



# HERETICS

*G. K. Chesterton*



HENDRICKSON  
Christian  
Classics

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G. K. CHESTERTON

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PUBLISHERS

*Heretics*

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## PREFACE

HENDRICKSON CHRISTIAN CLASSICS EDITION

G. K. Chesterton  
1874–1936

*Never has there been so little discussion about the nature of men as now, when, for the first time, any one can discuss it. The old restriction meant that only the orthodox were allowed to discuss religion. Modern liberty means that nobody is allowed to discuss it. Good taste, the last and vilest of human superstitions, has succeeded in silencing us where all the rest have failed.*

—G. K. Chesterton  
Heretics

He stood six feet, three inches tall, and weighed in at around three hundred pounds. He had a signature look that featured a distinctive moustache, a pair of glasses perched on his nose, all topped off with a cape, a jaunty hat, a walking stick, and as likely as not, a long cigar. His name was Gilbert Keith Chesterton, and he was one of the twentieth century's most remarkable Christian voices. He's a man whose name everyone

seems to know, but nobody really knows why. And most likely, they know of him because of something he wrote.

Whatever else may be said about G. K. Chesterton, he was first and foremost a writer. According to one estimate, he wrote one hundred books and contributed to hundreds more. He penned five novels, five plays, and hundreds of poems, plus two hundred short stories, including the popular tales of the priest-who-would-be-detective Father Brown. He enjoyed considerable success from his books, but at heart he was a journalist. His output included thirteen years of weekly columns for the *Daily News* plus thirty years of weekly columns for the *Illustrated London News*. On top of this, he edited his own newspaper *G. K.'s Weekly*. If you're counting, that's more than four thousand newspaper essays.

Whatever he wrote about—whether politics, philosophy, history, or theology—his style was distinctive: always full of wit, humility, paradox, and wonder. Chesterton had full command of the medium, the utter respect of his audience—and, most important, he controlled the conversation. His prominence and influence could perhaps be compared to that of a daily news anchor today—yet Chesterton wrote all his own material!

Most memorable, perhaps, is his humor. Chesterton found fun in life, and it shows in his writing. He loved telling stories on himself, and others enjoyed telling stories on him.

One famous story has him wiring his wife saying, “Am at Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?” “Home,” she wired back. All who knew him, whether they agreed with his beliefs or not, found him fun-loving, engaging, fearless, confident without being judgmental, and most of all, a friend.

Chesterton was born in 1874, in the Kensington section of London, into a family who had for several generations operated a successful real estate business. Though his family saw that he was baptized into the Church of England, their beliefs tended more toward Unitarian rather than traditional Christianity. Like other middle-class families of the time, their values were distinctly post-Christian. Anything perceived as traditional or classical was set aside in favor of *progress*—that is, whatever was new and modern. Traditional beliefs and institutions—religious, social, artistic, scientific, philosophical—were rejected in favor of personal experience,

perceptions, thought, and belief. Good was no longer measured through external absolutes, but rather in what was new and modern and progressive. Whatever was new was also deemed good and beautiful.

Chesterton's childhood, though largely non-religious, was nonetheless a childhood that he remembered as filled with fun, a quality he enjoyed his entire life. He was educated at St. Paul's, but rather than attend university, he enrolled in the Slade School of Art in 1892. It was here that he had his crisis of faith or, more accurately, his crisis of non-faith, which he later called "my period of madness." Oddly enough, this depression was triggered by the then-current school of painting, Impressionism—long considered a significant aspect of Modernism. Chesterton explains in his *Autobiography*:

I think there was a spiritual significance in Impressionism in connection with this age as the age of skepticism. I mean that it illustrated skepticism in the sense of subjectivism . . . Whatever may be the merits of this as a method of art, there is obviously something highly subjective and skeptical about it as a method of thought. It naturally lends itself to the metaphysical suggestion that things only exist as we perceive them, or that things do not exist at all.

As a remedy to the rampant skepticism with which he struggled, he began to read authors like Robert Browning, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Walt Whitman, who affirmed existence and its basic goodness. He also began to nurture gratitude for life and a sense of wonder for the creation itself. To a culture immersed in skepticism, these ideas represented an almost radical approach to life, and for Chesterton, they became his healing.

