aren't as credible as novels as they could have been. O'Connor, on the other hand, had internalised Jacques Maritain's Thomistic ideas about creative work, and so she was always trying to bring to life the story she had been given. That was her first aim: to honour the integrity and credibility of the given story. The story could proceed in only one way if it was to be credible, and she had to find that one way. It was hard work; it meant exploring cul-de-sacs, it meant throwing away much that she had written and then doing a great deal of re-writing as she discovered one step at a time the one true path for that particular story. No wonder she thought some stories were like demons: they only came forth only after prayer and fasting.

Here is Maritain from *Art and Scholasticism*:

*...art is gratuitous or disinterested as such – that is to say, that in the production of the work the virtue of art aims at only one thing: the good of the work-to-be-made, beauty to be made to shine in matter, the creating of the thing according to its own laws, independently of all the rest; and accordingly it desires that there be nothing in the work which will escape its regulation, and that it be alone in immediately ruling the work, in moulding it and fashioning it.*

*There are many ways of failing in this "gratuitousness." One may think, for instance, that good moral intentions make up for the quality of the craft or the inspiration, and suffice to construct a work. Or else one may go so far as to*

*adulterate the work itself... by forcibly applying to it, in order to rule it, foreign elements – the desire to edify, or to disedify, not to shock the public, or to create a scandal, to have “arrived” in society, or to cut a figure in the bars and cafes as an artist free and rare...*

I think Chesterton’s love of seeing ideas wrestling naked together was the foreign element that he allowed to infiltrate his novels, and hence he harmed the integrity of them, making them less than successful novels, a fact that he recognised. Flannery O’Connor, alert to the requirement of art to be faithful, above all, *to the good of the work to be made* was able to publish fiction that didn’t suffer from this compromise.

The philosopher and novelist, Roger Scruton – now Sir Roger Scruton – is also alert to the falsifying influence of aims and ideals that are foreign to the telling of a story. Scruton is both a greatly accomplished philosopher and a celebrated novelist, yet he distinguishes between the goals of his philosophical works and his fictional works, even though the same broadly conservative perspective animates both his philosophy and his fiction. Scruton was asked, Does he think that fiction can convey his message with as much force as his philosophical or political writings? He answered:

*It’s difficult to judge. Fiction is not there to exhort people, to change their ways or to advance a political programme. When it does try to do that it is always an artistic catastrophe, like the social realist novels that came out of Russia in the 1930s. But fiction has a greater capacity than philosophy to show the world as it is. Hegel describes art as the sensuous embodiment of the idea, meaning that art gives to the thoughts it expresses an immediate and sensory impact. The response to the novel should be, yes, this is how life is. And if you get it right, then you don’t only produce that response, you also elicit sympathy for your characters. This is not like an exhortation, a propaganda invocation to go out and change the world. It is a way of offering your readers emotional knowledge, putting them in touch with possibilities that might otherwise have remained hidden.*

Putting readers in touch with possibilities that might otherwise have remained hidden; that is something Chesterton and O’Connor sought to do with through their fiction. O’Connor described good fiction as plunging into reality. She said:

*I’m always irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and is very shocking to the system.*

A fiction writer, particularly one who shares O’Connor’s faith, is profoundly challenged by the depth of her commitment to writing fiction *really well*; fortunately, they’re also aided by her example of a writer unafraid to portray sin and grace, in all their violence, operating in the lives of individual human beings. What Flannery O’Connor achieved in her brief life provides enough instruction, correction and rebuke to clear away sentimentality, unreality, and laziness from the efforts of any writer. She makes a whip of cords and drives the untalented and the uncommitted from the courts of literature. She tells them sternly to get out, they have no business to be there. Such clearing is a violent and shocking act, but one that’s necessary for the entrance of grace.

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**Gary Furnell** is the branch manager of Coonabarabran Public Library in NSW, a position he has held for 21 years. He has been writing for *Studio* magazine, a Christian arts quarterly for two decades, and for the past four years has been a regular writer for *Quadrant* magazine, publishing essays on literature, philosophy and religion as well as short fiction.

His current long-term project, nearly completed, is a thematic treatment of the Hebrew wisdom books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, with his own thoughts supplemented by what he calls the 'much deeper thoughts' of Blaise Pascal, the 17th century French polymath; Edmund Burke, the 18th century English parliamentarian; Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher; and G K Chesterton.

# The Philosopher and the Polemicist: G.K. Chesterton and Georges Bernanos

Karl Schmude

Any comparison between G.K. Chesterton and Georges Bernanos immediately gives rise to two huge contrasts. One is their differences in temperament and approach, reflected in distinct literary and polemical styles. The other is the gulf between the cultures that gave birth to them – English and French.

The personalities of Chesterton and Bernanos could not have been more sharply distinguished: the measured, genial, patient, thought-provoking penetration of Chesterton, and the passionate, anguished, furious, volcanic power of Bernanos. Chesterton wrote books such as *Orthodoxy* and *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*; Bernanos wrote books entitled *Under Satan's Sun* and *Night is Darkest*. Chesterton redrew the face of Christ in *The Everlasting Man*. Bernanos resurrected it in *The Diary of a Country Priest*. Chesterton was a philosopher who thought imaginatively about the reality of spiritual warfare - as when he explained, in a Father Brown story, how his priest-detective knew the dark side of life: "I am a man," said Father Brown, "and therefore have all devils in my heart."<sup>1</sup> Bernanos embodied and evoked the reality of spiritual warfare - as he expressed on one occasion:

*I am between the Angel of light and the Angel of darkness, looking at them each in turn with the same enraged hunger for the absolute.*<sup>2</sup>

Chesterton channelled his Christian love like a stream. Bernanos projected it like a missile. Chesterton was the gentle John, Christ's beloved disciple. Bernanos was the fiery Paul, sounding a trumpet call of redemption.

