

*G. K. Chesterton:*  
*Rallying the Really Human Things*

**W**e need a rally of the really *human* things; will which is morals, memory which is tradition, culture which is the mental thrift of the fathers.”<sup>1</sup> That was the judgment of G. K. Chesterton some seventy years ago in an essay titled “Is Humanism a Religion?” In order to rally the really human things, Chesterton proposed a new Christian humanism, while he simultaneously warned of the dangers and deceptions of a popular secular humanism that behaved as if it were a religion.

Chesterton distinguished this modern secular humanism from a much older tradition of Christian humanism, with which he strongly identified. The headwaters of this Christian humanism are the writings of such ancient church fathers as Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom, Saint Augustine and Gregory the Great. The stream is replenished by such late-medieval and early-Renaissance figures as Dante, Erasmus, and Thomas More. Chesterton extols the efforts of these humanists. “I doubt,” he writes, “if any thinking person, of any belief or unbelief, does not wish in his

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heart that the end of mediaevalism had meant the triumph of the Humanists like Erasmus and More.”<sup>2</sup>

In recent decades “secular humanism” has become a term of opprobrium among conservative Christians who identify it with the forces they believe are undermining the religious foundations of Western civilization. Chesterton’s criticism is aimed more specifically at the philosophical outlooks of significant writers of his own time, including Aldous Huxley, George Bernard Shaw, and H. G. Wells. He admires all of these men for their often insightful social criticism and their literary talent. But he ultimately rejects their brand of humanism because it is entirely anthropocentric.

True humanism, argues Chesterton, is theocentric. Christian humanism honors the fact that, though created of dust, the human being is the only creature made by God in his very own image and likeness. Christian humanism answers humankind’s need to be redeemed from a fallen condition in which this image is tarnished, and in which death works like a rust that destroys even the most beautiful bronze statue. Because it knows the difference between God and man and the effects of sin, Christian humanism rejects the spurious notions of human progress and perfection espoused by secular humanists. Christian humanism builds upon the human person’s “inner-directedness” toward the transcendent. It nurtures and disciplines this yearning (*eros*) for the divine life—for truth, goodness, and beauty—that God has planted in every human being.

Christian humanism is grounded in the doctrine of the Incarnation and gains its special character from that doctrine. God in Christ affirms our enfleshed and historical existence and gives meaning to it in spite of death. Within human culture and through the elements of this material world—bread and wine, oil and water, flesh and blood—the incarnate Son saves us body and soul from sin and death. God has given human beings compelling reasons to labor with him and within and through this physical world to redeem the whole of creation.

These Christian facts, Chesterton argues, are the inspiration of Chris-

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tian humanism, which stands in contrast to man-centered philosophies of life that embrace matter to the exclusion of spirit, or else reject the material world in a flight to something deemed “spiritual.” Such secularist philosophies are not necessarily atheistic, but they cannot sustain either faith in a personal God or belief in the dignity, freedom, and eternal worth of the human person. The loss of this faith is the principal symptom, argues Chesterton, of the decline of the Christian paradoxical imagination.

*The loss of the paradoxical vision and  
the crisis of secular humanism*

In the introduction to his edited volume *The New Religious Humanists*, Gregory Wolfe argues that in the history of Western culture “religious humanism has made only infrequent appearances and has rarely occupied center stage.” He explains that it “is a mode of thought that tends to arise when cultural cohesion is threatened by large social and intellectual upheavals.”<sup>3</sup> He regards the time in which we live as one such moment. Wolfe adds that Christian humanism mediates the human and divine and the temporal and the eternal through paradox and thus avoids the Gnostic proclivities of secular ideology.

