Study Guide for G.K. Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy*

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Chapter Summaries

Chapter One: Introduction

Chesterton begins *Orthodoxy* with a statement about its origin, noting that he wrote this book in response to a challenge from G.S. Street. Street’s challenge was that Chesterton’s previous book, *Heretics*, merely pointed out flaws in other philosophies without ever establishing his own. In this work, then, Chesterton will set forth his philosophy, though he will not call it his, for, as he writes, “I did not make it. God and humanity made it; and it made me” (1). In this opening chapter, Chesterton tells a farcical tale of an English yachtsman who set sail, and due to a miscalculation, succeeded in discovering England, though in truth it had already been discovered. Chesterton will liken himself to this man in saying that his attempts to search for truth merely led him to discover that which had already been discovered over 1800 years before. Consequently, his plan is to lay out his own journey as one means of demonstrating how the “central Christian theology (sufficiently summarized in the Apostle’s Creed) is the best root of energy and sound ethics” (5).

Chapter Two: The Maniac

Chesterton begins this chapter by challenging the common notion that a man will succeed if he believes in himself. Chesterton argues the opposite—a man who believes in himself will almost certainly fail, for men are not to be trusted. “Complete self-confidence,” writes Chesterton, “is not merely a sin; complete self-confidence is a weakness” (7). In the remainder of the chapter, Chesterton will build off this idea to develop a picture of insanity. What makes a man a maniac? Not, as some may suggest, a lack of reason. For Chesterton, insanity arises in “the man who has lost everything except his reason” (11). He is by no means saying that logic is unimportant, only that logic does have that potential danger. He demonstrates his point with the example of the materialist. The materialist believes he is freeing man from the restrictions of religion. His logical, reasonable mind, or so he believes, leads him to the view of materialism and determinism. But Chesterton shows that materialism is far more restrictive than spiritualism. As an example, he points out that Christians are free to see order in the universe (a great deal of it in fact), but the materialist cannot allow even the slightest possibility of the supernatural and miraculous (16). From here, Chesterton draws parallels between the madman and the materialist, and concludes that both hold a position that is “unanswerable and intolerable” (18). The answer, Chesterton argues, is mysticism. The reason the mystic remains sane is that he has “always had one foot in earth and the other in fairyland” (20). Simply summarized, the mystic retains his imagination, and thereby retains his sanity.

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1 All page numbers refer to the Barnes & Noble Library of Essential Reading edition (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2007).
Chapter Three: The Suicide of Thought

Chesterton moves on to discuss in this chapter some of the modern philosophies that have become popular, and yet at the same time prove themselves to be self-contradictory. Rather than vilify them, however, he is quite charitable to many of these writers, suggesting that they have a good heart, just a heart in the wrong place (22). He compares these philosophies not to vices, but to “the old Christian virtues gone mad” (22). His first major example is humility that is in the wrong place. He argues that modesty has moved from the organ of ambition to the organ of conviction, “where it was never meant to be” (23). He adds how a man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but never about the truth, but a man is now confident in himself and doubtful about the truth.

The second example is the philosophy that there is no validity in human thought. This philosophy is marked by skepticism, materialism, and evolution. Yet Chesterton explains how evolutionary theory would certainly not destroy religion, but does, as a system, destroy itself. There can be no reason, no differentiation between good and bad logic, for both are simply “movements in the brain of a bewildered ape” (25).

The third example is pragmatism and the theory of progress. The pragmatist bent on progress says that what was good in one age is wrong in another, and while this could be true in some senses, that sense in which it can be true does not extend to the truth. The truth must be absolute, but the pragmatist requires that truth be relative to the individual or society. Pragmatism, Chesterton observes, is about human needs, but the self-contradictory problem of pragmatism is that it is not practical (or pragmatic) to be a pragmatist; as humans, one of our first human needs is to be something more (28).

Chesterton pauses at this point, before analyzing a final philosophy, to show that these modern philosophies are not only mad, they are suicidally mad; that is, they kill themselves because they contradict themselves.

The final example of modern philosophies is the elevation of will over reason. Once again, those who elevate the will seek to provide freedom by giving everyone the freedom to choose as he wills. And yet Chesterton shows that every act of the will is necessarily particular and not general because in choosing one thing, one rejects everything else (30-31).

In the final pages of the chapter, Chesterton admits that this chapter is “the first and dullest business of this book,” and yet one recognizes that it is important to show the helplessness of these philosophies in order to demonstrate how much better Christianity can answer life's questions. With his example of Joan of Arc, he provides the reader with a glimpse at the end of the chapter of what he will discuss in chapter six on the paradoxes of Christianity—that Christianity proves itself to be the norm, the standard, the mean between two extremes.

