# Orthodoxy Study Guide

## Orthodoxy by G. K. Chesterton

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Plot Summary

The Christian religion, specifically Catholicism, is a religion that not only is compatible with liberalism, but is itself thoroughly liberal. From its perspective, though, modern thought has to be thoroughly examined and the falsities within it have to be purged. The assumption of many modern thinkers, for example, is that imagination is something to be avoided, some going so far as to suggest that overindulgence in the imaginary can lead to insanity. Insanity, however, really is caused by relying too much on reason and leaving nothing mysterious. Attempting to explain everything with logic leaves the world small and the mind becomes incarcerated in it. One line of seemingly logical thought is skepticism, but if taken to its extreme, it spells the death of all thought. If one starts doubting everything, then one must doubt reason itself, and, if reason is doubtful, thought is useless.

Rather than resorting to the writings of the "great minds" of modern times, many useful lessons can be gathered from the fairy tales told to children. Fairy tales give two timely reminders to the world. First, by showing what an absurd world is like and how different things can be in them, they show the world that the way things are in it is not the result of some necessary, logical law, but rather the design of an intelligent creator. Second, they show that if something good is given to someone (like Cinderella's chance to go to the ball or the ability to fall in love) it is senseless to protest if there are rules restricting the gift (like the fact that Cinderella must leave before midnight or the rule that sex must only occur inside of marriage). These two lessons are taught also by Christianity. Further, the Christian who recognizes the world is created, adopts a unique attitude towards it: He loves it like a patriot loves his country, but he strives constantly also to fix it, because it is part of God's plan that he help it.

This fusion of two seemingly competing attitudes—the love of the world and the desire to change it (for the better)—is a pattern that is actually seen throughout Christianity. Unlike the ancient pagans, who set one passion against the other so that they canceled one another out, the Christian takes the opposite passions and embraces both. For example, when someone commits a sin, the Christian is faced with two reactions—outrage at the sin and love for the sinner—and he embraces both to their fullest extent.

"Progress" and "progressives" are more commonplace features of modern thought, and, once again, the Christian religion holds the true meaning to these terms. Unlike many modern thinkers, Christianity realizes that the term "progress" implies a vision—if one is progressing, one must be progressing towards something. Further, this progress is not something which happens automatically, but it must be worked for and, in fact, any hesitation in working for will inevitably result in sliding back and away from the vision.

While Christianity truly is a liberal religion, some so-called liberals attempt to false liberalize the religion and draw erroneous conclusions such as the position that Christianity and all of the other religions in the world, despite their superficial difference, are really the same. This false attempt at religious unity ignores the real doctrinal differences between, for example, Christianity and Buddhism. Christianity argues that

happiness and enlightenment are to be found in God, who created man separate from Himself and therefore is external; whereas, Buddhists seek enlightenment internally. The last refuge for agnostics is to urge any number of factual arguments against Christianity, but these arguments are ultimately flawed and fail to pass the basic tests of history.

# Chapter I: Introduction in Defence of Everything Else

## Chapter I: Introduction in Defence of Everything Else Summary and Analysis

The purpose of this book is to show that faith is simultaneously occasion both for wonder and amazement and for security and comfort. One of the chief assumptions of the book is that life is better when it is filled with the joy of adventure, of discovering something new. At the same time, all men seek to have security in their lives. How faith embodies both of these basic human needs is the subject of this book.

The focus in this book is not on any particular religious denomination. Rather, "central" Christian belief—what is believed by, more or less, all who consider themselves Christians—is all that is at stake. However, it is also not an attempt to give a thorough philosophical or theological defense of those beliefs, since such a task would go far beyond the book's scope. Rather, it is an attempt to describe how the author came to those beliefs: He looked for answers in everything but Christianity, and when he found them, he realized that he should have been looking towards Christianity to begin with.

# Chapter II: The Maniac

## Chapter II: The Maniac Summary and Analysis

While many people value self-confidence and self-belief very highly, it is actually a grave fault. Taken to its extreme, self-confidence can turn into madness. The question that is considered in this book is "what is a person is to believe in if he does not believe in himself?" In previous periods, this discussion could begin with the assumption that man is himself intrinsically sinful—that men, by nature, do evil things. However, in the modern period it has become fashionable to deny the existence of sin, so one might start, instead, with the belief that even if man cannot lose his soul through sin, he can at least lose his mind, and that this is a bad thing.

If everyone can agree that remaining sane is a good goal, then it would seem that imagination might be an intellectual pitfall. However, imagination is the friend of sanity, not its enemy; insane people generally are too given to reason. Many of them are incredibly logical and consistent, and their arguments are difficult to counter, even if they are plainly absurd. Many popular theories of the modern day have this same quality. Materialism—the theory that everything that exists is physical—has a certain consistency to it, but the picture it paints of the universe is too cramped and desolate. While the reasoning of these men could ultimately be shown to be faulty, the most effective route to changing their minds is along the lines of a personal and moral conversion to the idea that the universe is better and fuller than they believe it to be. It is necessary to show them that spiritual doctrines liberate the mind much more than their beliefs—whether it be the belief of a madman that everyone is out to destroy him or the belief of the materialist that men are mere beasts. By incorporating a certain amount of mystery, Christianity frees man from the necessity to reduce everything to the enslavement of pure logic.

