Introduction

I
G.K. Chesterton's Religious Life

> The supreme adventure is being born.
> G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*

> I for one have never left off playing,
> and I wish there were more time to play.
> G.K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*

In his own day G.K. Chesterton was a national institution, and a vivid image of him is still current: we can yet see his enormous dishevelled rotundity rolling down Fleet Street in his cape, with his black, broad-rimmed hat and pince-nez, a ham-fist hand swatting the air with his sword-stick, then quickly hailing a cab to take him the short distance to the 'Cheshire Cheese', a pub favoured by his literary cronies, where – 'til the witching hour – he would consume unwise quantities of beer and wine amidst a cloud of his own good cheer. We also think of his Fr. Brown detective stories, his Catholic apologetics, and the clutch of witticisms and lines of poetry in the quotation books. The image is true enough, so far as it goes: he was larger than life – charming, benign, fun-loving, a magical figure, and, some said, a saint. Once known simply as 'G.K.C.', much in demand as writer and speaker, adored by many of the literati, treasured by his friends and family, prized by Catholics as the great Catholic star of his time, he was relentlessly creative, witty, imaginative, insightful, fanciful, ebullient, child-like; the world – especially London – his playground. But there was more to him than that.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) was one of the great stimulators of religious thought in the twentieth-century English-speaking world, and in his day was a popular writer of international repute. Yet though it matters that he was right as a Christian, it does not matter so much whether he was right or wrong as to detail: the point of reading Chesterton today is to be ideologically and intellectually stimulated,

challenged and perhaps inspired and enlightened, rather than to be informed about facts or instructed in doctrinal details. This is certainly not to short-change his memory, because it was very much his view of himself, whom he always regarded as a journalist, who rarely made a fetish of facts or accuracy, whose role was to be an *agent provocateur* of ideas, a subverter of contemporary orthodoxies and heresies, a challenger of secular, liberal, materialist dogmas, prejudices, bigotries, habits of thought and narrownesses; to be a question mark against the efflorescence of off-the-wall pseudo-religions and phoney metaphysics, which so afflicted those days, when Christian life was thought to be collapsing. 'I am,' he averred, 'entirely on the side of the revolutionists. They are really right to be always suspecting human institutions; they are right not to put their trust in princes nor in any child of man.'[1]

It follows that in our own day of rampant materialism, burgeoning cults, 'New Ageism', of the intimidation of Christianity by political correctness and lobby groups pursuing sinister agendas under the guise of 'liberalism' and 'progress', of the 'commitment which is no commitment' to relativism and determinism, Chesterton still valuably challenges present-day fads, fancies, trends, heresies and orthodoxies. His doubts as much as his beliefs point us to the matter of where lies truth, what is real: 'real', 'reality', 'really' are words that recur in Chesterton like a speech impediment or mantra: 'religion is a rare and definite conviction of what this world of ours really is,' he insisted. It was because true religion was real that it had real effects on society. This meant, as he observed, that religion was the key to every age. For him, truth lay in a matrix of reason, common sense and imagination: if he could say, 'I believe in [Christianity] quite rationally upon the evidence', he also believed in the value of intuition and 'first principles' as much as did his mentor Cardinal Newman – 'only a man who knows nothing of reason talks of reasoning without strong, undisputed first principles' – and liked to think that God was a storyteller who was telling a fairy tale, in which we are the giants, the giant-slayers and the damsels in distress, all in quest of home and living happily ever after. He was well-placed to pose questions, for his own compulsive quest for truth had led him from a neo-Unitarian background, through agnosticism and socialism to a quasi-Enlightenment optimism, to Anglicanism, and ultimately to Roman Catholicism, his sharp insight allowing him a deep understanding of these varied sets of answers; these varied ideologies in turn giving him a broad, stereoscopic vision.

At the same time, he is constantly inviting us to be philosophers, to question the nature of principle, reality and belief, and with them why we feel, think and act as we do. His rhetoric breaks down the wall

between matter, fact, the secular and the profane on the one hand, and spirit, belief, faith and the sacred on the other. The image of the bridge (Latin *pontifex*: 'priest', literally 'bridge-builder') was of particular importance to him. Then, as now, religion, and especially Christianity, was ridiculed as a defunct and demoralizing superstition, as dangerous, pernicious unreason; so he stressed that everybody, not just the Christian, lives by belief rather than knowledge, and that the beliefs of the proud, self-satisfied, secular, materialistic anti-Christian and non-Christian worlds are often more credulous, outrageous, damaging and dangerous than Christian beliefs; the secular world being littered with obsessive ideas, perverse superstitions, ludicrous idolatries and harmful heresies: 'those abuses which are supposed to belong specially to religion belong to all human institutions. They are not the sins of super-naturalism, but the sins of nature.'