Chapter Four: The Ethics of Elfland

Chesterton follows up his discussion on these modern philosophies with an extended metaphor representing his view of the world. In opposition to all these modern philosophies that spoke of law and necessity, Chesterton rather believes that fairy tales represent that which is “entirely
reasonable” (40). It is reasonable, he argues, because fairyland has rightly grasped the difference between what is logically necessary and what is simply magic. For example, if Cinderella’s step-sisters are older than Cinderella, then it follows by necessity that Cinderella is younger than her step-sisters. Yet is by no means the same necessity to say that a tree must bear fruit, for although we cannot conceive of the former example being false, we can certainly conceive of a tree that does not bear fruit, but rather produces golden candlesticks (40-44). Chesterton explains how fairyland teaches us that we can know the cosmos, but not ourselves (45). Additionally, fairyland helps explain the beauty of obeying odd commands and conditions simply by reminding us how incomprehensible the gift is that we have received. He uses Cinderella again as an example. One may expect Cinderella to ask why the spell will end at midnight, and yet we could ask why or how it happened at all. If mice can become coachmen in the first place, why shouldn’t they return to form at midnight? Finally, Chesterton uses the examples of the color of the flowers and the rising of the sun to suggest that these things are not laws that just happened, but both are magical in that they both suggest that something was done. A red rose need not be red, just as the sun need not rise; rather, Chesterton concludes that we delight in colors because they could have been otherwise. Similarly, perhaps the sun rises every day because God delights in monotony. Perhaps he has simply never tired of telling the sun to rise or making daisies in the same way. It is not something that happens by necessity, but is daily a “theatrical encore” (51).

Chesterton concludes his chapter with five points that summarize his reflection on these topics. First, “this world does not explain itself” (55). Second, “magic must have a meaning, and meaning must have someone to mean it” (56). Third, despite the world’s defects, he thought this magical purpose beautiful. Fourth, “the proper form of thanks to it is some form of humility and restraint” (56). Finally, he had a “vague and vast impression that in some way all good was a remnant to be stored and held sacred out of some primordial ruin” (56).

Chapter Five: The Flag of the World

Chesterton’s discussion in this chapter is related throughout to optimism and pessimism. He argues that pure optimism and pure pessimism are impossible, for the optimist is not optimistic about the pessimist, just as the pessimist is not pessimistic about himself (57). He argues, however, that the answer is not a compromise; rather, we must heartily hate the world while at the same time heartily loving it (63). He asks, “Can he hate it enough to change it, and yet love it enough to think it worth changing?” (63). Christianity, he realized, had been accused of this very paradox that Chesterton had observed: it was too optimistic about the universe and yet too pessimistic about the world (65). And for Chesterton, this reality was a hard spike that perfectly filled the hole he had observed in the world, namely that one must find a way of loving the world without trusting it (70). He briefly relates some of the ways in which this knowledge answered for him the observations about the world that he had listed in the previous chapter, about the color of the flowers, the smallness of the cosmos, and the goodness to be guarded (71). In finding that we do not fit into this world, in learning that we are in the wrong place, Chesterton found the answer to how he “could feel homesick at home” (72).
Chapter Six: The Paradoxes of Christianity

Chesterton's purpose in this chapter is "to show that whenever we feel there is something odd in Christian theology, we shall generally find that there is something odd in the truth" (74). He uses the example of the human body. Two arms, two legs, two ears, two eyes, two nostrils, two lobes to the brain and more might lead one to expect that a man has two hearts, and yet he would obviously be mistaken. It is the reality of the universe that it is nearly perfectly logical, and yet not quite. Christianity, however, is “wrong” in all the ways the world goes wrong, which Chesterton argues as perhaps the strongest reason why it is right.

Chesterton explains that the most surprising thing, the thing that led him to reconsider Christianity, was not an apology by Christians, but the contradictory reasons for which the rationalists rejected it. One rejected it because it was too pessimistic, while the next because it was too optimistic. He gives nine more examples (too meek yet too murderous; its morality was common to all humanity and therefore not exclusive yet morals changed from era to era; it attacked the family and then forced family upon the culture; it degraded women's intellect yet was criticized for appealing only to women; it was too simple yet too pompous; it was too plain yet too colored; it restrained sexuality too much yet also restrained it too little; there was disunity, everyone believing his own thing, yet too much in agreement; it despised Jews yet was despised itself for being too Jewish).

Even still, Chesterton was not convinced, but thought if Christianity was wrong, “it was very wrong indeed” (81). Then an idea struck him regarding many men who spoke of one man. Some called him too short, others too tall; some called him too fat, others too slim; some too fair/light, others too dark. Perhaps, Chesterton thought, the man was just the right size, shape, and color, and those who spoke of him were merely doing so out of perspective. The tall man thought him short, while the short man thought him tall. The key fit, and as he applied it to Christianity, he found that all those places where it was critiqued, the perspective of the one who criticized it was too far in one direction or the other.