# Chapter III: The Suicide of Thought

## Chapter III: The Suicide of Thought Summary and Analysis

The problem in the modern world is not the lack of virtue, it is that the virtues still exist but without proper proportion and restriction. The virtue of love, for example, is exercised in such an unbridled fashion by some that they denounce the notion that anyone could act wrongly, because that would be mean spirited and, apparently, not a loving thing to do. This problem exists in the intellectual realm, too. In previous times, humility meant that man doubted himself but revered truth; in the modern world, man has unlimited confidence in himself and doubts whether there really is anything such as truth. This is still, in some sense, humility, but it is not the ambition of man which is humbled, but rather his reason. For example, the truly humble man in previous times would say that he thinks he might be wrong about this or that belief, but in modern times the falsely humble man doubts whether it is possible to know anything.

If thought is allowed to go down this path, it quickly destroys itself. If a person asks whether there is really truth, it would only be natural that he would eventually ask whether his reason—the very reason which prompted him to ask these questions—is of any value itself. After a certain point, all thought becomes pointless. Religious authority was set up to protect this—all the laws and doctrines of the Church, at their heart, aim at protecting human reason from undermining itself. Many modern philosophical theories—materialism and skepticism, for example—all lead towards the destruction of reason. There is also a theory of "progress" which displays these same faults. It says that human society is constantly progressing and evolving in every way. However, progress must always be towards something, and so it follows logically that at least what society is progressing towards must remain constant, and if this is admitted, then truth is vindicated.

Others, like Friedrich Nietzsche, have abandoned reason in favor of the will. They say that an action is good so long as it comes from the will. The absurdity of this belief, however, is obvious: Any action, if it is truly the voluntary action of an individual, comes from the will. Thus, the fascination with the will really amounts to saying nothing at all—one cannot prefer one action over another if the only criterion is that both be willed. By nature, an act of the will is an act of exclusion: By choosing to do one action, one also chooses not to do another. Therefore, those advocates of the will who shun the restraints of morality are incoherent. It is not morality which says that some actions cannot be done; rather, it is simply the nature of the will.

The case of Joan of Arc is a perfect example of how modern thinkers have torn virtues apart from one another and even turned them against each other. Tolstoy sympathized with and even admired the peasant; Nietzsche spoke out against the cowardice of the modern age. Joan of Arc had all those qualities, but she differed from those men in that she actually lived out those qualities in her life. In contemplating Joan of Arc, it is natural

to consider Christ, her inspiration. The figure of Christ is reprehensible to modern man because the fact that all the virtues existed simultaneously and organically him is foreign today; men cannot understand how one can, at once, be both supremely humble and supremely generous, for example.

# Chapter IV: The Ethics of Elfland

## Chapter IV: The Ethics of Elfland Summary and Analysis

It is often thought that as men age they stop caring about lofty ideals and concern themselves instead with practical realities. However, as one ages one really starts to lose faith in the practical world: Politicians, regulators, and laws wind up disappointing, but ideas remain forever the same. One idea that the author has always been attached to is his devotion to democracy. The principles of democracy can be summarized briefly: The most important thing about humans are those things which they hold in common and, further, that one thing they all hold in common is the desire to be in charge of government. Unlike other activities, like medicine or law, in which it is preferable only that experts be allowed to practice, the running of government is something which all individuals should be allowed to do, regardless of qualification, much like blowing one's nose. Democracy is simply this: that system of government in which men rule themselves.

Many people think that tradition and democracy are opposed to one another, since democracies often overturn long-standing traditions. However, this opposition is not real; in fact, revering tradition is simply taking democracy to its logical conclusion by including not only the living in the running of society, but also the dead. The wisdom of the dead is often more valuable than the wisdom of those living today, since it is the wisdom of many; whereas, often the wisdom of those living today is only that of a single person or a few people.

It is not surprising, then, that the most valuable lessons to be learned are those which come from tradition—specifically, fairy tales. Fairy tales are characterized by two patterns which serve as useful antidotes to modern thought. First, strange things frequently occur in fairy tales, such as bean-stalks growing up into the heavens and pumpkins turning into carriages. It is often thought today that everything that happens, happens by some scientific necessity; the universe is simply an enormous piece of machinery which proceeds with clockwork inevitability. But fairy tales are a reminder that not everything happens in such a rigid fashion. While logical laws are necessary (for example, it is logically necessary that, if Joe is the son of Mike that Mike is the father of Joe), yet modern thinkers are wrong to suppose that the fact that leaves are green is totally necessary; in fairy tales, leaves can be blue or purple. The fact that they are green (and not blue or purple) indicates that there is a reason that they are green, and this shows that behind the universe there is something or someone making a choice.

The second theme found in fairy tales is that characters often have strange and seemingly arbitrary rules laid upon them—Cinderella must leave the ball before midnight, for example. While such a rule might, at first, seem unjust, one must remember that there is no reason why Cinderella should be able to go to the ball at all,

and so it would not make sense for her to complain that she should have to leave after a certain time. The same reasoning can be applied to those who rail against morality in the modern age. Just as Cinderella would be ungrateful to complain about having to leave by midnight, those who complain about having to stay faithful inside a marriage are ungrateful for the ability to marry and fall in love at all. If one truly recognized how great such a thing is, one would not complain that there is a limit on it.