In doing this, he even challenges everything which post-Enlightenment society treasures: individualism, liberalism, the concept of progress, democracy, freedom, toleration, socialism, capitalism, the welfare state, science and rationalism. He suggested that underlying all these modern systems, solutions and aspirations was a subtext of egoism, pride and lovelessness, the lust for status, wealth and power, which both rotted the individual and led society towards a culture of death, of *grand guignol* dressed in the motley of reason and decency, progress and liberality, where the welfare state was actually the 'Servile State', providing services in return for the yielding of liberty, with the enforcement of the will of the powerful and the manufacturing of consent merely taking a more subtle form than hitherto. He supposed that all the puffing of 'individualism' was reducible to the atomization of society, the isolating of the individual; that 'progress' and 'reason' were legerdemain, whereby people were being stripped of tradition and collective belief in order to render them vulnerable to the new 'high-priests'. In short, he was a Christian apologist attacking the covert poverty of modern thought.

But to question these things effectively he also had to criticize the milk-and-water Christianity which survived the Laodicean and latitudinarian consensus of later Victorianism, when Christianity had been compromised and embarrassed by the advance of science, rationalism, capitalism and imperialism, and had conspired in the virtual victory of secularism and cultism over itself. He supposed that from the Reformation, Christianity had been not only weakened by division, but also set upon from within by the cancer of individualism and secularism, which had led to the decline of Christian faith in favour of egotistical, secular ways of thinking, which simply used Christianity as a 'successful

brand name' with the power to elicit conformity, by which to make the heresy of materialism and new forms of power more readily digestible. Christianity had deliquesced into bourgeois capitalism, with all its attendant 'virtues' – thrift, self-help, the spirit of enterprise, and the like – which were really vices designed to venerate the god Mammon. Protestant Christianity especially was in league with the secular, even as it believed itself to be its greatest enemy: it had commonly become a badge of self-approval for the venal, individualist bourgeois, who, having got society's approval, now wanted God's.

It would be seriously mistaken, however, to see Chesterton simply as a tub-thumping, bigoted, narrow-minded Catholic, who merely replaced the power of society with the power of the Pope, and secular superstitions with Catholic ones. For him, true religious insight was a matter of sanity, reason and common sense, of what he called 'healthy hesitation and healthy complexity'. As well as seeing much that was good in other religions and denominations and the secular world – and how could he not, when for the majority of his life he was not a Roman Catholic, when his beloved parents had not been Catholics, when, for a while, he himself was not even a Christian, and when some of his best friends were not Christians? – he was keenly aware of the ambiguities of belief, of the overlap in the human mind between fact and fantasy, fairy tale and reality; of the undefined relationship between objective and subjective, truth and vision: was he awake, or was he dreaming? It is probably due to his acute sensitivity about this fundamental dilemma that while he sometimes assumed the persona of the arrogant Anglo-Catholic or Romanist dogmatist, he actually said relatively very little about the details of Catholic belief over the extent of his hundred-or-so-book literary career. Chesterton was a great believer in belief: belief was a creative gift, while non-belief solved nothing and achieved little; yet one of his beliefs was that it helped to have the best belief available. He knew, however, that knowledge was elusive, that one had, as it were, to live and feel one's way into one's grasp of truth: 'it seems a somewhat wild proposition,' he declared early in his career, 'to say that we can think we know anything, since knowledge implies certainty and sincerity. . . . Our knowledge is perpetually tricking and misleading us, [and] we do not know what we know, but only what we feel.'[2]