Perhaps a final way of capturing these distinctions is to recall how each man died, as reported by those at their death-beds. Chesterton, after a life of journalism in England, declined in health in the first half of 1936 – fortunately, completing his autobiography during that time – and passed into eternity on June 14. The Dominican priest, Fr Vincent McNabb, his ally in so many causes, notably Distributism, came to visit him at his home in the village of Beaconsfield outside of London. Chesterton was close to death, and Fr McNabb sang at his bed-side the *Salve Regina*, a hymn to Our Lady commonly known as the prayer, Hail Holy Queen. He then picked up Chesterton's pen, which lay on the table beside his bed, and kissed it.<sup>3</sup>

By comparison, Bernanos lived a life of upheaval and interminable restlessness, which was reflected in his living in various places such as Majorca and South America as well as his native France. This restlessness, however, was subdued and balanced by a peacefulness of

soul that was most vividly revealed at his death. His friend, Pierre Bourdan, made the following comment as he gazed upon Bernanos's mortal remains:

*The cause that Bernanos served was as wide as the universe. Such men will not have lived in vain, since their image is before our eyes to renew our confidence, when we are afraid to see humanity reduced to the law of numbers, of statistics, and of material gain. If I ever need a fresh assurance that the destiny and the glory of mankind is not to be contained within these dismal limits, it will be enough to recall the luminous vision of a face where the last act of a serene faith was able to wipe out sixty years of suffering and bequeath to mankind, in exchange for this long ordeal, a smile of victory and ineffable promise.<sup>4</sup>*

The contrast in the cultures that nurtured Chesterton and Bernanos – English and French – is also striking.

Chesterton was acutely conscious of these differences, as he revealed in an essay he wrote for the French play, *The Secret of the Curé d'Ars*, by Henri Ghéon. Chesterton suggested that, while the Catholic Church is universal, it has also given birth to particular local – and especially national – identities, each of which has served to embody a distinctive spiritual truth:

*So the fullness and kindliness of the Faith has abounded in Flemish art and folk-lore; so the fire and chivalry of it [has found expression] in Polish history and tradition. The Spaniard has splendidly maintained in poverty that human dignity which he never wholly lost even under the load of wealth. The Irish have kept a clear space for that strange purity of the mind, in which hatred has become something clean and translucent, compared with the loves of other lands.<sup>5</sup>*

Chesterton then highlighted the distinguishing qualities of Catholicism in France, which, he thought, gathered up and gave expression to the vital virtues of the nation itself. It is, he said, “of the very nature of France that the French Catholic should emphasise the fact that the Church is a challenge.” A challenge, that is, to oneself, and to the world. The Frenchman, Chesterton said, is “essentially militant.” There is “nothing apologetic about his apologetics.” He concluded by quoting his friend and comrade-in-arms, Hilaire Belloc (himself half-French on his father's side): “The French do not fight with reluctance.”<sup>6</sup>

Another statement of Chesterton's about France illustrated his understanding of its peculiar quality and strength. In a preface to *Defence of the West*, by Henri Massis, a French literary critic and devoted disciple of Chesterton, Chesterton criticised his fellow Englishmen for their

*incapacity to understand the French intellect when it is militant, which is exactly when it is most French . . . these new intellectual fighters in France do not fit in with our conventions of controversy.<sup>7</sup>*

The characteristic approach to faith and to life, on the part of the French, reflected a certain spiritual adventurousness – a quality of courage that was prepared to take risks for God.

For Bernanos, it was intimately bound up with hope, the Christian virtue of hope. This was not a passive or facile emotion, and certainly not to be confused with optimism, which is a mood, not a virtue. Hope is a Christian virtue, a supernatural conviction, born of faith. It is, as Robert Speaight put it, a hope “that only the Resurrection could justify.” And Bernanos “had seen too many victories thrown away to believe in any other victory than this.”<sup>8</sup>

Bernanos believed, with every fibre of his being, that France was ‘an idea necessary to civilisation’; and, in Speaight’s words, “when Bernanos dragged his burly frame on to the platform the idea stood up and spoke.”<sup>9</sup>

Yet the differences between England and France can be exaggerated, for Chesterton and Bernanos had much in common. A personal sign of this is that Bernanos sent Chesterton dedicated copies of his works.<sup>10</sup> At an intellectual level, Bernanos was inspired by a single statement of Chesterton’s – in his great defence of the Christian faith, *Orthodoxy*:

*The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone.*<sup>11</sup>

Bernanos discovered this insight of Chesterton’s in 1926, and while he varied the wording – to speak of Christian “ideas” rather than “virtues” – he noted repeatedly that Chesterton had penetrated to the source of the modern European crisis. He regarded Chesterton’s words as “truly prophetic.” “The ‘Christian ideas gone mad’ of which Chesterton speaks will set the world on fire and put it to the sword.”<sup>12</sup> The very words used by Bernanos were an echo of Chesterton’s own description of the delicate balance of truths and virtues in Christianity, and what happens when they get out of balance. As he put it in *Orthodoxy*, the Church could not afford to let one idea become less powerful and another idea too powerful. It presided over a set of “terrible ideals and devouring doctrines, each one of them strong enough to turn to a false religion and lay waste the world.”<sup>13</sup>

In “Letter to the Americans,” written in September 1941, Bernanos included an “open letter” to the American President Roosevelt, in which he said that the task before them was not simply freeing Europe from Hitler but in tearing up by its roots that cancer of which Hitler was “merely one of the superficial symptoms” – and “tomorrow even worse ones may occur.” He went on to say:

*Chesterton wrote once that the world was full of Christian ideas gone mad. It is perhaps permissible to say even now that Fascism, Hitlerism, Communism shall one day appear, in the light of history, as monstrous deformations of the ancient idea of Christendom.*<sup>14</sup>

Bernanos came to see, more and more, the pivotal importance of Chesterton’s insight about Christian virtues (or, as Bernanos phrased it, Christian ideas) “gone mad.” The Frenchman envisaged a perilous future in which such distortions would, indeed, become “monstrous”; that the relentless march of so-called Progress would try to eliminate pain and poverty, and finally even death itself, and bring in a program of social engineering and hygiene that would limit births and do away with the infirm.<sup>15</sup>

It is remarkable, as Michael Tobin has noted, that Bernanos should foresee - inspired, at least in part, by a profound insight of Chesterton's - the startling emergence of state-sanctioned mass slaughter in the Western democracies. This would begin with abortion and move, inexorably, to euthanasia.<sup>16</sup> The democracies of the West would embrace these measures within a short time after the mass exterminations of Stalin and Hitler. As Malcolm Muggeridge pointed out in his famous 1980 essay, "The Humane Holocaust":

*. . . the origins of the holocaust lay, not in Nazi terrorism and anti-semitism, but in pre-Nazi Weimar Germany's acceptance of euthanasia and mercy-killing as humane and estimable . . . it took no more than three decades to transform a war crime into an act of compassion, thereby enabling the victory in the war against Nazism to adopt the very practices for which the Nazis had been solemnly condemned at Nuremberg.*<sup>17</sup>

Nor was this commonality between Chesterton and Bernanos limited to the world of ideas. The French critic, Christiane d'Haussy of the University of Paris, has argued that, even though Chesterton's style was highly individual, it was "not unlike the styles of [Paul] Claudel, [Charles] Péguy, [Leon] Bloy or [Georges] Bernanos."