# Chapter V: The Flag of the World

## Chapter V: The Flag of the World Summary and Analysis

Pessimism and optimism both assume that man has some choice in the world in which he lives. The better attitude to have towards the world is one of love and loyalty, almost as a person loves his country. To love something is not, however, to approve of everything about it. If one loves a town, one will approve only of what is good in it while recognizing that its flaws should, and even must, be remedied. In fact, unless someone has this attitude, a thing can never be changed. Those who hate it, like the pessimist hates the world, will do nothing to help; the optimist, on the other hand, cannot see anything wrong with the world, and, likewise, has no motivation to help. He who truly loves can easily be mistaken for a pessimist (or an optimist) however, and the only way to distinguish them is by their intentions. If a person criticizes the way a house looks, it may be that he is trying to help the owner of the house and has good intentions at heart. However, he may simply be sour and has no intention of helping anyone and simply wants to hurt others.

True loyalty is, in a sense, irrational, because it persists despite any obstacle. A true patriot loves his nation regardless of what happens to it, what laws it passes, or what the government is. This does not mean that the patriot does not wish these things to be different than they are—he may care more than anyone else, in fact—but the love persists. The direct opposite of this loyalty is suicide, because it is a willful exit from the world and a statement that nothing in the world has enough value to justify life. It is common today for people to equate the person who commits suicide with the martyr, but martyrdom and suicide are in fact totally opposed. The person who commits suicide hates everything and wants to get away from it. The martyr loves something, or everything, so much that he is willing to part with it, for its sake, even though he would rather not.

This kind of loyalty is the chief sentiment of the Christian, and why he is able to remain so optimistic about the world while simultaneously shunning it. The Christian is devoted to the world because it is created by God, but is not uncritical of it—and is even untrusting of it—because man has, in some ways, ruined it.

# Chapter VI: The Paradoxes of Christianity

## Chapter VI: The Paradoxes of Christianity Summary and Analysis

The world is neither perfectly reasonable or unreasonable. A strict rationalist might think, for example, since that man is symmetrical in many ways (an ear on each side of his head, an arm on each side of his body) that he is symmetrical in every way and therefore would have a heart, too, on each side of his chest. The value in Christianity is that, like cold reason, it predicts correctly when things follow logic, but unlike cold reason, it also correctly predicts when things deviate from it. This is seen particularly in Christianity's ability to bring together what appear to be two opposites and make sense out of them—for example, Christians are able to at the same time be proud of being human and think themselves the greatest of all creatures, while also being immensely humble and ashamed of their sins. The paradox is not, strictly speaking, a paradox of Christianity; rather, Christianity is simply reflecting the seemingly paradoxical nature of reality.

This paradoxical nature, or at least Christianity's recognition of it, can be seen by the criticisms aimed against it. Many people will simultaneously accuse Christianity of opposite and contradictory flaws. For example, some way will say that Christians are naively optimistic and see everything far too rosy but then will later insult Christians for their gloomy outlook on the world. Once one observes all these criticisms, it would start to seem that critics will attempt to level just any attack they can find against it.

Yet, the critics' motives aside, the mere fact that the criticisms seemed to contradict one another did not show that they were wrong; it only showed that, if they were right, the Church was something monstrously evil, because it managed to combine together any number of flaws within itself. Further investigation shows, however, that the criticisms told more about the critic than the Church—the wealthy businessman found fault with the Church's condemnation of greed; the promiscuous lover with the Church's teaching on chastity. In reality, the Church had found a way to combine together opposing passions without either contradicting itself or compromising the passions. Thus, for example, one might think that in order to avoid being proud, one should think neither too highly or lowly of oneself. In other words, one ought to avoid the passions of extreme pride and self-hatred. Christianity is unique in that it is able to preserve the passion of each—man is, on the one hand, triumphant to belong the noble race of humans but shamed without limit to be such a sinner. Likewise, the logical man might think that a person should only forgive moderate transgressions against him. However, the Christian loathes even the slightest sin but is filled with nothing but love for the sinner.

Christianity, in short, frees men from the bondage of pagan ethics, which made men constantly restrain themselves and live dull, passionless lives. Christianity set passion

free and embraced it, restraining only as much as was necessary to prevent it from destroying the delicate balance it achieved. In fact, that balance might be called orthodoxy. Since powerful passions merge together so dramatically in Christianity, it is necessary that there be a sound structure in which they interact lest one passion overpower the rest, and this is precisely the purpose of all the dogmas and rules of Christianity. While many see orthodoxy as opposed to freedom, its purpose really is to enable people to escape the greyness of a life without passion and live to the fullest extent possible. However, if that balance is ever compromised, then the whole system falls apart.

# Chapter VII: The Eternal Revolution

## Chapter VII: The Eternal Revolution Summary and Analysis

The notion of progress assumes some standard of value towards which progress is being made. This standard cannot be found in nature, as many think, since nature is totally anarchic. Nature does not say whether life is good or bad; rather, people, observing nature, impose their own standard upon it which says life is good. Some modern thinkers, then, simply see the standard as a matter of moving forward in time, as if progress happens inevitably: Whatever change happens is good. Others, like Nietzsche, hide behind vague metaphors to talk about progress—that is, they speak of "higher forms of life" without ever clarifying exactly this means. Others, still, believe that nature will take care of things and change will occur in some fashion, though they do not know when or how this will occur.