In a sense, he was an artist rather than a dogmatist, a storyteller, whose own life he regarded as a story; who regarded life in general as a story, because God was an artist, a storyteller. 'Romance,' he liked to think, 'is the deepest thing in life; romance is deeper than reality'; and though 'life may sometimes appear . . . as a book of metaphysics', 'life is always a novel'; 'our existence is . . . a story.'[3] As he said, 'the soul of

a story is a personality'. Stories have a large measure of unpredictability, and not least their endings, which are only known when they are known. So he was telling stories even when not writing novels or short stories. For him, while Christianity was by far the truest truth available, it was also a story, even as the Gospel is a story; and existence is a never-ending story. It was this underpinning of mystery and inconclusiveness, of the consciousness of possible other endings, that informed his humility, which was for him not just a Christian doctrine, but the mode of his mind. His fascination with the Book of Job, with its intellectual open-endedness, alone indicates his idea of religion as an ultimately unresolved mystery. He knew that life and religion posed questions that were not always answered; that the mystery is truly solved only at the end, for death is the moment of truth.[4] He once went so far as to quip that the big difference between Christianity on the one hand, and 'the thousand transcendental schools of to-day' and all the ancient paganisms on the other, is that the latter were aristocratic in that they involved an initiation of comprehension for the élite of the cult, while in the former 'the Christian mysteries are so far democratic that nobody understands them at all.' And if life, man and existence were a story, it was one told about characters; it was a drama of time, place and action, and the engine of the art was spirit, or mind and heart, emotion and psychology; and he was perfectly well aware that religion was to do with mental need, with inner drives which were not susceptible to dissection by the materialist's scalpel, or even by the theologian's: what the theologian did was cast light upon the mystery, not solve it; and what the dogmatist did was provide the spot-marks by which to best direct the action of the stage drama.

Though he may now be regarded as an outdated eccentric, in the first third of the twentieth century Chesterton was perhaps the most prominent English literary-cum-religious figure. Born into a nominally Unitarian family in 1874, he became a Roman Catholic only in 1922, at the age of forty-eight, having been a convinced Anglo-Catholic for about sixteen years. He trained as an artist at the Slade School of Fine Arts (and was an accomplished caricaturist), but turned to journalism, his life's work, and married his Anglo-Catholic wife Frances in 1901, shortly after meeting the aggressively Roman Catholic historian and man of letters Hilaire Belloc, with whose name his own was to be henceforth associated. Though his brother Cecil, to whom he was devoted, became a Catholic, as well as friends such as the polymathic intellectual Maurice Baring, he resisted the logic of his own thought for many years; and he had been a Roman Catholic for just fourteen years when, in 1936, he died.

Crucial to understanding Chesterton's development is the fact that

he enjoyed a very happy childhood, his love of life being instilled into him largely by his father. He came to see that as people grow out of childhood they lose much of their innate religious sensibility, and with it their sense of the magic of life, so that as they grow physically they shrink spiritually; and if Chesterton did not say 'adults are but children writ small', he could have. As a youth he became agnostic, sceptical, solipsistic, pessimistic and depressive to the point of – in his own word – 'madness'. He once referred to 'the old Agnosticism of my boyhood when my brother Cecil and my friend [Edmund Clerihew] Bentley almost worshipped old [Thomas Henry] Huxley like a god. . . . The other side often forgot that we began as free-thinkers as much as they did: and there was no earthly power but thinking to drive us on the way we went.'[5] At that time he came to see the world as divided between what he called 'pessimists' and 'optimists'; and for a while he fell into the former camp. He was disturbed by what he called 'the nihilism of the '90s', influenced, he thought, by such as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer; and the pessimist was associated with this movement, which had its roots in the atheistic, sceptical, critical rationalism which had taken such a hold in the 1870s, naming in the literary sphere Hardy, A.E. Housman, W.E. Henley and Swinburne amongst those who helped to create the pessimist ambience, the fashion of the pessimistic despising of good things as worthless and pointless. Optimists, as Chesterton supposed, tended to say, 'this is the best of all possible worlds', or at least that 'it is the best of all possible things that a world should be possible'; pessimists the reverse; optimists that things were getting better, that people were basically good; the pessimists that things were bad and going nowhere, that people were irredeemably bad. He saw 'Pessimism' as a pseudo-philosophical affliction of the ages, which at the time of the early Church was already preaching an anti-life doctrine. Pessimism did not consist in

> being tired of evil but in being tired of good. Despair does not lie in being weary of suffering, but in being weary of joy. It is when for some reason or other the good things in society no longer work that the society begins to decline; when its food does not feed, when its cures do not cure, when its blessings refuse to bless.[6]

Pessimism worried him especially, because it suggested that nothing had value.