*They all believed in a direct approach to the reader, in a sublime homeliness and in rhetorical flourishes, in outbursts of verbal violence, in the flamboyant and the baroque.*<sup>18</sup>

At the deepest level, Chesterton and Bernanos had much in common. They believed in and lived a common Catholic faith (even decades before Chesterton formally embraced it). They shared an understanding of the importance of a spiritual revolution, a revolution of the mind and heart, in order to find communion with God. They gave their souls to Christ, and their minds and hearts to Christendom - though the rupture of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation had wounded Christendom in England to an extent it had not in France, so that a sense of France as an embodiment of Christendom lived in Bernanos' consciousness to an extent that is not quite matched by Chesterton's sense of England.

Yet Chesterton felt a profound loyalty to his homeland. His great poem, "The Secret People," where he speaks of "the people of England, that never have spoken yet," has been quoted widely over the years - and particularly recently, in the aftermath of Brexit, with one wag saying: "Well, they've spoken now." By comparison, Bernanos' love of France had about it a quality that transcended patriotism. It was more than a natural loyalty: it was a supernatural vocation. One might say that Chesterton defended nobly the *idea* of Christendom, while Bernanos defended resolutely the *city* of Christendom.

Despite these differences of historical experience, Chesterton and Bernanos were both imbued with the spirit of Christian citizenship - of belonging to a sanctified land called Christendom, not just a cultural entity called Europe. Not a perfect land, indeed, but one that had been blessed by God in His unending quest to embrace, through the arms of culture, all the human creatures He created - and His Son died to save.

Beyond these common beliefs, there are other shared attitudes and themes in the writings of Chesterton and Bernanos. I would highlight three that are of particular interest and importance.

The first is their solidarity with the poor and the powerless – not only the materially poor, whom Chesterton regarded as dispossessed in the post-Reformation era, and later oppressed in the “servile state” of an industrialised society, but also the culturally overlooked and spiritually needy (who are not necessarily the materially needy). Both Chesterton and Bernanos were interested in people’s souls, their spiritual longings, their destiny beyond death, and not just their material well-being.

With prophetic insight, Chesterton discerned that the ordinary person was under extreme attack from modern culture – a culture that professed to be considerate of his needs but, in practice, had introduced a new persecution of the Common Man - a new oppressiveness. In the signature essay of an anthology published in 1950, well after his death, Chesterton reflected on the Common Man. He thought that the emancipation had really amounted to a new persecution – that it had “in rather special and narrow ways emancipated the Uncommon Man.”<sup>19</sup>

At an early stage Chesterton was alive to the power of the new elites in Western culture – and the ways in which they proclaimed a deep regard for the poor, whose lives they shared to a decreasing extent, and whom, in practice, they were incapable of understanding. The modern liberation

*has given an eccentric sort of liberty to some of the hobbies of the wealthy, and occasionally to some of the more humane lunacies of the cultured. The only thing that it has forbidden is common sense ...*<sup>20</sup>

In Chesterton’s mind, many of the freedoms achieved by the modern Enlightenment were not actually freedoms prized by the great majority of human beings. Modern man is now more free to found a sect, said Chesterton, but the Common Man does not really have any interest in founding a sect. What he much more likely wants to found is a family.

Apart from granting freedoms that the Common Man is not really interested in, many of the freedoms actually wanted by the Common Man were being denied. Chesterton pinpointed the essential elitism, the unrecognised selectivity, of professed democratic impulses in a post-religious age.

*Progress . . . has upon every matter persecuted the Common Man; . . . restrained the obscenity that might amuse him and applauded the obscenity that would certainly bore him; silenced the political quarrels that can be conducted among men and applauded the political stunts and syndicates that can only be conducted by millionaires; encouraged anybody who had anything to say against God, if it was said with a priggish and supercilious accent; but discouraged anybody who had anything to say in favour of man, in his common relations to manhood and motherhood and the normal appetites of nature.*<sup>21</sup>

For his part, Bernanos conveyed his love of the poor and the neglected in typically stirring rhetoric. He believed that

*the world will be saved by the Poor . . . . And they will save it without wishing to; they will ask for nothing in return, simply because they will be unaware of the value of the service they will have rendered.*<sup>22</sup>

What is the particular service the poor will have rendered to the world? Bernanos believed it was the gift of *hope* that the poor offered – that this was a pure gift, not embellished by self-interest or romanticised by the temptations to envy. The modern world, Bernanos thought, “no longer has time to hope, or to love, or to dream.” The inner life is now too busy to allow for hope, and too self-interested to allow for love. Bernanos thought that the poor “shall possess the earth, simply because they will not have lost the habit of hope in a world of the hopeless. . . . that the humble patience of man has constantly . . . put in check the wild forces of evil.”<sup>23</sup>

Chesterton, in the years when he was a journalist in London’s Fleet Street, used to write his articles in pubs or restaurants, rather than in newspaper offices. Bernanos, too, wrote in these popular settings because, he said, “I cannot long be deprived of the human face and voice. . . . I scribble in cafes, just as I used to scribble in railway carriages, in order not to be taken in by figments of my own imagination, in order at a glance to re-discover, in the unknown person opposite, my own fair measure of joy or sorrow.”<sup>24</sup> As he admitted in his “Letter to the Americans”:

*I am obliged to write books, but I should a thousand times prefer to dispense with publishers and booksellers and travel quietly along haphazard roads, talking about things I like with people I happen to meet in a stray inn, leaning on the table, looking them full in the face, and saying whatever came into my mind.*<sup>25</sup>