Finally, some people think that progress means the world is moving towards what they want it to be, and even if they are wrong about where the world should go, they at least are correct insofar as they see progress as movement towards some definite goal. However, one of the pitfalls of modern thinking about progress is that many people seem to think that, in different ages, the vision which should guide society—the goals it should try to attain—are changing, and this completely negates the notion of progress of any substance, because if the goal is always changing, it will be impossible to ever achieve it. Further, if work is done in a previous age towards one goal, and then the goal changes, all that previous work is now worthless. The real effect of this kind of thinking is to, ironically, keep the status quo—since progress is a moving target, no one really knows how to work to it, and those who benefit are those who like things the way they are. It is obvious, then, that the acknowledgment of a fixed goal is one requirement for true progress. Christianity recognizes this, and thus it is characterized as a constant revolt against man's sinful nature, seeking to restore that original vision of Eden.

The second characteristic of true progress is that the goal of it must not be something simple, but something composite. That is, a natural thing, like a nose, may gradually grow larger or redder, but the changes will always be in one attribute increasing or decreasing. The progress which is relevant to human affairs, however, is more like a delicate balance. For example, man's attitude towards nature should neither be total subjection and worship, like the pagans, nor should it be total disregard and hatred, like modern industrialists. Man should revere nature, not as a god, but as a beautiful creation which is worthy of respect. This attitude involves carefully opposing one attitude towards another and not letting either win out completely. All human progress is like this—measuring competing forces in a very specific way. However, if nature is capable only of producing simple changes, then such a goal must be the work of a creative mind. Once again, Christianity had already acknowledged this: The goal

towards which society should march is not something material and merely natural, but something spiritual and supernatural.

A final requirement for any doctrine of progress is the recognition that if things are left alone, they decay and worsen. If things truly stayed as they were, or got better, there would be little need to act. The role of the progressive is to fight against this decay, because he recognizes that things must constantly change if he wants them not to get worse. Once again, Christianity recognizes this fact in its constant warnings that all men are subject to sin and must constantly fight against temptation. In fact, this attitude forms the strongest common bond between Christianity and democracy: Both are wary of giving too much power to one mind, lest he use it corruptly. Unless one recognizes man's natural inclination to decay morally, this attitude would be unjustified.

# Chapter VIII: The Romance of Orthodoxy

## Chapter VIII: The Romance of Orthodoxy Summary and Analysis

Much of modern "thinking" is really used to allow people to avoid thinking at all. People dress up their speech with large, impressive words to disguise their lack of real thought. Since people do not truly understand what they are saying, one major difficulty that arises is when one of the words means two different things in different contexts. The term "liberal" is such an example, and many of these fake intellectuals insist that a truly liberal thinker ought to be for free thought, since a liberal ought to be for the liberation of all things. While a liberal is dedicated to freedom, so-called free thinkers are really people who just have dedicated themselves to a number of ideologies, like any other thinker, and, therefore, the liberal owes no special allegiance to him.

For example, free thinkers commonly insist that miracles do not and could not ever happen, and this idea is obviously not liberal. For, this idea is based upon the philosophy of materialism, which states that there is no freedom in things whatsoever, but precise, clockwork determinism. A true lover of freedom would at least hope for the possibility that, even if man does not have free will, at least God does, which is all one must believe to think that miracles are possible.

Other supposedly liberal thinkers argue that all religions are really the same, despite external differences; this argument is urged especially in the case of Buddhism and Christianity. While some meaningless similarities can be found (both Christ and Buddha heard God speak to them from the Heavens) the substances of the religions are totally opposed. For Buddhists, enlightenment is found by looking inwardly and finding the divinity within. Christians, on the other hand, seek God outside of themselves, because they recognize that they are not gods, but separate creations.

In fact, this emphasis on looking inwardly is another key doctrine of modern "liberal" theology, and it is often based upon a notion that there really are not separate beings; rather, everyone and everything, including God, is really the same thing. But such a philosophy is opposed to many of the ideals liberals ought to cherish—for example, it is impossible to love anything if everything is the same. Part of love is to act unselfishly, but if there are not other selves, then one has no choice but to act selfishly: Any nice act towards another, would really be a nice act for oneself, since everyone is the same being.

Another branch of modern "liberal" Christianity are the Unitarians, who deny the Trinity. The Trinity, though, embodies the natural instinct in man to live a social life; it recognizes that man cannot be happy on his own, but needs others. For the Trinity shows that God is a society of three persons. Those religions which deny the Trinity tend to be violent or at least dysfunctional because they lack this emphasis on the social nature of humanity.

Finally, the Divinity of Christ, whether true or not, must be acknowledged to be a definitely liberal idea, though modern liberals are quick to deny it. The doctrine shows, after all, a deep kinship between man and God—to the point that God not only suffered physically, but even, for a moment, had doubt. The cry on the cross, asking why God had forsaken him, is the same kind of doubt and "free thinking" embraced by modern liberals, and in the case of Christianity, this doubt is elevated to the status of the Divine. And, yet, for some reason, critics are quick to attack and attempt to refute Christianity, even if in so doing they compromise the very ideals of liberty and humanity that they supposedly set out to preserve.

# Chapter IX: Authority and the Adventurer

## Chapter IX: Authority and the Adventurer Summary and Analysis

At this point, even if the value of the individual beliefs of the Christian religion have been proven, it has not yet been shown why one must accept the doctrines. In other words, even if it is good and useful to believe these things, it is not clear why one must accept them within the religious context in which they have been presented. The first and most obvious response to this is simply that it would not be intellectually honest to believe in these things without justification, and since their justification comes from religion, one must accept it as it is.