He himself could not sustain the mental and spiritual anguish of such pessimism for long, and so decided to build for himself an ideology, an attitude to life, which would restore his childhood paradise. Like the

alcoholic finally accepting he has a problem, he took the first essential step along the path to religion in recognizing that he had a profound need. At first, however, he thought that if the disease was pessimism, then philosophical 'Optimism' must be the remedy. This was 'the primary conviction that life is worth living and the world is worthy of our efforts for it'; but it had degenerated in present-day society into 'a sort of cheap cheeriness, at the back of which there is a curious sort of hollow unbelief in reality,' with no conception of the reality of evil. For him, Optimism was 'an attempt to hold on to religion by the thread of thanks for our creation; by the praise of existence and of created things.' Eventually he came to associate Optimism and Pessimism with the sins of presumption and despair: 'The heresies that have attacked human happiness in my time,' he observed,

> have all been variations either of presumption or of despair; which in the controversies of modern culture are called optimism and pessimism. And if I wanted to write an autobiography in a sentence, . . . I should say that my literary life has lasted from a time when men were losing happiness in despair to a time when they are losing it by presumption.[7]

Fairly soon, however, he realized that while Optimism coincided with fundamental features of his own disposition of the childhood years, it was ultimately insufficient and even vacuous, because it was rootless, only partially perceived present reality and looked to an unreal future perfection. He therefore continued his quest to find a combined attitude and belief which would answer his metaphysical and psychological anguish, and effectually restore his prelapsarian happiness.

He described his time in the wilderness:

> I was a pagan at the age of twelve, and a complete agnostic by the age of sixteen. . . . I certainly regarded [Christ] as a man. . . . I read the scientific and sceptical literature of my time. . . . I never read a line of Christian apologetics. I read as little as I can of them now. It was Huxley and Herbert Spencer and [Charles] Bradlaugh who brought me back to orthodox religion. They sowed in my mind my first wild doubts of doubt.[8]

At that period he 'assumed that the Catholic Church was a sort of ruined abbey, almost as deserted as Stonehenge'; while his family and friends were 'more concerned with the opening of the book of Darwin than the book of Daniel; and most of them regarded the Hebrew Scriptures as if they were Hittite sculptures.' The psychological strength he had taken from his father was no longer supported by his shifting

ideological needs, so that his personality temporarily fractured. It is possible that one cause of his shrinking from religion was both personal and universal, in that he had a great fear of heights and falling, which he attributed to a deeper fear of helplessness before the divine will, which he posed in terms of 'the awful idea of immortality', wherein 'it is the infinity of the fall that freezes the spirit: it is the thought of not dying'; so that 'it is not death I fear, but hell; for hell must mean an infinity of falling.' It was while he was at the Slade School, in the earlier 1890s, at the age of about twenty, that he suddenly realized that he was, as he put it, 'becoming orthodox'.

Yet before he found orthodoxy, he had a strong suspicion that existence was religious: he had a fundamental intuition that the universe was spiritual more than material: 'it is *only* the spirituality of things that we are sure of. . . . I do not know on what principle the Universe is run, I know or feel that it is *good* or spiritual.'[9] 'Nothing,' he declared, 'is . . . so natural as supernaturalism.'[10] To his basic instinct for the wonder of existence he added a sympathy with socialistic ideals, a love of freedom, a valuing of Protestantism; but such things with which he thought he was in alliance let him down, and he came to realize that the idea of the centrality of God was the essential protection for all good things. He felt that all the atheisms were too simple a view of existence, while Christianity matched its complexity:

> Life is not an illogicality; yet it is a trap for logicians. It looks just a little more mathematical and regular than it is; its exactitude is obvious, but its inexactitude is hidden. . . . Everywhere in things there is this element of the quiet and incalculable. . . . Insight or inspiration is best tested by whether it guesses these hidden malformations or surprises. . . . This is exactly the claim which I have since come to propound for Christianity. . . . Its plan suits the secret irregularities, and expects the unexpected. It is simple about the simple truth; but it is stubborn about the subtle truth.[11]

He accepted Christianity because, he said, it revealed itself as 'a truth-telling thing', insisting on truths which do not at first appear credible, but turn out to be so; and being 'alone of all creeds . . . convincing where it is not attractive'. Also, 'it is only since I have known orthodoxy that I have known mental emancipation.' So he became an Anglican, but eventually moved on to Roman Catholicism because he came to believe the one to be the blurred image of the other, while Rome was the supreme Christian foe of all modern ideological degeneracies. As he indicated in his *Autobiography*, 'Mother Church' acted as a bridge back to his dead

father, so that it was the key (the combined metaphor is his) which unlocked his inner child, enabling him once again to fully relish life. By 1908 he could say that with orthodoxy he had returned to 'my father's house. I end where I began – at the right end. I have entered at least the gate of all good philosophy. I have come into my second childhood.'