In 1895 Chesterton left the Slade School, but a career in art was not for him. He went directly to Fleet Street to work as a journalist, where he honed his craft by writing weekly columns for the *Daily News*, developing his ideas and building an audience. Columnists were given considerable freedom in their choices of subjects, and Chesterton became one of the *Daily News*' star writers, a feat all the more remarkable because he challenged the modernism his readers held close, while endorsing traditional beliefs they held suspect.

Chesterton's journey toward faith took another major turn in 1896, when he met Frances Blogg, who would become his wife. Frances was a devout Anglican, and by the time of their marriage in 1901, Chesterton had journeyed away from his few remaining Unitarian beliefs towards Anglicanism. Though moving into Christianity, he was acutely aware of the weaknesses in the Anglican communion: specifically its unwillingness to stand against Modernism. His observations were set out in his book *Heretics*, published in 1905. By his own admission, this book pointed out the problems without providing solutions. It wouldn't be until 1908, when Chesterton's faith was more fully formed, that he was ready to offer solutions, based on his own experiences. It would be in *Orthodoxy* that he would demonstrate how Christian belief holds the answers to modernity and the problems of modern life.

Ultimately, Chesterton's journey led him through the Anglo-Catholic tradition and on to Rome; he was received into the Catholic Church in 1922, after many years of struggle, both within himself and also with his family, especially his wife Frances. For Chesterton, the move was a natural culmination of a life spent upholding Christian belief in the face of corrosive modern thought and culture. Indeed, for him, the Catholic Church was orthodoxy, and other churches, especially the Church of England, were not.

A few years later, Frances joined the Roman Church as well, much to Chesterton's joy. The two never had children, but they were a team who enjoyed and esteemed one another. Frances above all kept his life in order, and served as his spiritual barometer and guide, as well as his chief literary critic. Their marriage lasted thirty-five years, until his death in 1936.

In contrast to many writers who are content to let their published words be the end of the story, Chesterton found excitement in life itself. He was not afraid to confront, whether in print or in person. He debated the noted intellectuals of the day, men like George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, and Clarence Darrow. He was one of the founding members and first president of London's Detection Club, a group that included mystery greats like Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Freeman Wills Crofts, and Ronald Knox. With Frances, he was an enthusiastic traveler, visiting Jerusalem (Palestine), the Continent, and North America.

Chesterton's voice is still powerful, still fresh, still relevant. Two world wars, nuclear weapons, the Cold War, and countless other conflicts, genocides, epidemics, and social upheavals should have laid to rest by now the humanistic theology that Chesterton confronted his entire career, but like kudzu, it seems never to go away. What Chesterton deplored in the Church of England—specifically their willingness to sacrifice doctrine in the name of unity—is evident still today. And though modernity may have been superseded by the postmodern, every aspect of Western culture and life today is drenched in the residual legacy of skepticism, materialism, relativism and socialism—including, of course, the Church itself.

As you read this book, you join a remarkable league of spiritual descendants who count Chesterton among their spiritual mentors: folks like C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, T. S. Eliot, Ronald Knox, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and Mahatma Gandhi. What Chesterton did—and teaches us to do as well—is confront heresy directly, without apology or embarrassment. In *Heretics*, he courageously names the foremost heretics of his time and then proceeds to challenge their false philosophies—philosophies so popular that most of them still permeate our thinking one hundred years later. Perhaps Chesterton can still teach us how to think and how to challenge the heresies in our thinking, and the heretics of our time.

## READER'S NOTE

In this book, G. K. Chesterton is engaging in a dialog with the influential men and women of his own time. While some of those names may remain familiar, many of them are not. To help readers bridge the gap, the editors have created a Biographical Appendix, which appears at the end of this book. It lists most of the people Chesterton mentions, along with short biographical notes to help the reader better understand Chesterton's arguments. Since many individuals appear several times in the book, the Appendix also includes page numbers where the references to each person appear.