Chesterton had a deep affinity with the desires and needs of ordinary people, in his writings as well as in his journalistic and political activities on behalf of the social philosophy of Distributism. He once defined poets as “those who rise above the people by understanding them.”<sup>26</sup> His popular sympathies, as he wrote of his brother Cecil, “could really survive any intimacy with the populace.”<sup>27</sup>

In *The Diary of a Country Priest*, Bernanos’ brilliant novel about a young priest whose inner sufferings in a spiritually moribund parish correspond to his physical struggles as he is dying from cancer, there is a touching scene between the priest and a poor woman who has been caring for an ex-priest unaware he is dying of tuberculosis. The woman catches the disease, and is dying too - yet, as Anne Barbeau Gardiner has pointed out, “she feels joy in her new sense of solidarity with the poor across the world,” in a similar way to what the young priest “had experienced as a child when he read Gorky and lost his loneliness in a sense of solidarity with the Russian poor.”<sup>28</sup>

A second common attitude between Chesterton and Bernanos is the spirit of lost innocence which is associated with the passing of childhood and the corrupting influences of adult life. Both men cherished childhood, not as an indulgence in nostalgia or an escape from the

responsibilities of adulthood, but as a condition of primitive connection and permanent value that must be preserved if we are not to lose our souls.

Not long before his conversion to Catholicism in 1922, Chesterton gave an insight into the spiritual meaning which childhood held for him. In a private letter to Mgr Ronald Knox, he wrote:

*I am in a state now when I feel a monstrous charlatan, as if I wore a mask and were stuffed with cushions, whenever I see anything about the public G.K.C.; it hurts me; for though the views I express are real, the image is horribly unreal compared with the real person who needs help just now. I have as much vanity as anybody about any of these superficial successes while they are going on; but I never feel for a moment that they affect the reality of whether I am utterly rotten or not; so that any public comments on my religious position seem like a wind on the other side of the world; as if they were about somebody else – as indeed they are. I am not troubled about a great fat man who appears on platforms and in caricatures; even when he enjoys controversies on what I believe to be the right side. I am concerned about what has become of a little boy whose father showed him a toy theatre, and a schoolboy whom nobody ever heard of, with his brooding on doubts and dirt and daydreams, of crude conscientiousness so inconsistent as to be near hypocrisy; and all the morbid life of the lonely mind of a living person with whom I have lived. It is that story, that so often came near to ending badly, that I want to end well.<sup>29</sup>*

A similar view of childhood – perhaps an even sharper one - can be found in Bernanos. In many of his books, fiction and non-fiction, he gave an imaginative insight into the continuing importance of childhood in the life of the adult. As Peter Hebblethwaite has noted, childhood to Bernanos was an image of the supernatural condition. It was the reflection of a more or less instinctive right relationship to God – a relationship of trustful dependence and responsive love.<sup>30</sup> An adult possesses hope insofar as he has preserved something of childhood and struggles to restore and strengthen its qualities. The heroine in Bernanos' novel, *Joy*, Chantel de Clergerie, remarks at one point:

*It seems to me, she had confided to Abbe Cenabre one day, that it is possible to act like an adult, keeping up one's little place in the world, defending one's legitimate interests, and at the same time view the essential, elementary things – joy, sorrow, death – with the eyes of a child.<sup>31</sup>*

Of course, childhood itself passes, and Bernanos was not concerned to turn back the clock and take refuge in a futile nostalgia or a romantic replay. He was talking about *childlikeness*, not childishness. He knew that childhood itself had gone – as he once put it, “none are so dead as the little boy that once was me,”<sup>32</sup> but he cherished the hope that the values enshrined in childhood could still call to him from the future, for they are a faint and insistent echo of a life with God.

In his final book, *The Carmelites*, a play about a community of nuns martyred during the French Revolution (it was later converted into an opera by Francis Poulenc, and performed

in various places, including the Sydney Opera House in 1984), Bernanos cast the meaning of a religious vocation in terms of the rediscovery of childhood values. The Prioress in the play compares the prayer of a shepherd-boy, which is offered spontaneously as he tends his flock, with the absorption in prayer that should distinguish the life of the nun – and, in varying measure, the life of all of us:

*What a little shepherd-boy does from time to time, and on an impulse of the heart, it is our duty to do both day and night. Not that we have any reason to suppose that our prayers are better than his, but on the contrary. That simplicity of spirit, that sweet surrender to the Divine Majesty which, in him, is the inspiration of a moment, a true act of grace, . . . we must devote our lives to acquiring, or of finding again, for it is one of the gifts of childhood . . . Once we have left those behind us, we have to suffer for a very long time before entering them again, just as when the long night is over, we find the dawn once more.<sup>33</sup>*

In both Chesterton and Bernanos, there is a deep sense of the loss of childhood as being a loss of innocence, a loss of *original* innocence – and an acceptance of Original Sin. They both saw – and Bernanos most pointedly – that childhood was an image, not of human perfection, but of the kind of relationship we should have with God, expressed in a spirit of utter reliance upon Him, of generous trust in Him. It was an image of man’s spiritual craving and supernatural calling; and so the recovery of childlike, not childish, attitudes and values was an inescapable pathway to God.

Both Chesterton and Bernanos took very seriously Christ’s warning, that ‘unless we be converted and become like little children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’ (Matthew 18:3) Or, as Bernanos himself put it: ‘Become as little children – there lies your refuge.’<sup>34</sup>

Chesterton never went to university, even though some of his class-mates at his London school, St Paul’s, did. But he detected at an early date that there was something profoundly wrong about the modern Western mind – that it had fallen into an abyss of confusion and self-destruction. He analysed this in the very first pages of *Orthodoxy*, in the chapters called “The Maniac” and “The Suicide of Thought.”

In Chesterton’s belief, the much-acclaimed intellectual liberation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment – the freeing of the Western mind from the “enslavement” of religious faith and the shackles of superstition – had, in fact, liberated the mind from its own moorings; as if a ship only has to be afloat, and has no need of a compass or an anchor.

The Enlightenment had liberated the intellect, not just from faith, but also from reason. In fact, the two, in Chesterton’s mind, were intrinsically connected, for reason was itself an act of faith: it was “an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all.”<sup>35</sup> If the mind is nothing more than the product of random material forces, why should we rely on its conclusions? On what basis should we ascribe any meaning or validity to them at all?