Critics of Catholicism and Christianity in general offer many arguments against the Church, often based on a number of small facts. This method, in general, is a valid one—it is perfectly reasonable to have a number of small arguments for a position rather than one, all-inclusive argument. However, the specific arguments they give are flawed, because the facts that they assume are simply untrue. Thus, for example, many agnostics take issue with Christianity's central assumption that man is fundamentally different from ordinary animals (namely, man has a soul, and the animals do not). If this were true, it would certainly be a hard argument for Christianity to combat, but simple observation will show that humans are really nothing like animals, and most of all in intellectual areas.

Likewise, many agnostics urge any number of historical arguments against the Church, citing the negative effects of the Church on the psyches of people living in its dominion. Once again, though, this argument is not really based on anything factual. The dominance of the Church in the Middle Ages, as bad that period was, was the only thing which kept civilization afloat and allowed it to eventually re-emerge later. Historically, when a civilization like Rome falls, nothing arises again out of it, but Europe provides a stark counterexample to that trend, and it is difficult to not believe that Christianity had some role in it.

Another stumbling block for agnostics is the Church's insistence on the existence of miracles. However, objections to the occurrence of miracles generally amount to little more than begging the question. Many miracles are known, for example, on the testimony of peasants, and their testimonies are discounted on one of two bases: either the peasant is untrustworthy because he is a peasant or his story is impossible because it involves miracles. The modern democratic man can hardly believe that a person is less honest simply because he is poor, but if the testimony is not believed simply because it asserts that a miracle occurs, then the skeptic is simply assuming materialism to be true and not allowing historical evidence to counteract it. After all, few people dismiss the same kind of testimony when it comes to natural events, such as famines or wars.

The final reason for accepting the authority of orthodoxy is that all men seek a living teacher, and the Church has proven itself to be one. When a person or institution consistently provides answers to questions one has, it earns one's respect and trust, and one clings to it as a teacher. The Church throughout the ages, has proven this. Unlike other religions, which rely merely upon Scripture for guidance—Scripture which was written once and for all thousands of years ago—the Church is unique in its ability to continually converse with the world and provide answers.

Finally, Christianity is unique in that it recognizes that the true state of mankind is one of happiness, and sorrow or grief are merely transitory, passing feelings. The ancient pagans were joyous about the little, trivial things of life, and were terrified by the big things: Their gods were arbitrary and despotic and, they thought, their lives were chaotic and merciless. The Christian, on the other hand, may grieve over passing and trivial things, but can joyously rest in confidence that God has a plan for him which will result in his true happiness.

# Characters

## Joan of Arc

Joan of Arc was a Christian saint who Chesterton sees as embodying the good parts of the philosophies of Nietzsche and Tolstoy. Like Tolstoy, Joan was able to see the value in small, trivial things. She could see the good in a peasant (she was one, after all) and could admire the beauty of a simple landscape. Like Nietzsche, Joan could also recognize that she lived in a cowardly time that was afraid to stand up for anything. Joan saw that the substance of belief was being diluted. The difference between Joan and these two philosophers, however, is that Joan was willing to act on her beliefs. While Tolstoy, a comfortable aristocrat, idly praised the working man from his armchair, Joan herself actually was a peasant. Nietzsche, for all of his criticisms of how spineless the modern world had become, and for all of his praise of the man of action, did nothing to change it. Joan, on the other hand, literally took up her sword and fought to change the world, and she did. In her life and actions, Joan resembles the man she was serving: Christ, who she took inspiration from as the ultimate synthesis of right belief with action.

## Christ

Jesus Christ is the founder of Christianity and, according to his followers, is the Divine Son of God. In addition to being the founder of the religion, he also serves as the chief example for Christians to imitate. In particular, Christ shows how to embody the "paradox" of embracing two competing passions without compromising either. Thus, for example, Christ was himself supremely humble, to the point where he washed the feet of his merely mortal disciples. At the same time, however, he recognized who he was and therefore was willing to make promises which only God could make to those who would listen to him. Christ's temptation in the Garden of Gesthemene and his cry on the cross—"My God why have you forsaken me?"—also serve as a stepping stone for the agnostic to accept him. The agnostic is characterized by his doubt, and therefore can identify with Christ who, though he was the Son of God, still had his own moment of doubt. Christ is also characterized by his happiness, which Chesterton argues is one of the chief characteristics of the Christian. However, like the Christian, this joy can sometimes be concealed, and thus other emotions (outrage or sorrow) often seem to dominate the Gospel accounts of Christ.

## George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw was an English writer who was alive at the same time as Chesterton. He subscribed to the idea that the most important feature of man was his will and that actions are good by virtue of being willed.

## Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was a 19th-century German philosopher who argued that the only source of value in the world was the will. He admired the man that sought and achieved what he wanted, regardless of what that is. Chesterton criticizes him on several accounts. First, he argues that Nietzsche's view of value is flawed because everyone always does what they will, by definition. Second, he criticizes Nietzsche for being inactive, despite urging others to action.

## H.G. Wells

H.G. Wells was a 19th-century English author who thought that scientific thought should be replaced by the more will-centered thought of the artist. Thus, instead of the geometer proving that a line is curved, he ought to will it to be curved, much like the artist makes his painting look a certain way.