On the face of it, the term religious humanism seems to suggest a tension between two opposed terms—heaven and earth, so to speak. But this is a creative, rather than a deconstructive, tension. Perhaps the best analogy for understanding religious humanism comes from the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, which holds that Jesus was both human and divine. In the paradoxical meeting of Christ’s two natures is the pattern by which we can begin to understand the many dualities we experience in life: flesh and spirit, nature and grace, God and Caesar, faith and reason, justice and mercy.<sup>4</sup>

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Chesterton is perhaps the most articulate twentieth-century practitioner of this Christian paradoxical imagination. He judges that a serious breakdown of the fundamental moral suppositions deposited by biblical faith and the classical tradition is underway and accelerating. He believes that this declension is due to a loss of conviction in our culture about the reality of the Incarnation—that God truly became a human being in Jesus Christ—with all the import that that event has for human existence. For Chesterton, the doctrine of the Incarnation is the hinge that holds together what is, for the Christian, a vision of the world that is essentially paradoxical. And he is astonishingly adept at employing this vision in his cultural criticism and Christian apologetics. The Incarnation sheds light where sin deceives and despair darkens the human horizon. Sin causes us to experience spirit in opposition to matter, faith in conflict with reason, life defeated by death. But the Incarnation reveals these apparent contradictions as paradoxes.

Contradiction may signal futility, but paradox is pregnant with the possibility of resolution and harmony. Paradox is an ally of truth. The good news of the Christian Gospel is that the God who is spirit became flesh, that infinite being became finite existence, that the immortal One became mortal man in order that death might be undone and humanity drawn into eternal life. God in his being and act unties the Gordian knot of sin. The errors of pagan religion and the falsehoods of atheistic and antihuman secularism are exposed by the Incarnation and replaced by its paradoxical truth. This divine and human truth opens a way for man, an alternative to the escape of the soul from matter and time or the embrace of mere flesh and finitude in a courtship with personal extinction.

Chesterton believes that the collapse of this wonderful vision of man in his relation to both heaven and earth lies at the heart of the modern crisis of meaning. Indeed, what makes Chesterton instructive today is that he lived on the cusp of postmodernity. Modernity was the result of a five-hundred-year process in which the dual Christian truth about the dignity and degradation of human existence, illuminated by the Incarnation, held

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together by the paradoxical imagination, was split apart. Secularist humanism emerged from this fractured truth and has not known how to put it back together, even when it has desired to do so. It seems doomed, rather, to fly from one pole of that truth to the other. On the one hand, it seeks to affirm, through some form of idealism or other, the “divinity” of human life, yet it rejects the doctrine of the Incarnation. On the other hand, it is drawn toward the opposite pole of naturalism and relativism and forgets the crucial difference between finitude and sin—and the distinctions between error and contravention of higher law. Chesterton sums up:

Where is the cement which made religion corporate and popular, which can prevent [humanism] falling to pieces in a debris of individualistic tastes and degrees? What is to prevent one Humanist wanting chastity, and another truth, or beauty without either? The problem of an enduring ethic and culture consists in finding an arrangement of the pieces by which they remain related, as do the stones in an arch. I know of only one scheme that has thus proved its solidity, bestriding lands and ages with its gigantic arches, and carrying everywhere the high river of baptism upon an aqueduct to Rome.<sup>5</sup>

In its late-Renaissance and Enlightenment origins, secular humanism is still a “mitigated” Christian humanism in which God is driven to the borders of human life and enterprise. Grace is redefined as “the supernatural varnish of those acts whose perfect rectitude the *reason* of the upright man suffices to assure,” notes Jacques Maritain.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, nature becomes the sole norm, as perfection entails not a transcendent participation in the life of God but is rather completely imminent. The modern idea of progress emerges, justified by an unquestioning faith in reason and modern science. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this secular humanism embraces a complete human autonomy that needs neither God nor grace.

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Chesterton's life straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This provided him a vantage point from which to see the line that was being crossed in his time. The old idealistic liberal humanism born of the Renaissance and Enlightenment was giving way to a militant, anti-theistic secularism, whose child is nihilism. He judges that all of the principal spheres of culture, the family, education, economic life, and politics are being hollowed out and vacated of moral conviction by the solvent of rationalism and the blindness of positivism. I do not think that he would have been surprised by the radical historicism, skepticism, and relativism espoused by contemporary postmodernists like Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty and embraced naïvely by many ordinary people today.