He would not have been the thinker he was, nor would he have displayed the ideological development that he did, had he not started from a point of nothingness, of realizing and accepting that he knew nothing. In 1906 he wrote an essay called 'A Fairy Tale', in which he recounted a recent personal epiphany, which he believed had universal application:

> I was sitting . . . on a heap of stones in the Isle of Thanet, when I remembered that I had forgotten. . . . My blood ran cold, and I knew at once that I was in fairyland. . . . A domestic and even prosaic landscape, like that of this flat corner of Kent, can be soaked in a supernaturalism all the more awful from being detached and alien from the landscape itself. Everything that stood up around me stood up shapeless and yet with some horrible hint of the human shape. . . . Everything was at once secretive and vigilant; even the heap of stones beneath me seemed to be all eyes. But all external oddities were secondary to, or perhaps only symbolic of, the sudden sense of a sacred and splendid ignorance that had fallen upon my soul; the enigma of being alive. Saints have not discovered the answer. Philosophers have not even discovered the riddle. But in that moment at least I remembered that I could not remember. . . . The essence of fairyland is this; that it is a country of which we do not know the laws. This is also a peculiarity of the universe in which we live. We do not know anything about the laws of nature; we do not even know whether they are laws.[12]

For him, this acknowledgement of total scepticism was a fundamental religious insight, and the starting point of 'remembering'.

Chesterton's response upon becoming a Christian was to defend Christianity, to become a literary crusader, bounding from his corner with both metaphysical fists flying, believing that if a thing was good it was worth fighting for, that if an ideal was adopted it had to be defended: 'the moment a man is something, he is essentially defying everything.' If one truly stood for something, offending others was inevitable: Jesus, who said he came to bring not peace but a sword – the sword of truth – was murdered partly because he gave offence. Chesterton confessed that

'that peculiar diplomatic and tactful art of saying that Catholicism is true, without suggesting for one moment that anti-Catholicism is false, is an art which I am too old a Rationalist to learn.' On the occasion of his reception into the Roman Catholic Church, he told his mother:

> I have thought about you, and all that I owe to you and my father, not only in the way of affection, but of the ideals of honour and freedom and charity and all other good things you always taught me: and I am not conscious of the smallest break or difference in those ideals; but only of a new and necessary way of fighting for them. I think . . . that the fight for the family and the free citizen and everything decent must now be waged by [the] one fighting form of Christianity.[13]

Having ached since childhood to be a knight in shining armour, he fought for Christianity as a true champion; none too carefully, but boldly and with good cheer. Shortly after his conversion to Rome, he wrote that the Church 'has recaptured the initiative and is conducting the counter-attack; . . . it is aggressive. It is this atmosphere of the aggressiveness of Catholicism that has thrown the old intellectuals on the defensive.'[14] He himself was part of that counter-attack.

Though he was, with Belloc and Ronald Knox, one of the three pillars of English Catholic wisdom in the first half of the twentieth century, Chesterton was unskilled at being a blindly conformist Catholic, just as he was poor at conforming to any other ideology or institution. For several years he shied from becoming a Roman Catholic; a friend witnessed that 'for a time he conceived the possibility of a Catholic accepting the authority of the Church without accepting the authority of Rome.' Following his conversion, George Bernard Shaw told him, 'I know that an officially Catholic Chesterton is an impossibility.'[15] Realising that people thought Catholics had no intellectual independence, he insisted that 'Catholics are much more and not less individualistic than other men in their general opinions': 'Catholics know the two or three transcendental truths on which they do agree; and take rather a pleasure in disagreeing on everything else.' In his radical politics, his originality, his florid vivacity, his individualist whimsy, he strained away from the tenor of the contemporary Catholic Church, which was very much absorbed with legalism, censoriousness and the power of Rome and its clergy. While it is true that his detective hero is a Catholic priest, Fr. Brown is an oddball, *sui generis*, whose forte is sensitive insight rather than theology. Similarly, it was Chesterton's personal paradox that he, a great individualist, preached conformity to Rome. His lifelong preoccupation with liberty was probably partly responsible