## Leo Tolstoy

Leo Tolstoy was a 19th-century Russian author and aristocrat who believed that all actions that are specifically willed are evil because people themselves are intrinsically evil. Chesterton criticizes him because if all actions are evil, then people are left simply doing nothing.

## Renan

Renan was a French writer who argued against the supernatural nature of Christ and attempted to explain his life in a purely natural way.

## Torquemada

Torquemada was a Catholic friar who was instrumental in the Spanish Inquisition. Without condoning the Inquisition, Chesterton points out that at least Torquemada had principles in which he believed.

## Mr. Blatchford

Mr. Blatchford was an English thinker who argued that Christianity and Buddhism were fundamentally the same, despite superficial differences.

# Buddha

Buddha was an ancient thinker whose ideas form the basis of Buddhism. The religion is based around the idea that one finds enlightenment through interior reflection and the suppression of desire.

# Objects/Places

## Orthodoxy

Orthodoxy refers to any religious system which has doctrines that must be believed on the basis of the authority of some institution. In this instance, Chesterton is referring to the orthodoxy as put forward by the Catholic Church on the basis of the authority it argues comes from Jesus Christ.

## Evolution / Darwinism

The theory of evolution was a popular theory in the time Chesterton was writing (early 20th century). Fundamentally, it was the belief that modern organisms evolved from older, "lower" forms of life. Many took this theory and extended it beyond biology, however, and saw society as constantly evolving and improving.

## Progress

Progress is the movement of society towards some fixed vision of what is good. In Chesterton's time, there is much confusion over what this means. Some equate progress simply with the march of time—that is, whatever changes happen are progress, whether they are good or bad. Chesterton finds that all the conclusions he came to on his own about progress were already believed and being taught by the Catholic Church.

## Trinitarianism

Trinitarianism is the belief that God is a Trinity—that is, that God is one God, but three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For Chesterton, that God is a Trinity shows that all persons naturally need others to be happy.

## Unitarianism

Unitarianism is the denial that God is a Trinity. Chesterton sees a "unitary" God as despotic and vengeful. He argues that religions like Islam are violent, and uses their denial of the Trinity as a reason.

## Materialism

Materialism is the belief that the only things that exist are material things. The doctrine specifically excludes the possibility of God, angels, or souls. It also indirectly denies the

possibility of free will. According to materialists, the universe is like an enormous machine which plays out with clockwork inevitability.

## Idealism

Idealism is the opposite of materialism and states that there is no physical reality. Rather, everything exists only in the mind.

## The Middle Ages

The Middle Ages refers to the time between the fall of Rome and the re-emergence of Europe around the time of the Renaissance. Many critics of Christianity point towards the Middle Ages as an example of what happens when the Church dominates society. However, Chesterton argues that Christianity is the only thing that kept civilization afloat at all after the fall of Rome. Without it, he argues, civilized life would have been lost forever.

## Patriotism

Patriotism is the love of one's country, but it does not exclude criticizing it. In fact, one is not truly a patriot if one blindly accepts whatever one's country does. If a patriot truly loves his country, he will try to prevent it from doing what is wrong and urge it do what is right. The relationship between a patriot and his country is analogous to the relationship between a Christian and the world.

## Liberalism

Liberalism is, fundamentally, the belief that all men are equal and should have equal authority in the running of government. The purpose of the arguments presented in Orthodoxy is to show liberals that the ideas in Catholicism are not opposed, but in fact totally in tune with, the tenets of liberalism.

## Tradition

Tradition is the wisdom passed down from previous generations to the modern day. While many see democracy being opposed to tradition, Chesterton believes that democracy, to be truly democratic, should revere tradition, since to do otherwise would be to exclude the voices of generations past. This is not acceptable, since the essence of democracy is to exclude no man.

# Pimlico

Pimlico is an English town which apparently is run-down and not very attractive to outsiders. Chesterton argues that a person can still be loyal to Pimlico despite its many defects. In fact, the only way Pimlico could ever improve is if people devote themselves to it and try to change it for the better.

# Themes

## Christianity: A Liberal Religion

Chesterton's primary aim in this book is to prove to English liberals that Christianity is compatible with the primary tenets of liberalism. However, in order to do this, Chesterton must also show that many ideas which pass as liberal are not really so. Thus, for example, Chesterton argues against those "liberal" theologians who think that it is necessary to be a materialist in order to be liberal. If liberty is the driving force behind liberalism, then materialism, which negates the freedom of the will, is truly contrary to it. Since materialism is incompatible with the belief that miracles happen—because God, being immaterial, cannot exist for a materialist—Chesterton is also rebuking those liberal forms of Christianity which argue for a more "natural" and less supernatural religion.

Another important feature of liberalism is its dedication to democracy. Liberals believe that men, by nature, should have equal authority in government, and it is natural, then, that liberals are also democrats. This is fundamentally compatible with Christianity, because unlike other ideologies, Christianity teaches that all men are subject to sin. Socialism argues, for example, that poverty damages the minds of the poor, and so it would seem to follow logically (despite the socialist's intentions) that the rich should rule. But for the Christian, not only is the rich man as much of a sinner as the poor, there is something additionally suspicious about the rich man: He may be unduly influenced by his wealth. Therefore, it is natural that the Christian, like the liberal, should avoid those forms of government which give power to the rich and not the poor.