Chesterton maintained that the fundamental breakdown in Western society was mental – that our society “has had a mental breakdown; much more than a moral breakdown.” The decay of intellectual life occurred before the decay of moral principles. “Things are being settled by mere associations because there is a reluctance to settle them by arguments.”<sup>36</sup> I sometimes wonder whether, in that sentence, Chesterton caught an early hint of the phenomena of political correctness and identity politics in our time – that arguments are not really put: rather, things are “settled by mere associations,” with race or gender or religion, or whatever category of distinction the modern mind is drawn to highlight.

When it came to an embodiment of this diminishing of the mind, this intellectual clouding and collapse, Chesterton pinpointed the intellectual elite. He acquired, quite early, a deep distrust of “The Intelligentsia.” This was not because he deprecated the intellectual life. On the contrary, it was because he prized it – and wanted it valued in a way it no longer was.

Chesterton thought that modern intellectuals had themselves abandoned the intellectual life; that they *worshipped* the mind – “like an unknown god”<sup>37</sup> - instead of *using* the mind; and they had replaced intellectual objectivity with subjective feelings and associations, and with ideologies born of denial and negation. In short, Chesterton thought that the Intelligentsia was no longer intellectual – and that they had “hardly enough brains to be called half-witted.”<sup>38</sup> The Intelligentsia “thought a great deal about thinking, but it did not think”. Everything, he said, “seemed to come at second or third hand”.<sup>39</sup> And “those who pontificated most pompously were often the most windy and hollow.”<sup>40</sup> On one occasion, Chesterton took fun in pricking such bubbles of pomposity:

*If I choose to head an article “An inquiry into the conditions of Mycenaean civilisation, with special reference to the economic and domestic functions of women before and after the conjectural date of the Argive expedition against Troy”, I really have no right to complain if (when I send it to the Chicago Daily Scoop) they alter the title to “How Helen of Troy did the housekeeping.”<sup>41</sup>*

On another occasion, Chesterton recalled the example of a man at a literary club who would hold up his hand, as if to command silence, and preface his remarks by saying: “A Thought.” A club member heard such an introduction time after time and, goaded beyond endurance, exploded with the words: “But, Good God, man, you don’t call that a *thought*, do you?”<sup>42</sup>

For Chesterton, the ultimate sign of intellectual bias, devoid of objectivity, and even common sense, was captured in this statement:

*Supposing there is no difference between good and bad, or between false and true, what is the difference between up and down?<sup>43</sup>*

Bernanos, for his part, had a deeply suspicious view of modern intellectual elites. In his fierce polemic on the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, called in English *A Diary of My Times* (though in French, it had the more expressive title, literally translated, of *The Vast Cemeteries Under the Moon*), Bernanos poured out his rage against those, both lay and clerical, who justified the massacre of defenceless people in Spain. He especially criticised the false intellectuals who led the way, and who embodied the smugness and self-

righteousness of the materially well-off and spiritually hardened. Two short excerpts will suffice to reveal his rage:

*A hundred times would I prefer iconoclastic brigands whose sacrilegious fury is indeed far nearer to my own heart than the pride of philosophers.*<sup>44</sup>

A second statement reveals the contempt Bernanos felt for democracy - and the way in which he felt it was manipulated by intellectuals for their own purposes:

*. . . I am not a democrat. The democrat, and particularly the intellectual democrat, is in my opinion the most loathsome type of bourgeois.*<sup>45</sup>

In his "Letter to the English," written in 1940 (and a companion to the later "Letter to the Americans"), Bernanos insisted upon the responsibility of the elite for the self-destruction Europe was undergoing:

*. . . [I]t is the elite who are becoming pagan; it is the elite who, while proclaiming themselves to be more Christian than ever, are rallying to a totalitarian pagan order.*<sup>46</sup>

He reserved his special wrath for the elites of his own country. In a speech delivered in Switzerland soon after World War II, he gave vent to his disillusionment with the leaders of France:

*France has been betrayed by her élites; her intellectual élite has betrayed her even more than the others, for it has betrayed both her traditions and her spirit, by systematically doubting both.*<sup>47</sup>

Bernanos recognised that the instrument of elitism was increasingly the modern state; that so often, elitism was not a reflection of popular sentiment, but of the opinion leaders who dominated the culture, particularly one that was increasingly media-saturated and poll-driven. The more power the state is granted, even in a democracy where the will of the people is supposedly valued and meant to prevail, the more the state's lust for control – even apparently benign and compassionate control (especially through bureaucratic channels) – would assert itself tyrannically.

Bernanos penetrated the nature of modern totalitarianism and its characteristic creator - what he called 'the totalitarian animal'. He believed that the Europe which had once been Christianised was now like a man who is "devitaminized" – deprived of his essential sources of energy and equilibrium, even though he could "show the appearance of normal health for a long time."<sup>48</sup> Bernanos recognised the distinctive – and disturbing – quality of social and political power in our time:

*The totalitarian animal, the beast of prey, in turn executioner or soldier, builder or demolisher, maker of order or of chaos, always ready to believe what he is told and to carry out whatever he is commanded to do, is a species slow to appear. The totalitarian animal is not at all a primitive beast, but on the contrary, the product of a civilization which has apparently passed the extreme point of its normal development ... It is true that once born it*

*professes to scorn the intellect, but, in order to have been born, it needed a certain atmosphere of anarchy and an air of intellectual disintegration ...*

*Nevertheless, it wasn't from the lower depths that the man with the sub-machine gun, the beast of prey, was to emerge, but from the higher philosophical systems.<sup>49</sup>*

Bernanos was also dismissive of the idea that equality is clearly compatible with democracy and liberty, for he thought that only the state can enforce equality. In Bernanos' words:

*Totalitarian regimes are the most egalitarian of all: total equality in total slavery!<sup>50</sup>*

No wonder the English critic Raymond Mortimer once said of Bernanos that he used language like a flame-thrower.<sup>51</sup>

The comparison between Chesterton and Bernanos in an understanding of modern intellectual elites is not one of contrast, but of complementarity. Chesterton approached the decay of the Western mind as a philosopher and an artist, while Bernanos attacked it as a polemicist and a novelist. Whereas Chesterton criticised it as an *idea* gone wrong, Bernanos reviled it as an *experience* gone wrong.