for his long delay in becoming a Roman Catholic; although eventually he managed to convince himself that the Church stood for freedom more than any other institution or ideology of the time. He was always particularly suspicious of prigs and puritans, if only because he suspected they wanted to prohibit his beloved beer and cigars; and correlatively he supposed that 'our travels are interludes in comradeship and joy, which through God shall endure for ever. The inn does not point to the road; the road points to the inn. And all roads point at last to an ultimate inn, . . . and when we drink again it shall be from the great flagons in the tavern at the end of the world.'

Belloc, who knew Chesterton's mind as well as most, was surprised at his conversion, and commented at the time that 'faith is an act of will and as it seemed to me the whole of his mind was occupied in expressing his liking for and attraction towards a certain mood, not at all towards the acceptation of a certain Institution as defined and representing full reality in this world.'[16] Belloc's judgement was valid; but he missed the delicate 'mood', or psychology, which finally led him to feel that the Catholic Church best matched his personal needs. Chesterton had always felt the need for an ideology that would be universally relevant and applicable, while allowing for the individual, the local, the homely. Anglicanism had seemed to fit the bill, in so far as it was 'Catholic': i.e. 'universal'. But he was always uneasy about Henry VIII and the establishment of a local Catholicism – as opposed to a Catholicism which provided for the local – which had transmogrified so readily into Protestantism. He came to see Anglicanism as a muddle of compromises between men who did not believe a great deal. He rather cruelly characterized the State Church as 'a mere illogical interlude; in which God holds his authority from Caesar; instead of Caesar holding it from God.'

When he did belatedly become a Roman Catholic, he was not – and never had been – an avid practitioner of the Faith (rarely going to Communion, though more from humility than indifference), and seldom went into detail about Catholic authority or specifically and uniquely Catholic doctrine or practice. He did not, for example, analyze the 1917 revision of the Code of Canon Law – a major event in the world of Catholic discipline. Like most Catholics, while he explicitly accepted 'the whole package', he implicitly warmed to some parts of it, though not others, and so tended to emphasize the bits which seemed most important to him. Happily, these bits were generally ones to which a wide audience could relate; which conformed with his concern to convey Christian fundamentals. ('Almost every Englishman,' acknowledged the patriotic Chesterton, 'has his own separate form of Christianity.') He

once referred to 'that excellent method which Cardinal Newman employed when he spoke of the "notes" of Catholicism.' In the same way, Chesterton explored the 'notes' of Catholicism, rather than their supporting technicalities.

Throughout his life he was sensitive to Rome's shortcomings, as well as to its cultural glory and its incomparable significance in presenting Christ to the world. 'The Saints,' he once remarked, 'were sometimes great men when the Popes were small men.' Obviously, for the forty-eight years when he was not a Catholic he had his reservations. For example, he then observed that

> against the Church of Pio Nono [Pope Pius IX] the main thing to be said was that it was simply and supremely cynical; that it was . . . founded . . . on the worldly counsel to leave life as it is; that it was not the inspirer of insane hopes, of reward and miracle, but the enemy, the cool and sceptical enemy, of hope of any kind of description.[17]

And, perhaps with a particular eye on Roman celibacy, he admitted, 'I have not myself any instinctive kinship with that enthusiasm for physical virginity, which has certainly been a note of historic Christianity.' In 1903 he observed that 'the stoic philosophy and the early church discussed woman as if she were an institution, and in many cases decided to abolish her.' He said that following his conversion, 'I sympathize with doubts and difficulties more than I did before. . . . It may be that I shall never again have such absolute assurance that the thing is true as I had when I made my last effort to deny it.' As a Catholic, he could still observe that 'undoubtedly some harm was done . . . when the Popes of the Renaissance filled Rome with trophies that might have marked the triumphs of the Caesars, and permitted the slander that the father of Christian man had usurped the title of King of Kings and forgotten his own actual title of Servant of Servants.' He knew, like any other educated, reasonable Catholic, that the historic Church had always needed reforming: Voltaire, he said, had been right to hate the 'horrors' of the Spanish Inquisition. He was very conscious of the saints, such as Teresa of Avila and St Francis of Assisi, as reformers of the Church. The men of the Enlightenment had had 'a just impatience with corrupt and cynical priests.'