## The Superiority of Liberal Politics

Though this book was written to persuade its readers of certain religious beliefs, it is obvious that Chesterton is also concerned with convincing others of his political beliefs. He often does this by extending tangents from his main points concerning religion to discuss political philosophy. For example, in the second chapter of the book, Chesterton argues against the notion that liberals, who value freedom, should be philosophically in tune with so-called "free thinkers." Liberals certainly support the freedom of thought, but "free thinkers" refers to those who hold a specific set of thoughts, and especially the doctrine of materialism, which Chesterton later goes on to prove is not particularly liberal.

Likewise, in the chapter dedicated to the concept of progress—"The Eternal Revolution"—Chesterton takes issue with those who think of progress as something which constantly changes its goals, and against this point he makes the thoroughly political argument that it benefits only those who like the status quo, namely the capitalists (embodied by a Mr. Gadgrind). This affiliation with the working class and skepticism towards the capital owners is characteristic of liberal thought.

# The Compatibility of Tradition with Democracy

Chesterton attempts to overcome the prejudice many of his readers apparently have that to be a democrat is also to be opposed to tradition. The source of this prejudice is fairly obvious. Just as Chesterton, while calling himself a liberal, opposes the ideas of other liberals (though, they are false liberals, according to him), so too many democrats believe bad ideas. Among these ideas is the idea of social evolution. Just as human beings evolved from more primitive ancestors, so too has society evolved from more primitive societies. Tradition, then, is something crude and outdated; to wish to return to tradition, even in part, is like thinking that a chimpanzee is better than a human

Chesterton, of course, takes issue with the theory of evolution (not necessarily with its biological application—he does not seem to think that to be difficult). Progress is not a natural progress. Rather, progress is the result of hard-working individuals trying to make the world a better place. Further, not all change is good change; it is entirely possible that the majority of changes to the society in recent history have been for the worst. Therefore, it is not reasonable to utterly reject tradition; it may be that the ancestors of the modern world still have answers to the problems that have been created, or have otherwise arisen, since their time.

Chesterton sees the reverence of tradition as a logical extension of the idea of democracy. The core of democracy is that all men should have equal political footing, and he does not see why dead men should be excluded from this equality. Since tradition, according to him, is nothing more than the wisdom of dead men, it follows logically that, far from being opposed, tradition is something integral to democracy.

# Style

## Perspective

Chesterton is a well-respected English writer known for his fiction and non-fiction works alike. In this piece, he very clearly has biases, which he makes no attempt to hide. First of all, he is Christian, and specifically a Catholic, and the purpose of this piece is to show how he came to be a Christian. While this piece is not explicitly written to convince others to become Christian, it is clear that it has elements of an appeal. For example, in the last chapter of the book, Chesterton insists upon how joyous the life of the Christian is, and joy is the theme of the final paragraph. This is an obvious attempt to make life as a Christian attractive. Further, he elsewhere compares the Church to a loving mother who teaches her young child about the world. Once again, Chesterton makes an emotional appeal to the possibly skeptical reader.

Second, Chesterton is clearly a political liberal, and perhaps the chief audience for this book are those people who more or less agree with him politically but disagree with him on religion. However, how much Chesterton really agrees with most other liberals is not clear. While calling himself a liberal, he goes after many ideas which are considered "liberal" in his time. This suggests that perhaps Chesterton is trying to change the minds of his readers not only on religion, but also on politics.

## Tone

Humility characterizes much of Chesterton's writing in these books. Chesterton, though a skilled writer, is neither a trained philosopher nor a trained theologian, and as such appears somewhat uncomfortable asserting the ideas in this book with any authority. In order to overcome this, he will frequently appeal to common sense or very simple analogies, as if to show that the conclusions he draws, no matter how complicated or intelligent they may seem, are really conclusions even a simple child could draw from observation. Thus, for example, he offers an indirect argument for God's existence which basically argues that the world's features could have been different than they are; therefore, they must be the result of a choice by some intelligent creator. However, instead of stating this argument in philosophical fashion, Chesterton draws these lessons from fairy tales told to him in the nursery. Thus, Chesterton can advance a decently sophisticated argument without having to answer for his lack of academic credentials.

Another key feature of Chesterton's writing style is the use of paradox and negation. For example, in the beginning of Chapter III: The Suicide of Thought, Chesterton writes: "But the virtues are let loose also; and the virtues wander more wildly, and the virtues do more terrible damage." The idea that virtues could be "let loose" and do "terrible damage" is meant to be thought-provoking. Chesterton is attempting to cause confusion in the mind of his reader initially in order that the subsequent explanation is more lucid.

## Structure

Orthodoxy is divided into nine chapters, each with its own distinct theme. Aside from the first chapter, which is a brief introduction to the book, there is not an obvious reason for the order of the book. Rather, Chesterton seems to be concerned with addressing many of the reasons why modern liberals take issue with Christianity and takes on these issues generally a chapter at a time.

After introducing the book in the first chapter and giving his reason for writing it (others had argued that he only criticized their ideas without offering his own), Chesterton sets out in the second chapter with a criticism of the excessively logical, arguing that intense devotion to reason leads to madness. The following chapter follows a similar theme: Skepticism, which is a form of exaggerated devotion to logic, leads ultimately to the death of thought itself, since it undermines reason ultimately.