*To my Father*

—G.K. Chesterton



## I

### *Introductory Remarks on the Importance of Orthodoxy*

Nothing more strangely indicates an enormous and silent evil of modern society than the extraordinary use which is made nowadays of the word “orthodox.” In former days, the heretic was proud of not being a heretic. It was the kingdoms of the world and the police and the judges who were heretics. He was orthodox. He had no pride in having rebelled against them; they had rebelled against him. The armies with their cruel security, the kings with their cold faces, the decorous processes of State, the reasonable processes of law—all these like sheep had gone astray. The man was proud of being orthodox, was proud of being right. If he stood alone in a howling wilderness, he was more than a man; he was a church. He was the center of the universe; it was round him that the stars swung. All the tortures torn out of forgotten hells could not make him admit that he was heretical. But a few modern phrases have made him boast of it. He says, with a conscious laugh, “I suppose I am very heretical,” and looks round for applause. The word “heresy” not only means no longer being

wrong; it practically means being clear-headed and courageous. The word “orthodoxy” not only no longer means being right; it practically means being wrong. All this can mean one thing, and one thing only. It means that people care less whether they are philosophically right. For obviously a man ought to confess himself crazy before he confesses himself heretical. The Bohemian, with a red tie, ought to pique himself on his orthodoxy. The dynamiter, laying a bomb, ought to feel that, whatever else he is, at least he is orthodox.

It is foolish, generally speaking, for a philosopher to set fire to another philosopher in Smithfield Market because they do not agree in their theory of the universe. That was done very frequently in the last decadence of the Middle Ages, and it failed altogether in its object. But there is one thing that is infinitely more absurd and unpractical than burning a man for his philosophy. This is the habit of saying that his philosophy does not matter, and this is done universally in the twentieth century, in the decadence of the great revolutionary period. General theories are everywhere condemned; the doctrine of the Rights of Man is dismissed with the doctrine of the Fall of Man. Atheism itself is too theological for us today. Revolution itself is too much of a system; liberty itself is too much of a restraint. We will have no generalizations. Mr. Bernard Shaw has put the view in a perfect epigram: “The golden rule is that there is no golden rule.” We are more and more to discuss details in art, politics, literature. A man’s opinion on tram cars matters; his opinion on Botticelli matters; his opinion on all things does not matter. He may turn over and explore a million objects, but he must not find that strange object, the universe; for if he does he will have a religion, and be lost. Everything matters—except everything.

Examples are scarcely needed of this total levity on the subject of cosmic philosophy. Examples are scarcely needed to show that, whatever else we think of as affecting practical affairs, we do not think it matters whether a man is a pessimist or an optimist, a Cartesian<sup>1</sup> or a Hegelian,<sup>2</sup> a materialist or a spiritualist. Let me, however, take a random instance. At any innocent tea-table we may easily hear a man say, “Life is not worth living.” We regard it as we regard the statement that it is a fine day; nobody

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<sup>1</sup> Relating to the philosophy of René Descartes.

<sup>2</sup> Relating to the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

thinks that it can possibly have any serious effect on the man or on the world. And yet if that utterance were really believed, the world would stand on its head. Murderers would be given medals for saving men from life; firemen would be denounced for keeping men from death; poisons would be used as medicines; doctors would be called in when people were well; the Royal Humane Society would be rooted out like a horde of assassins. Yet we never speculate as to whether the conversational pessimist will strengthen or disorganize society; for we are convinced that theories do not matter.

This was certainly not the idea of those who introduced our freedom. When the old Liberals removed the gags from all the heresies, their idea was that religious and philosophical discoveries might thus be made. Their view was that cosmic truth was so important that every one ought to bear independent testimony. The modern idea is that cosmic truth is so unimportant that it cannot matter what any one says. The former freed inquiry as men loose a noble hound; the latter frees inquiry as men fling back into the sea a fish unfit for eating. Never has there been so little discussion about the nature of men as now, when, for the first time, any one can discuss it. The old restriction meant that only the orthodox were allowed to discuss religion. Modern liberty means that nobody is allowed to discuss it. Good taste, the last and vilest of human superstitions, has succeeded in silencing us where all the rest have failed. Sixty years ago it was bad taste to be an avowed atheist. Then came the Bradlaughites,<sup>3</sup> the last religious men, the last men who cared about God; but they could not alter it. It is still bad taste to be an avowed atheist. But their agony has achieved just this—that now it is equally bad taste to be an avowed Christian. Emancipation has only locked the saint in the same tower of silence as the heresiarch. Then we talk about Lord Anglesey and the weather, and call it the complete liberty of all the creeds.