Things could and did go wrong in the historic Church: even in his favourite High Middle Ages, for example, 'mediaeval sins hampered and corrupted mediaeval ideas'; and there were 'certain historic tendencies' which had 'hardened into habits in many great schools and authorities' in the Church, which St Francis of Assisi and St Thomas

Aquinas were destined to address as reformers. These 'tendencies' included the Augustinian and Anselmian schools, which had too much emphasized the soul to the neglect of the body, making them 'less orthodox in being more spiritual'. When he observed that the Church had always been subject to 'treason', he had in mind the treason of the Manichaean mentality, the puritanism that said the material world was evil. Another problem in the mediaeval Church was that some of the Scholastic theologians took 'everything that was worst in Scholasticism and made it worse. . . . They were a sort of rabid rationalists, who would have left no mysteries in the Faith at all.' He was well aware of what he called the 'harsher side' of mediaeval religion, 'what many would call [its] ferocity'. He admitted that the 'corruptions' of mediaeval theology 'often took the form of the most abominable abuses; because the corruption of the best is the worst.'

He was phlegmatic about the unchristianness of Catholics down the ages, because he realized that 'Christianity is not a creed for good men, but for men', who, like St Peter, tend to betray their ideals. He acknowledged that 'it is part of that high inconsistency which is the fate of the Christian faith in human hands, that no man knows when the higher side of it will really be uppermost, if only for an instant; and that the worst ages of the Church will not do or say something, as if by accident, that is worthy of the best.' He was also aware of – as he expressed it – 'that casual kind of Catholic that never remembers his religion until he is really in a hole.'

He did not always like the way the Church expressed faith: 'When we see the Roman churches of the Baroque period, especially of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, we naturally feel a revulsion against them, because of something overloaded in their magnificence and something garish in their very gaiety': it was glory turned to vainglory. He tells the story of St Dominic meeting the Pope, who points to his gorgeous papal palace and brags, 'Peter can no longer say "Silver and gold have I none" '; to which Dominic replies, 'No, and neither can he now say, "Rise and walk" '.[18]

He once associated the later-mediaeval papacy with 'dubious "drives" of the Charity Bazaar sort; not always producing (or receiving) perfect charity.' He even implicitly admitted that he was not completely temperamentally in tune with the Roman way: 'By every instinct of my being, by every tradition of my blood, I should prefer English liberty to Latin discipline'; and someone – like himself – becoming a Catholic 'must often face the dull and repulsive aspects of duty' in the Church: they 'must realise all the sides upon which the religion may seem sordid or humdrum or humiliating or harsh.' He was reluctant to visit Lourdes,

and never liked the cult surrounding St Thérèse of Lisieux. As a Catholic, he admitted there were 'real rocks of offence' in the Church. It is this preparedness and ability to criticize his own ideological base which licenses him to criticize other denominations, other religions and secularisms.

This is not, however, to say that Chesterton was not happy as a Catholic: real people – like the Faith itself – are more complex than extremists would allow. In his *Autobiography* (chapter 4) he cheekily cocks a snook at his anti-Catholic society: 'So far,' he says,

> as a man may be proud of a religion rooted in humility, I am very proud of my religion; I am especially proud of those parts of it that are most commonly called superstition. I am proud of being fettered by antiquated dogmas . . . it is only the reasonable dogma that lives long enough to be called antiquated. I am very proud of what people call priestcraft . . . [and] Mariolatry . . . [and] the mysteries of the Trinity or the Mass; I am proud of believing in the Confessional; I am proud of believing in the Papacy.