A third point of comparison between Chesterton and Bernanos is their grasp of totalitarian evil. This was the characteristic evil of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Every age has its characteristic evil – as well as characteristic good. For the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the evil was a corporate and collective one – the overwhelming power of the state to enforce evil, and to spread it, with all the apparatus of media control, social propaganda, political coercion, and technical exploitation, that the modern state can so comprehensively apply.

It has, indeed, been a common misrepresentation of Chesterton that he had no real knowledge of evil; that he was a jolly man who loved the pleasures of life, especially beer (which he did), and who floated on the froth of human existence rather than penetrating to the depths. This, the 'Toby Jug' image of Chesterton, is a profound misreading of his life and writings, and has powerfully countered by authors as various as Jorge Luis Borges and Malcolm Muggeridge. Though he died in 1936, and thus had only a limited opportunity to see the rise of totalitarian tyranny in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he discerned the source and nature of totalitarian evil at an early date.

More than 30 years before the rise of Nazism, and 15 years before the rise of Communism, Chesterton appreciated the direction in which Western society was heading in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He saw that the power of the State had increased massively, and that modern society would seek to compensate for its spiritual emptiness by enforcing a system of social and political control that would finally entrap, and even exterminate, people, rather than liberate them. There would be the appearance of freedom, masking the reality of enslavement:

*The Totalitarian State is now making a clean sweep of all our old notions of liberty, even more than the French Revolution made a clean sweep of all the old ideas of loyalty. It is the Church that excommunicates; but, in that very*

*word implies that a communion stands open for a restored communicant. It is the State that exterminates; it is the State that abolishes absolutely and altogether; whether it is the American State abolishing beer, or the Fascist State abolishing parties, or the Hitlerite State abolishing almost everything but itself.<sup>52</sup>*

In Chesterton's mind, the most false idea of freedom was, ironically, the one that went by the name of Liberalism. At a remarkably early time, 1905, he offered this prophecy of an apparent dawn that would turn into the darkest night:

*The earnest Freethinkers need not worry themselves so much about the persecutions of the past. Before the Liberal idea is dead or triumphant, we shall see wars and persecutions the like of which the world has never seen.<sup>53</sup>*

Both Chesterton and Bernanos understood that, if a particular idea of freedom were false, it would lead inevitably to enslavement. A misunderstanding of humanity would lead to inhumanity.

Bernanos's view of Western democracies was not only sceptical but hostile. He thought that the betrayal of the Christian roots of Western civilisation went very deep, and that generations of faithlessness had produced their own evil fruit. In 1947, he said to a group of reporters in Paris:

*[D]emocracy has been the death of us. The totalitarian systems have been fathered by democracy. To hell with democracy!<sup>54</sup>*

Thus, a crucial understanding that Chesterton and Bernanos shared is that totalitarianism was not confined to Communist and Nazi countries. It was, in fact, a potential – and burgeoning – condition in Western democracies as well, which was destined to explode in the latter years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and flourish like suffocating weeds in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But accompanying, and contesting, this experience of evil was the deep sense of goodness to which Chesterton and Bernanos were intensely alive. Both authors were fascinated by saints – Chesterton, in his biographies of St Francis of Assisi and St Thomas Aquinas, and Bernanos, in his devotion to St Joan of Arc and his memorable portrayals in fiction of the experience of holiness. And they shared a deep and unrelenting struggle to attain a life of holiness.

Bernanos believed that the pursuit of holiness was the ultimate human adventure – and the refusal to pursue it was the ultimate human tragedy. In an essay on St Joan of Arc, published in 1929, he presented a stirring call for Christian communion with God:

*For sanctity is an adventure; it is even the only adventure. Once you have understood this, you have entered into the heart of the Catholic faith; your mortal flesh will have trembled, no longer with the fear of death, but with a superhuman hope ...*

*God did not create the Church to ensure the prosperity of the saints, but in order that she should transmit their memory; . . . Our Catholic tradition carries them along, unhurt, in its universal rhythm. Saint Benedict and his*

*raven, Saint Francis and his mandola and his Provençal verses, Joan and her sword, Vincent and his shabby soutane, and the latest arrival, so strange and secret . . . with her incomprehensible smile - Thérèse of the Child Jesus. They lived and suffered as we do. They were tempted as we are. The man who dares not yet accept what is sacred and divine in their example will at least learn from it the lesson of heroism and honour.*

*Not one of us who carry our load of responsibility – to our country, our family, or our profession – with our poor faces hollow with anxiety, our hands hardened with toil, the immense tedium of our daily life, with our daily bread to earn, and the honour of our homes to defend – not one of us will ever know enough theology even to become a canon. But we know enough to become a saint.<sup>55</sup>*

Two final quotations illustrate the complementary differences between Chesterton and Bernanos – Chesterton as the philosopher who was also an artist, and Bernanos as the polemicist who was also a novelist.

In his biography of St Francis of Assisi, Chesterton described in one chapter the changing atmosphere taking place in Western Europe in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13th centuries, which was epitomised in Francis. And he captured the transformation in this soaring paragraph:

*While it was yet twilight a figure appeared silently and suddenly on a little hill above the city, dark against the fading darkness. For it was the end of a long and stern night, a night of vigil, not unvisited by stars. He stood with his hands lifted, as in so many statues and pictures, and about him was a burst of birds singing; and behind him was the break of day.<sup>56</sup>*

In Bernanos' *Diary of My Times*, there is a passage that glows with poignancy in the midst of a book that vibrates with the invective of outrage about the 'reign of terror' that took place in the Spanish Civil War. Bernanos is especially scathing of the Church for its complicity in this killing, and he writes at one point:

*If I happen to hold the Church responsible, it is not in the absurd ambition of reforming it. I don't consider the Church capable of human reformation, at all events in the manner of Luther or Lamménais. I don't wish the Church to be perfect, for the Church is a living thing. Like the most lowly, the most destitute of her sons, the Church struggles haltingly from this world into the next; she sins and expiates and whosoever shall turn their eyes from her splendour will hear her praying and sobbing with the rest of us, in the darkness.<sup>57</sup>*

Thus Chesterton uplifts us to new heights of religious vision and cultural promise, and Bernanos takes us down into the depths of spiritual reality and communal experience.