In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton quips: "At any street corner we meet a man who utters the frantic and blasphemous statement that he may be wrong. Everyday one comes across somebody who says that of course his view may not be the right one, or it is not his view. We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table, leave aside making a sure distinction between right and wrong."<sup>7</sup> He concludes that secular humanism is the gathering "place" of forces that undermine the really *human* things and open the gates for anti-human ideologies dressed in shepherd's clothes. This new humanism is especially subversive and damaging to Christian faith and Western culture because it is parasitic. It exploits and expends the religious and moral capital of biblical faith and is incapable of replenishing that capital. Chesterton observes that secular humanism "is using, and using up, the truths that remain out of the old treasury of Christendom."<sup>8</sup> The deposit of moral truths set adrift by a disintegrating Christendom is thus gradually degraded, reduced to ideological half-truths and sappy clichés.

The modern world is not [wholly] evil. [Indeed], in some ways the modern world is far too good. It is full of wild and wasted virtues. When a religious scheme is shattered . . . it is not merely vices that are set loose. . . . But the virtues are let loose also;

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and the virtues wander more wildly [than the vices], and the virtues do more terrible damage. 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>9</sup>

Consider the Christian virtue of charity, for example. Instead of the selfless seeking of another's good, charity becomes sugary sentiment. It is invoked to deny that forgiveness entails judgment and repentance, or that sin even exists. In due course, secular humanism may rob or empty all of the virtues of their true and vital meaning. The final outcome of such a process can be seen in what has been done to the religious notion of the dignity of human life. It has been uprooted from its biblical ground and the garden of the church. Its deep *human* meaning, nurtured by the Christian doctrine of the *imago Dei*, withers and fades from memory. A desiccated concept of human dignity is embraced instead. And ironically, or rather tragically, that concept is deployed to justify acts that contradict traditional moral teaching.

Chesterton says that the humanism of the secularist leads morality down a perilous path, a path that he tells us in *Orthodoxy* is paved with pragmatism and relativism. Man is told "to think what he must and never mind the Absolute." "But precisely one of the things he must think," adds Chesterton, "is the Absolute." Otherwise, the whole of the rest of the world is an illusion. Both pragmatism and relativism embrace an outlook "just as inhuman as the determinism" to which they often vehemently object. "The determinist (who, to do him justice, does not pretend to be a human being) makes nonsense of the human sense of actual choice." But pragmatism and relativism "make nonsense of the human sense of fact."<sup>10</sup> The road they pave leads to the devil's version of the Emerald City, where nothing is what it seems, words are no longer tools of truth but instruments of raw power, and the moral compass is abandoned because there are no true poles of good and evil or right and wrong.

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This suicide of thought, as Chesterton calls it, leads inexorably toward the denial of the existence of the good—or of anything that is really and permanently human. In 1905, in a book titled *Heretics*, Chesterton anticipates with uncanny prescience what postmodernism at the turn of the twenty-first century boldly declares. “Modern morality,” he writes, seems only capable of making a case for itself by pointing out “the horrors that follow breaches of law.”<sup>11</sup> Premarital sex may be inadvisable because one risks pregnancy or AIDS. One probably shouldn’t lie because lying undercuts the social trust that is the precondition for getting what one really wants. All of these “prohibitions” are subject, of course, to alteration or negation if means may be found to avoid negative consequences. In other words, modern morality is consequentialist. More than that, it is morbidly consequentialist, having lost a sure vision of the goodness of goodness.

In the end, images of automobile accidents, pictures of people dying from AIDS, and photographs of aborted fetuses won’t necessarily stop people from drinking and driving, engaging in casual or “unprotected” sex, or escaping the inconvenience of having a child by having an abortion. At the Creation, God did not say: *I will make the seas with clean water, not polluted water, and the land arable and not desert because it would be a disaster for the environment otherwise.* He made the seas clean and the land habitable because it was good that they be so. A vision of the good has far greater power to move men and women to do the right thing than all the horrible images we may conjure up to terrify them into doing it.