Also, in some respects he even saw the Church through rose-tinted spectacles: though he denied being a 'medievalist' – in the sense of one who sees value only in mediaeval culture – he did tend to present mediaeval culture and religion – 'Catholic culture' – as the measure of all things; and he did tend to stress the merits of Catholicism in an exaggerated form: 'Catholic doctrine and discipline,' he says, 'may be walls; but they are the walls of a playground,' where children can 'fling themselves into every frantic game and make the place the noisiest of nurseries.' (Although, in a more prosaic mood he would probably have pleaded 'poetic license' over such expressions.) His sister-in-law observed that he 'was so impregnated with the supernatural power of the Church over her disciples, that he credited Catholics as such with an undue impeccability of motive and purpose in worldly affairs.'[19] This would certainly account for his giving some benefit of the doubt – though largely critical – to the Fascists of Catholic Spain and Italy. The priest who received him into the Catholic Church noted his awe of Catholic priests: 'he would carefully weigh their opinion however fatuous.' His child-like enthusiasm for Catholicism led him to perhaps unwarranted optimism about its present performance and immediate fate: the Catholic Church, he declared in 1925, was 'newer in spirit than the newest schools of thought'; a mother who 'grows younger as the world grows old', and more beautiful; and she was 'on the eve of new triumphs'. He was clear that Rome was the prime Church: 'the Roman Church is the Church

and is not a sect . . . the Catholic Church stands alone. It does not merely belong to a class of Christian churches.' And, contrary to the common criticism that Catholicism was emotionalist, he insisted that it was 'the most rationalistic of all religions', alone 'accepting the action of the reason and the will.' He supposed poetically that 'if every human being lived a thousand years, every human being would end up either in utter pessimistic scepticism or in the Catholic creed;' implying that such was the richness of the Church's intellectual and spiritual stores that it would take a thousand years to properly appreciate her gifts.

Chesterton's charm and importance can be indicated by the comments of his contemporaries, such as George Bernard Shaw, who called him 'the sort of man that England can produce when she is doing her best.'[20] Walter de la Mare's epitaph was :

> Knight of the Holy Ghost, he goes his way
> Wisdom his motley, Truth his loving jest;
> The mills of Satan keep his lance in play,
> Pity and innocence his heart at rest.[21]

Catholics were, of course, admiring: Ronald Knox – the most prominent and respected English Catholic priest of that generation – commented: 'if you asked me who was the simplest person I have ever known I should mention the name of one of the cleverest men of our generation, Mr. G.K. Chesterton.' Knox said he would be remembered by Catholics as 'a man who fought always on the side of the angels, a great model, to the authors of all time, of two virtues in particular – innocence and humility.'[22] The journalist and publisher Douglas Jerrold said that he, along with Belloc and A.R. Orage, 'changed the current of public opinion and taught us to look beneath the surface and examine the foundations of old loyalties'; and that he, along with Shaw, Wells, Belloc, Bennett, Galsworthy and Conrad, was one of 'the great Edwardians'.[23] For the man of letters Douglas Woodruff, writing in 1942, Chesterton and Newman were 'the two chief apologists for Catholicism in the last hundred years in England.'[24]

The obituaries were predictably fulsome: his colleague Gregory MacDonald recalled that, though Chesterton eventually 'suffered as all great men may do by becoming a national institution', 'pre-War England knew better than post-War England the excitement of finding on any day of the year that its Plato had broken out with an original lecture, that its Shakespeare had shattered everything with a single song. . . . In the twentieth century he was one of the few free men.'[25] Another colleague and friend, W.R. Titterton, wrote:

> he had all his life acute and blissful awareness of the miracle

> of common things. . . . he had a little world of beliefs from earliest childhood, which . . . were in fact fibre of his fibre and blood of his blood. This little world was a world of fairy-tales. He believed in fairies, first of all . . . because of his awareness of the miracle of Nature, but secondly because the law of fairyland chimed with the law of his soul.[26]

His Dominican friend Vincent McNabb compared him to Aquinas: 'with both men thought becomes consecration. . . . The finest quality about their mental work is not its truth, but its moral worth, its goodness – indeed its holiness.' Yet 'he himself was so much better than anything he wrote or did that his words and deeds were but symbols of the inner source of all he said or did.'

> This constant abiding with what was highest in human thought and desire gave him that indescribable but unmistakable character of humility. . . . He was . . . not only the *servus servorum*, making all he met his masters whom in love he served, but [made] them all his teaching-masters from whom in gratitude he learned. . . . So knit were his mind and soul with God that his very laughter – so frequent and so infectious – had a quality almost liturgical. It seemed in its own human way a ritual worship of the Truth. . . . It was hard to speak with Gilbert Chesterton and not to think – *and think of God*.[27]

When McNabb had visited the unconscious, dying Chesterton he sang the *Salve Regina* over him, as he would have done for a fellow Dominican. His parting reverential act was to pick up from the bedside table Chesterton's pen – through which he had communicated so much goodness to the world – then bless and kiss it.