Their writings are marvellously complementary – and mutually strengthening.

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**Karl Schmude** is President of the Australian Chesterton Society as well as a member of the Editorial Board of the international Chesterton Institute and a frequent contributor to its journal, *The Chesterton Review*. He has produced a biographical booklet on G.K. Chesterton (republished in 2008 by the Catholic Truth Society in London), as well as other booklets on Catholic figures and subjects.

He has published extensively, both in Australia and overseas, on subjects associated with religion and culture - particularly literature, history, and education. He served as University Librarian from 1984 to 2000 at the University of New England in Armidale NSW, and subsequently became engaged in the development of Campion College as Australia's first Liberal Arts tertiary institution. He is a Founding Fellow of the College and served as Executive Director of the Campion Foundation from 2000 to 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> G. K. Chesterton, "The Hammer of God," *The Father Brown Stories* (London: Cassell, 1929), p.224.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Speaight, *Georges Bernanos: A Study of the Man and the Writer* (London: Collins & Harvill, 1973), p.61.

<sup>3</sup> Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1944), p.552.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Speaight, *Georges Bernanos: A Study of the Man and the Writer* (London: Collins & Harvill, 1973), p.274.

<sup>5</sup> G.K. Chesterton, "The Challenge of the Curé d'Ars," in Henri Ghéon, *The Secret of the Curé d'Ars* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1929), p.241-242. Also published in G.K. Chesterton, "The Curé d'Ars," *G.K.C. As M.C: Being a Collection of Thirty-Seven Introductions* (London: Methuen, 1929), p.259-260.

<sup>6</sup> G.K. Chesterton, "The Challenge of the Curé d'Ars," in Henri Ghéon, *The Secret of the Curé d'Ars* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1929), p.243-244.

<sup>7</sup> Christiane d'Haussy, "Chesterton in France," in *G.K. Chesterton: A Centenary Appraisal*. Ed. by John Sullivan (London: Paul Elek, 1974), p.216.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Speaight, *Georges Bernanos: A Study of the Man and the Writer* (London: Collins & Harvill, 1973), p.20.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Speaight, *Georges Bernanos: A Study of the Man and the Writer* (London: Collins & Harvill, 1973), p.209.

<sup>10</sup> Christiane d'Haussy, "Chesterton in France," in *G.K. Chesterton: A Centenary Appraisal*. Ed. by John Sullivan (London: Paul Elek, 1974), p.216.

<sup>11</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (John Lane, The Bodley Head: London, 1908), p.51.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Tobin, "A Prophetic Chesterton Phrase," *The Chesterton Review*, Vol.XV, No.4-Vol.XVI, No.1, November 1989-February 1990, pp.547-549.

<sup>13</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (John Lane, The Bodley Head: London, 1908), p.182.

<sup>14</sup> Georges Bernanos, "Letter to the Americans," *Plea for Liberty* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1945), p.103.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Tobin, "A Prophetic Chesterton Phrase," *The Chesterton Review*, Vol.XV, No.4-Vol.XVI, No.1, November 1989-February 1990, pp.549-551.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Tobin, "A Prophetic Chesterton Phrase," *The Chesterton Review*, Vol.XV, No.4-Vol.XVI, No.1, November 1989-February 1990, p.551.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.humanlifereview.com/heroes/>

<sup>18</sup> Christiane d'Haussy, "Chesterton in France," in *G.K. Chesterton: A Centenary Appraisal*. Ed. by John Sullivan (London: Paul Elek, 1974), p.217.

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<sup>20</sup> G.K. Chesterton, "The Common Man," *The Common Man* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1950), p.1.

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<sup>22</sup> Georges Bernanos, "Patience of the Poor," *Commonweal*, April 23, 1953, p.6.

<sup>23</sup> Georges Bernanos, "Patience of the Poor," *Commonweal*, April 23, 1953, pp.6-7.

<sup>24</sup> Georges Bernanos, *A Diary of My Times* (London: Boriswood, 1938), pp.18-19.

<sup>25</sup> Georges Bernanos, "Letter to the Americans," *Plea for Liberty* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1945), p.100.

<sup>26</sup> G.K. Chesterton, "The Three Kinds of Men," *Alarms and Discursions* (London: Methuen, 1910), p.149.

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- <sup>31</sup> Georges Bernanos, *Joy* (London: Catholic Book Club, 1948), p.93.
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- <sup>39</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1936), p.157.
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- <sup>43</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1936), p.158.
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- <sup>45</sup> Georges Bernanos, *A Diary of My Times* (London: Boriswood, 1938), p.232.
- <sup>46</sup> Georges Bernanos, "Letter to the English," *Plea for Liberty* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1945), p..
- <sup>47</sup> Georges Bernanos, 'Why Freedom?,' *The Last Essays of Georges Bernanos* (Chicago, Illinois: Henry Regnery, 1955; repr. New York: Greenwood, 1968), p.108.
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- <sup>55</sup> Robert Speaight, *Georges Bernanos: A Study of the Man and the Writer* (London: Collins & Harvill, 1973), p.100.
- <sup>56</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *St Francis of Assisi* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), pp.41-42.
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# Father Brown – The Detective Who Philosophised

John Young

In this talk I want to consider Chesterton as a philosopher who used his literary gifts to express deep philosophical concepts. I'll give examples particularly from the Father Brown stories.

How are we to explain the enormous influence he has had on so many people, an influence that continues to the present day?

Of course there is no single explanation: there are many factors. He had a unique literary style. His interests were very wide. He had massive common sense. He had a profound understanding of reality.

He had a gift of friendship and deep sympathy with other people. He was a good man, a holy man. Will he one day be canonised? Some people think so.

Chesterton is not usually regarded as a philosopher, yet his book on St Thomas Aquinas has been highly praised by the eminent philosophers Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain and Anton Pegis. Gilson says: "I considered it to be without possible comparison the best book ever written on St Thomas... Chesterton was one of the deepest thinkers who ever existed..." This is quoted by Cyril Clemens in his book *Chesterton*, pages 150-151.

Was Chesterton a philosopher? He himself says that he was not "a trained philosopher, acquainted with the technique of the trade" (*St Thomas Aquinas*, page 146). But I believe he should be seen as a philosopher, indeed as a metaphysician.