In *Heretics*, Chesterton observes: “A young man may keep himself from vice by continually thinking of disease. He may keep himself from it also by continually thinking of the Virgin Mary. There may be question about which method is the more reasonable, or even about which is the more efficient. But surely there can be no question about which is the more wholesome.”<sup>12</sup> Modern people, he says, have grown so modest about the good that they no longer believe they can be certain of what it is. Erroneous notions of tolerance are fostered by secular humanism in its

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final stage as it gives itself over to nihilism. Even ordinary people voice the opinion that our principal moral obligation is not to believe too strongly in any moral conviction. "A great silent collapse, an enormous unspoken disappointment has, in our time, fallen on our . . . civilization," writes Chesterton. "All previous ages have sweated and been crucified in an attempt to realize what is really the good man. [Yet] a definite part of the modern world has come . . . to the conclusion that there is no answer to these questions."<sup>13</sup> Under the aegis of secular humanism, an idea which is inherently absurd gains support: that human flourishing may be achieved without defining what is human or what is good for human beings. Chesterton continues:

Every one of the popular modern phrases and ideals is a dodge in order to shirk the problem of what is good. We are fond of talking about "liberty"; that, as we talk of it, is a dodge to avoid discussing what is good. We are fond of talking about "progress"; that is a dodge to avoid discussing what is good. We are fond about talking about "education"; that is a dodge to avoid discussing what is good. The modern man says, "Let us leave all these arbitrary standards and embrace liberty." This is, logically rendered, "Let us not decide what is good, but let it be considered good not to decide it." He says, "Away with your old moral formulae; I am for progress." This, logically stated, means, "Let us not settle what is good; but let us settle whether we are getting more of it." He says, "Neither in religion nor in morality, my friend, lie the hopes of the race, but in education." This, clearly expressed, means, "We cannot decide what is good, but let us give it to our children."<sup>14</sup>

Many would agree that Chesterton has got hold of something disturbing about the modern temper. His diagnosis, prescient in his own time, is confirmed in ours. What drew the venom of his adversaries and contin-

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ues to offend many is his prescription. Secularism needs to be replaced by faith, he says unabashedly, and relativism by firm standards of right and wrong. In the simplest terms, Chesterton proposes a return to dogma, a proposal that sounds exceedingly strange to moderns, who think that tolerance and an indiscriminant commitment to “diversity” are the highest goods of civilized life.

### *Joseph Wood Krutch on the modern temper*

I want to explore what a return to dogma means and what its importance is for Chesterton’s Christian humanism. But before doing so, it may be useful and instructive to examine in counterpoint the views of one of Chesterton’s younger contemporaries. In perhaps his best-known book, titled *The Modern Temper* and published in 1929, the American literary and social critic Joseph Wood Krutch ruthlessly flayed the illusions of the liberal humanism of his day, illusions to which he himself had earlier adhered. In that book, Krutch concluded that the collapse of Western civilization is inevitable, even if the course is long and winding. Krutch’s analyses of the modern crisis shared much in common with Chesterton’s. But whereas Chesterton saw through the crisis to hope, Krutch crouched in despair.

Krutch’s despair is especially poignant because he understands its source. His liberal and secular creed does not permit belief in the truths and verities of traditional religion. Liberated reason must do without dogma. Krutch also recognizes the terrible irony in this situation. For without faith and certitude, there is no stopping the new barbarians who are knocking down the fortress walls of the civilization he loves. With melancholic honesty Krutch writes in his book’s foreword:

I have neither celebrated the good old days nor attempted to prove that mankind is about to enter a golden age. I am sure