But there are some people, nevertheless—and I am one of them—who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe. We think that for a landlady considering a lodger, it is important to know his income, but still more important to know his

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<sup>3</sup> Bradlaughites were followers of Charles Bradlaugh.

philosophy. We think that for a general about to fight an enemy, it is important to know the enemy's numbers, but still more important to know the enemy's philosophy. We think the question is not whether the theory of the cosmos affects matters, but whether in the long run, anything else affects them. In the fifteenth century men cross-examined and tormented a man because he preached some immoral attitude; in the nineteenth century we feted and flattered Oscar Wilde because he preached such an attitude, and then broke his heart in penal servitude because he carried it out. It may be a question which of the two methods was the more cruel; there can be no kind of question which was the more ludicrous. The age of the Inquisition has not at least the disgrace of having produced a society which made an idol of the very same man for preaching the very same things which it made him a convict for practicing.

Now, in our time, philosophy or religion, our theory, that is, about ultimate things, has been driven out, more or less simultaneously, from two fields which it used to occupy. General ideals used to dominate literature. They have been driven out by the cry of "art for art's sake." General ideals used to dominate politics. They have been driven out by the cry of "efficiency," which may roughly be translated as "politics for politics' sake." Persistently for the last twenty years the ideals of order or liberty have dwindled in our books; the ambitions of wit and eloquence have dwindled in our parliaments. Literature has purposely become less political; politics have purposely become less literary. General theories of the relation of things have thus been extruded from both; and we are in a position to ask, "What have we gained or lost by this extrusion? Is literature better, is politics better, for having discarded the moralist and the philosopher?"

When everything about a people is for the time growing weak and ineffective, it begins to talk about efficiency. So it is that when a man's body is a wreck he begins, for the first time, to talk about health. Vigorous organisms talk not about their processes, but about their aims. There cannot be any better proof of the physical efficiency of a man than that he talks cheerfully of a journey to the end of the world. And there cannot be any better proof of the practical efficiency of a nation than that it talks constantly of a journey to the end of the world, a journey to the Judgment Day and the New Jerusalem. There can be no stronger sign of a coarse material health than the tendency

to run after high and wild ideals; it is in the first exuberance of infancy that we cry for the moon. None of the strong men in the strong ages would have understood what you meant by working for efficiency. Hildebrand<sup>4</sup> would have said that he was working not for efficiency, but for the Catholic Church. Danton would have said that he was working not for efficiency, but for liberty, equality, and fraternity. Even if the ideal of such men were simply the ideal of kicking a man downstairs, they thought of the end like men, not of the process like paralytics. They did not say, "Efficiently elevating my right leg, using, you will notice, the muscles of the thigh and calf, which are in excellent order, I—" Their feeling was quite different. They were so filled with the beautiful vision of the man lying flat at the foot of the staircase that in that ecstasy the rest followed in a flash. In practice, the habit of generalizing and idealizing did not by any means mean worldly weakness. The time of big theories was the time of big results. In the era of sentiment and fine words, at the end of the eighteenth century, men were really robust and effective. The sentimentalists conquered Napoleon. The cynics could not catch de Wet. A hundred years ago our affairs for good or evil were wielded triumphantly by rhetoricians. Now our affairs are hopelessly muddled by strong, silent men. And just as this repudiation of big words and big visions has brought forth a race of small men in politics, so it has brought forth a race of small men in the arts. Our modern politicians claim the colossal license of Caesar and the Superman, claim that they are too practical to be pure and too patriotic to be moral; but the upshot of it all is that a mediocrity is Chancellor of the Exchequer. Our new artistic philosophers call for the same moral license, for a freedom to wreck heaven and earth with their energy; but the upshot of it all is that a mediocrity is Poet Laureate. I do not say that there are no stronger men than these; but will any one say that there are any men stronger than those men of old who were dominated by their philosophy and steeped in their religion? Whether bondage be better than freedom may be discussed. But that their bondage came to more than our freedom it will be difficult for any one to deny.