Philosophy is the study of reality at its deepest level by the use of reason. So a person whose reason penetrates deeply into reality is a philosopher. Whether he has academic qualifications or not is irrelevant; he may have impressive university degrees in philosophy, yet not be a philosopher. In fact, the students enrolled in philosophy courses at some of the most prestigious universities are likely to end up with less philosophical insight than they had at the beginning of their studies.

The most profound part of philosophy is called metaphysics. This deals with being at its deepest level, far deeper than the level attained by our five senses. It deals with the supreme principles that underlie all our thinking, even though we may not be explicitly aware of these underlying principles. It deals with the transcendentals of truth, goodness and beauty, which are attributes of all things from the most primitive sub-atomic particle to God himself. In its most profound subdivision –

natural theology – it deals with the existence and nature of God, so far as he can be known by reason as distinct from divine Revelation.

Some people have little inclination for thinking at this deep level, particularly because of the influence of the secularism that pervades our society. But there is another reason for this difficulty, arising from the nature of man and of the nature of human thought.

Each of us is a composite of body and soul. And the soul is not material but spiritual. Yet it does not operate independently, but always in conjunction with the body. Our knowledge begins with the five senses –, sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell. These are the gateway to our knowledge of the external world. These five external senses feed the internal senses, including imagination and memory. Then the intellect understands by abstracting its knowledge from the sense knowledge that had come through the five external senses.

This means that our intellectual knowledge has a certain remoteness about it: it lacks the concrete character of the sense knowledge from which it has been abstracted. Yet it is far more important than the sense impressions from which it is derived. A dog or a horse has the five external senses, and they may be more acute than in humans. But the knowledge had by the dog or horse does not transcend what the senses reveal.

Intellectual knowledge is not just a higher degree of sense knowledge, but is different in kind, for it reveals the very nature of things whereas sense knowledge is confined to the external, to the appearances of things, and does not penetrate into their natures.

Things are not only a bundle of sensible qualities. A potato, for example, is not just qualities that can be felt and seen and tasted, etc. It is a substance having these qualities. Yet the substance, the essential reality, can't be reached by any of our senses. But it can be known by the intellect, which abstracts the nature of the thing from the sensible qualities presented to the five senses.

But because our intellectual knowledge of things is abstracted from what the external senses perceive there is a remoteness about it, in contrast with the concrete apprehensions of the senses. So we can tend to think things are more real because more concrete in our apprehension, whereas it is really the intellect that penetrates most deeply into things: sense knows them only superficially.

The most sublime knowledge naturally knowable to the human intellect is metaphysics. Yet because of the way we attain our knowledge it seems remote, and is difficult to acquire.

Jacques Maritain, in the most profound of his works, *The Degrees Of Knowledge*, contrasts the approach of the metaphysician with that of the artist. He says: “the metaphysician breathes an atmosphere of abstraction which is death for the artist. Imagination, the discontinuous, the unverifiable, in which the metaphysician

perishes, is life itself to the artist. While both absorb rays that come down from creative Night, the artist finds nourishment in a bound intelligibility which is as multiform as God's reflections upon the earth, the metaphysician finds it in a naked intelligibility that is as determined as the proper being of things. They are playing seesaw, each in turn rising up to the sky." (p. 2)

A fascinating thing about Chesterton, and an essential key to understanding his influence, is his ability to combine both approaches. His thought is metaphysical because it penetrates into the depths of being. But he expresses it with vivid imagery in the manner of an artist.

He often speaks of the awareness and wonder of *being* which the young child has, and notes how this tends to become dimmer as the child grows older, "... When we are very young children we do not need fairytales: we only need tales. Real life is interesting enough. A child of seven is excited by been told that Tommy opened a door and saw a dragon. But a child of three is excited by been told that Tommy opened a door" (*Orthodoxy*, Fontana Books,p. 52).

Chesterton never lost his sense of wonder, and he never lost it because he always retained a deep insight into the meaning of being. He was a metaphysician before he ever studied metaphysics. He saw that there cannot be a pure flux; that beneath all becoming there is being, and contingent being leads us to the perfect Being who is God (see *St Thomas Aquinas*, chapter 7 – especially page 172 of the Image Books edition).

He saw the basic principles, and so was able to apply them to the ever-changing world around him; but it was the principles that were basic, not the changes. In one of the Father Brown stories, a conversation between Father Brown and a sceptical minded doctor goes like this: the doctor says, "I'm a practical man; I don't bother much about philosophy or theology." Father Brown replies: "You won't be a practical man until you do."

# Australian Chesterton Society

Web: [chestertonaustralia.com](http://chestertonaustralia.com)

## Purpose

The Australian Chesterton Society is a national association devoted to fostering an appreciation of G.K. Chesterton's writings and the value of his thought in contemporary Australia.

The Australian Chesterton Society is part of an international Chesterton movement that seeks to promote the study and understanding of Chesterton's ideas and insights. Various members contribute regularly to *The Chesterton Review*, the quarterly journal of the G.K. Chesterton Institute for Faith & Culture located at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. Several members serve on the Editorial Board of *The Review*.

## Historical background

The Society first developed as a regional body, having been established in 1993 by Mr A.G. (Tony) Evans as the G.K. Chesterton Society of Western Australia. During that period, the Society launched, in association with the University of Notre Dame Australia, an annual series of Chesterton Memorial Lectures, delivered by such distinguished speakers as Rev Dr Paul Stenhouse MSC, Professor Pierre Ryckmans, Ian Wilson and Dr Race Matthews. It also held talks and debates as well as less formal meetings devoted to convivial conversation on Chesterton's works.

## Conferences

In 2000, the Society assumed its national identity at a major conference held in the ancient monastery town of New Norcia, north of Perth. Since that time the Society has staged conferences in such centres as Sydney (2001), Canberra (2002), and Melbourne (2004). Since 2007, its conferences have taken place at Campion College Australia in Sydney.

## Membership

Membership of the Australian Chesterton Society is available for A\$30.00 per annum. It includes a subscription to the Society's newsletter, *The Defendant*, and can be arranged by contacting the Society's Secretary-Treasurer, Mr Ray Finnegan:

Address: 13 Fossey Street, Holder ACT 2611

Phone: (02) 6288 5137

Email: [range2@grapevine.net.au](mailto:range2@grapevine.net.au)