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that those who hold conventional religious opinions will find my book in many ways offensive and I fancy that many who are militantly rationalistic will be disgusted by my failure to share their optimism concerning the future of a rationalistic humanity. . . . Certainly if any modern temper like that herein described does actually exist it is very different from that scientific optimism, which, though it is being widely popularized at the present moment, really belongs to nineteenth century thought and certainly one of its most distinguished features is just its inability to achieve either religious belief on the one hand or exultant atheism on the other. Unlike their grandfathers, those who are its victims do not and never expect to believe in God; but unlike their spiritual fathers, the philosophers and scientists of the nineteenth century, they have begun to doubt that rationality and knowledge have any promised land into which they may be led.<sup>15</sup>

There is something at once noble and pathetic about this declaration. For Krutch concedes that he himself has contributed to the subversion of the foundations of liberal society. This is because he and other secular liberals are unable to believe in or to commend to others the truths and moral principles that inspire a free society and give men and women reasons to defend it. "The world may be rejuvenated in one way or another, but we will not," Krutch confesses. "Skepticism has entered too deeply into our souls ever to be replaced by faith, and we can never forget the things which the new barbarians will never need to know."<sup>16</sup>

Scientific enlightenment, says Krutch, makes it no longer possible to hold to the classical and biblical belief that the virtues participate in a larger transcendent purpose. Human ignorance and fear imagined a meaningful universe masked in mystery and headed toward salvation; we must now conclude that the universe is impersonal and indifferent to human

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purpose or suffering. “It is no longer [possible] to believe or tell tales of noble men because we do not believe that noble men exist [nor the gods they would obey]. The best we can do is achieve pathos and the most that we can do is to feel sorry for ourselves. . . . [The] cosmos may be farcical or it may be pathetic but it has not [even] the dignity of tragedy.”<sup>17</sup> The human cause, says Krutch, “is a lost cause. . . . [as] there is no place for us in the natural universe.” But for the stoic Krutch, “we are not, for all that, sorry to be human. We should rather die as men than live as animals.”<sup>18</sup>

In the final analysis, Krutch’s humanism collapses upon itself. The humanist who values human freedom so highly ironically subverts freedom’s transcendent foundations with a deadly embrace of naturalism or radical historicism. Under either, freedom is an illusion, much as God is a projection of the human mind. We are left to believe and behave as if there is more than there really is—that our humanity is special and our freedom is real—because to believe and act in any other manner would be unpleasant. “We have discovered the trick which has been played upon us,” Krutch declares, “and . . . are [at least] no longer dupes.”<sup>19</sup>

### *A return to dogma*

So far as I am aware, Chesterton did not review *The Modern Temper*. But let me speculate as to how he might have answered Krutch. I suspect that Chesterton would have begun by observing that Krutch rejects religious revelation and truth too hastily. Even as he claims that theism has been irreversibly demythologized, Krutch himself is caught in the myth of secularist liberalism. He is like a man blindfolded who thinks that the object of his criticism has disappeared, or like the child who thinks that he has hidden from his playmates by covering his eyes with his hands. In *The Modern Temper*, Krutch criticizes both Chesterton and T. S. Eliot for taking “refuge” in Roman and Anglican Catholicism, “whose dogmas, if accepted without argument, provide the basis which pure reason cannot discover.”<sup>20</sup>

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However, if one reads Chesterton carefully and fairly (and Eliot as well) one sees that his diagnosis of modernity is neither romantic nor reactionary. Chesterton knows that Christendom is gone and that the church no longer stands at the center of culture. Indeed, he chides those who continue to think triumphantly that England is still a Christian nation.<sup>21</sup> Nowhere does he suggest that his aim is to put the old Christendom back together again, in England or anywhere else.