The fourth chapter picks up a theme touched upon in the second: the value of imagination. In this chapter, he gives a brief and indirect argument for God's existence and for the existence of morality by appealing to the imaginary lands of fairy tales. The following chapter is presented as the next step in maturity—just as the young boy moves on from fairy tales to war stories, so too did Chesterton move on to discuss the similarities between a patriot and a true Christian. In this chapter he argues that a true Christian is loyal to the world, since God created it, but does not accept everything in it, since it is part of God's plan that man work for good in the world. Continuing on this theme of opposing attitudes—loving the world but also wanting to change it—Chesterton generalizes it and shows how the Christian is constantly balancing opposing passions without compromising either. Orthodoxy, he concludes, is the structure which keeps the passions from overwhelming one another.

Returning to the theme that man is instrumental in changing the world, Chesterton discusses the then very fashionable idea of progress in Chapter VII. He argues that many, or even most, of the concepts of progress in his time are flawed, and that true progress means the movement towards some fixed goal. While he discovered this on his own, he was shocked to find, he says, that Christianity has always believed this same thing. Thus, he ties Christianity into the modern notion of progress, and obvious appeal to the sensibilities of those liberals for whom he is writing.

In the final two chapters, Chesterton takes on a number of arguments leveled against Christianity. The arguments in Chapter VIII are of a more theoretical level and include discussing claims that Christianity and Buddhism (and really all other religions) are ultimately the same and the beliefs of the Unitarians. The final chapter, Chapter IX, gives a defense for the institution of the Church itself. Chesterton may have given a good argument for the individual beliefs of Christianity, but a skeptic might still advance any number of factual arguments against the Church. Chesterton takes these individually and shows that ultimately the "facts" which they suppose are really not facts at all.

# Quotes

"If he does read it, he will find that in its pages I have attempted in a vague and personal way, in a set of mental pictures rather than in a series of deductions, to state the philosophy in which I have come to believe. I will not call it my philosophy; for I did not make it. God and humanity made it; and it made me." (13)

"For if this book is a joke it is a joke against me. I am the man who with the utmost daring discovered what had been discovered before. If there is an element of farce in what follows, the farce is at my own expense; for this book explains how I fancied I was the first to set foot in Brighton and then found I was the last. It recounts my elephantine adventures in pursuit of the obvious. No one can think my case more ludicrous than I think it myself; no reader can accuse me here of trying to make a fool of him: I am the fool of this story, and no rebel shall hurl me from my throne." (17)

"In this remarkable situation it is plainly not now possible (with any hope of a universal appeal) to start, as our fathers did, with the fact of sin. This very fact which was to them (and is to me) as plain as a pikestaff, is the very fact that has been specially diluted or denied. But though moderns deny the existence of sin, I do not think that they have yet denied the existence of a lunatic asylum. We all agree still that there is a collapse of the intellect as unmistakable as a falling house. Men deny hell, but not, as yet, Hanwell." (22)

"Imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. Poets do not go mad; but chess-players do. Mathematicians go mad, and cashiers; but creative artists very seldom." (23)

"A small circle is quite as infinite as a large circle; but, though it is quite as infinite, it is not so large. In the same way the insane explanation is quite as complete as the sane one, but it is not so large." (31)

"There is a thought that stops thought. That is the only thought that ought to be stopped. That is the ultimate evil against which all religious authority was aimed." (40)

"Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our father." (51)

"But this is a deep mistake in this alternative of the optimist and the pessimist. The assumption of it is that a man criticises this world as if he were house-hunting, as if he were being shown over a new suite of apartments. If a man came to this world from some other world in full possession of his powers he might discuss whether the advantage of midsummer woods made up for the disadvantage of mad dogs, just as a man looking for lodgings might balance the presence of a telephone against the absence of a sea view. But no man is in that position. A man belongs to this world before he begins to ask if it is nice to belong to it. He has fought for the flag, and often won heroic victories for the flag long before he has ever enlisted." (70)

"St. Francis, in praising all good, could be a more shouting optimist than Walt Whitman. St. Jerome, in denouncing all evil, could paint the world blacker than Schopenhauer. Both passions were free because both were kept in their place." (100)

"We need not debate about the mere words evolution or progress: personally I prefer to call it reform. For reform implies form. It implies that we are trying to shape the world in a particular image; to make it something that we see already in our minds. Evolution is a metaphor from mere automatic unrolling. Progress is a metaphor from merely walking along a road—very likely the wrong road. But reform is a metaphor for reasonable and determined men: it means that we see a certain thing out of shape and we mean to put it into shape. And we know what shape." (112)

"The Buddhist is looking with a peculiar intentness inwards. The Christian is staring with a frantic intentness outwards." (142)

"Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian." (171)

# Topics for Discussion

What is liberalism?

Why is Chesterton writing this book?

What is the relationship between democracy and liberalism?

Why does Chesterton think that democracy and Christianity are compatible?

How might Chesterton address the objection that many Christian governments, historically, have not been democratic?

Why does Chesterton think that imagination is a safeguard against insanity?

Why does Chesterton use fairy tales to provide an argument for God's existence?

What are Unitarians and why does Chesterton think their belief is dangerous?

Why does evolution appear so much in debates which have nothing to do with biology?

Is Chesterton's assessment of the role of the Catholic Church in European history in Chapter IX accurate? Why or why not?