The theory of the unmorality of art has established itself firmly in the strictly artistic classes. They are free to produce anything they like. They are free to write a "Paradise Lost" in which Satan shall conquer God. They

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<sup>4</sup> Hildebrand (Pope Gregory VII) instituted reforms in the Church.

are free to write a “Divine Comedy” in which heaven shall be under the floor of hell. And what have they done? Have they produced in their universality anything grander or more beautiful than the things uttered by the fierce Ghibelline<sup>5</sup> Catholic, by the rigid Puritan schoolmaster? We know that they have produced only a few roundels. Milton does not merely beat them at his piety, he beats them at their own irreverence. In all their little books of verse you will not find a finer defiance of God than Satan’s. Nor will you find the grandeur of paganism felt as that fiery Christian felt it who described Farinata lifting his head as in disdain of hell. And the reason is very obvious. Blasphemy is an artistic effect, because blasphemy depends upon a philosophical conviction. Blasphemy depends upon belief and is fading with it. If any one doubts this, let him sit down seriously and try to think blasphemous thoughts about Thor. I think his family will find him at the end of the day in a state of some exhaustion.

Neither in the world of politics nor that of literature, then, has the rejection of general theories proved a success. It may be that there have been many moonstruck and misleading ideals that have from time to time perplexed mankind. But assuredly there has been no ideal in practice so moonstruck and misleading as the ideal of practicality. Nothing has lost so many opportunities as the opportunism of Lord Rosebery. He is, indeed, a standing symbol of this epoch—the man who is theoretically a practical man, and practically more unpractical than any theorist. Nothing in this universe is so unwise as that kind of worship of worldly wisdom. A man who is perpetually thinking of whether this race or that race is strong, of whether this cause or that cause is promising, is the man who will never believe in anything long enough to make it succeed. The opportunist politician is like a man who should abandon billiards because he was beaten at billiards, and abandon golf because he was beaten at golf. There is nothing which is so weak for working purposes as this enormous importance attached to immediate victory. There is nothing that fails like success.

And having discovered that opportunism does fail, I have been induced to look at it more largely, and in consequence to see that it must

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<sup>5</sup> The Ghibellines were a faction that supported the Holy Roman Empire in a power struggle between the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire in twelfth and thirteenth century Italy.

fail. I perceive that it is far more practical to begin at the beginning and discuss theories. I see that the men who killed each other about the orthodoxy of the Homoousion<sup>6</sup> were far more sensible than the people who are quarrelling about the Education Act. For the Christian dogmatists were trying to establish a reign of holiness, and trying to get defined, first of all, what was really holy. But our modern educationists are trying to bring about a religious liberty without attempting to settle what is religion or what is liberty. If the old priests forced a statement on mankind, at least they previously took some trouble to make it lucid. It has been left for the modern mobs of Anglicans and Nonconformists to persecute for a doctrine without even stating it.

For these reasons, and for many more, I for one have come to believe in going back to fundamentals. Such is the general idea of this book. I wish to deal with my most distinguished contemporaries, not personally or in a merely literary manner, but in relation to the real body of doctrine which they teach. I am not concerned with Mr. Rudyard Kipling as a vivid artist or a vigorous personality; I am concerned with him as a Heretic—that is to say, a man whose view of things has the hardihood to differ from mine. I am not concerned with Mr. Bernard Shaw as one of the most brilliant and one of the most honest men alive; I am concerned with him as a Heretic—that is to say, a man whose philosophy is quite solid, quite coherent, and quite wrong. I revert to the doctrinal methods of the thirteenth century, inspired by the general hope of getting something done.

Suppose that a great commotion arises in the street about something, let us say a lamppost, which many influential persons desire to pull down. A grey-clad monk, who is the spirit of the Middle Ages, is approached upon the matter, and begins to say, in the arid manner of the Schoolmen,<sup>7</sup> “Let us first of all consider, my brethren, the value of Light. If Light be in itself good—” At this point he is somewhat excusably knocked down. All the people make a rush for the lamppost, the lamppost is down in ten minutes, and they go about congratulating each other on their unmedieval

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<sup>6</sup> The Christian doctrine formulated at the first ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325 AD, which affirms that God the Son and God the Father are of the same substance.

<sup>7</sup> Medieval Scholastic academicians.

practicality. But as things go on they do not work out so easily. Some people have pulled the lamppost down because they wanted the electric light; some because they wanted old iron; some because they wanted darkness, because their deeds were evil. Some thought it not enough of a lamppost, some too much; some acted because they wanted to smash municipal machinery; some because they wanted to smash something. And there is war in the night, no man knowing whom he strikes. So, gradually and inevitably, today, tomorrow, or the next day, there comes back the conviction that the monk was right after all, and that all depends on what is the philosophy of Light. Only what we might have discussed under the gas lamp, we now must discuss in the dark.