Krutch's honesty and despair, in fact, support Chesterton's contention that secular humanism at the ship's helm has at great peril thrown overboard the spiritual ballast of civilized life and broken religion's moral compass. As the ship rocks and tips to the deep, the humanist's talk of there being "no precise moral ideals . . . [sounds] ludicrous." For progress cannot be charted without sure points of reference and a compass. Chesterton writes:

I do not . . . say that the word "progress" is unmeaning; I say that it is unmeaning without the previous definition of a moral doctrine, and that it can only be applied to groups of persons who hold that doctrine in common. Progress is not an illegitimate word, but it is logically evident that it is illegitimate for us. It is a sacred word, a word that could only rightly be used by rigid believers and in the ages of faith.<sup>22</sup>

Here, surely, is the nub of the matter. Chesterton's turn to dogma is not what it sounds like to the ears of secularists, modern and postmodern. He does not say that we must believe in dogmas or else the worst. He does not force dogma down our throats. He does not offer dogma as a bulwark against regress or decline. Rather, dogma—religious truth affirmed in consensus, established in authority, and declared as norm in public debate—is bound to reemerge precisely because human beings cannot live and prosper in a world in which truth is thought not to exist. In *Heretics* Chesterton explains:

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Man can be defined as an animal that makes dogmas. As he piles doctrine on doctrine and conclusion on conclusion in the formation of some tremendous scheme of philosophy and religion, he is, in the only legitimate sense . . . becoming more and more human. When he drops one doctrine after another in a refined scepticism, when he says that he has outgrown definitions, when he says that he disbelieves in finality, when, in his own imagination, he sits as God, holding to no form of creed and contemplating all, then he is by that very process sinking slowly backwards into the vagueness of the vagrant animals and the unconsciousness of grass. Trees have no dogmas. Turnips are singularly broad-minded.<sup>23</sup>

A postmodern world requires a Christian humanism grounded in philosophical realism. Chesterton judges that people are ready for it, for a fraud has been perpetrated. The skeptics contradict themselves. They oppose dogma dogmatically and deny their own humanity in doing it. They claim to be empirical but deny the testimony of lives lived in faith. The seeds of suspicion they sow can also sprout, however, into fresh seedlings of belief.

When will we know that the rally for the really *human* things has begun in earnest? With the return of dogma, of course. And Chesterton is as sure of a return to dogma as he is that birds need air in which to fly and that fish need water in which to swim. At the close of *Heretics*, he sounds what Robert Royal has called “the battle charge for the kind of struggle”<sup>24</sup> that must necessarily ensue if humanity is to avoid the abyss of postmodern nihilism and return to a God-centered vision of human nature and destiny. This is what Chesterton says:

Truths turn into dogmas the instant that they are disputed. Thus every man who utters a doubt defines a religion. And the scepticism of our time does not really destroy the beliefs, rather it creates them; gives them limits and their plain and

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defiant shape. . . . We who are Christians never knew the great philosophic common sense which inheres in that mystery until the anti-Christian writers pointed it out to us. The great march of mental destruction will go on. Everything will be denied. Everything will become a creed. It is a reasonable position to deny the stones in the street; it will be a religious dogma to assert them. It is a rational thesis that we are all in a dream; it will be a mystical sanity to say that we are all awake. Fires will be kindled to testify that two and two make four. Swords will be drawn to prove that leaves are green in summer. We will be defending not only the incredible virtues and sanities of human life, but something more incredible still, this huge impossible universe which stares us in the face. We shall fight for the visible prodigies of the invisible. We shall look on the impossible grass and the skies with a strange courage. We shall be those who have seen and yet have believed.<sup>25</sup>

Chesterton challenges us with one final paradox. Without dogma, there is merely descent into chaos and nothingness. With dogma, we may become demons in bellicose combat over many truths and many gods. For in a sinful world dogma comes into combat with dogma. Nevertheless, dogma, the right dogma, may also enable us to be godlike, to recognize ourselves as creatures made in the image of the one God who must live in the unity of his truth revealed in the flesh of a man who lived twenty centuries ago.

Contrary to so much of what claims to be Christian in our culture, we are called to believe not in order to gain peace but to know the truth. Dogma is religious truth, but it hardly guarantees peace. The first and last lesson of Christian humanism is this: by our own efforts alone, we cannot sew together the cloth of peace from our sinful and tattered human nature. Real peace, like real humanity, is a transcendent gift, which we will enjoy only when we wholly accept and faithfully obey the God who has become really human.