Chapter Seven: The Eternal Revolution

Chesterton moves on in chapter seven to the notion of progress. He provides three requirements about the ideal toward which progress is directed. The first ideal is that it must be fixed. Too often man changes his ideal in pursuit of progress. Rather than changing the real to make it conform to the ideal, he changes the ideal to make it easier to conform to the way things actually are. The second ideal is the it must be composite. It cannot be one thing which swallows up the rest, but rather it must be “a definite picture composed of these elements in their best proportion and relation” (106). The third ideal is that we must keep watch even in Utopia, lest we fall as we did from Eden (106). He argues that men are prone to leave things as they are if they do not want them to change. The reality, however, is that things change on their own. For example, a white post left unattended becomes a black post. The only way to maintain the old white post is to paint continually a new white post. If one desires things to remain as they are, one must constantly be in revolution (107). As he did with the previous two examples, Chesterton explains how Christianity
provides the best explanation for this phenomenon, simply that the tendency of man to backslide is just a manifestation of original sin and the fall (108).

In the final section of the chapter, Chesterton moves on to a discussion of aristocracy and the rich. He argues that Christianity alone maintains that the rich are not better than the poor because of their position. In fact, Christianity warns that “to be rich is to be in peculiar danger of moral wreck” (110). Chesterton provides a sort of summary of his views on Utopia when he writes the following: “I must be prepared for the moral fall of any man in any position at any moment; especially for my fall from my position at this moment” (111). The Utopia that Chesterton envisioned was only answered in the New Jerusalem (114). In summary, then, Chesterton’s chapter argues that one must wage an eternal revolution against the “progress” of the world and instead aim to maintain the ideal of the New Jerusalem and work towards achieving it.

Chapter Eight: The Romance of Orthodoxy

Chesterton argues in this chapter that “almost every contemporary proposal to bring freedom into the church is simply a proposal to bring tyranny into the world” (117). Chesterton goes on to argue that one of the more common worldly maxims, that all religions agree in meaning but differ in machinery, is completely the opposite. They agree in machinery, that is the external methods such as the use of priests, scriptures, altars, feasts, and more. It is precisely in the area of meaning that they so adamantly disagree. For example, Chesterton compares Buddhism and Christianity. He demonstrates how Buddhism looks intently inwards, while Christianity stares “with a frantic intentness outwards,” a truth demonstrated by their art, in which Buddhist saints have eyes shut, while Christian saints have eyes open (123). He concludes with a discussion of Christian morality in which he argues that “all moral reform must start in the active not the passive will” (129).

Chapter Nine: Authority and the Adventurer

The final chapter aims to answer why one would accept the whole of Christianity rather than just its “good” qualities. Why not accept what is valuable and comprehensible and leave the dogmas that are incomprehensible (134)? Chesterton’s answer is most simply that Christianity is so often right about so many varied things that “the very fact that the things are of different kinds increases the importance of the fact that they all point to one conclusion” (135). And it is precisely the fact that Christianity has been right about so many scattered truths that he found it not only to be true on certain points, but it “revealed itself as a truth-telling thing” (149). Many philosophies, he admits, tell the truth about that which seems to be true, but only Christianity affirms the truth of things that do not appear to be true, and yet prove themselves time and again to be true (149). His final example is, not surprisingly, a final paradox. Christianity is accused of being sorrowful, while Paganism is joyful. But once again Chesterton argues that Christianity has struck this seemingly impossible balance of two opposite passions that blaze alongside one another (139). Christianity is sorrowful when appropriate, but Chesterton argues that this is only an “innocent interlude” (151); joy, on the other hand, ought to be “the permanent pulsation of the soul” (151).
Discussion Questions

1. How would you respond to Chesterton’s question: “How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it?”

2. What does Chesterton identify as the purpose of the book?

3. What are the primary modern philosophies that Chesterton opposes?

4. Chesterton writes: “The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason” (11). What do you think must exist with reason to keep it in balance? How do you think Chesterton would answer the same question? Defend your position with evidence from the text.

5. How are fairy tales more rational than scientific “laws”?

6. Chesterton writes: “If men loved Pimlico as mothers love children, arbitrarily because it is theirs, Pimlico in a year or two might be fairer than Florence” (59). How would you react to rewriting the sentence as follows? “If men loved the world as mothers love children, arbitrarily, because it is theirs, the world in a year or two might be fairer than we have ever known it since the fall of man.” Do you agree or disagree? Why? How might it look different?

7. What do you think Chesterton means by calling chapter five “The Flag of the World”? To what is he referring?

8. What does Chesterton say about the “Inner Light”?

9. In the “Ethics of Elfland,” Chesterton argues that man is not strong enough to exult in monotony, but God is. He gives the examples of a sunrise and a daisy. What other examples can you think of related to God’s “monotony”? How might a new appreciation for God’s “monotony” impact our daily life?

10. How might Chesterton’s thoughts in chapter five, “The Flag of the World,” change or strengthen our views of patriotism?

11. What are the irregularities in our world? How does Christianity explain these? Start with Chesterton’s examples (heart, snowflake) and then find your own.

12. What does Chesterton identify as the primary reason for abandoning his agnosticism and returning to Christianity?

13. How would you describe Chesterton’s argument for belief in God? What type of argument is it? Give examples in defense of your position.

14. Chesterton describes Nietzsche as a timid thinker because “he does not really know in the least what sort of man he wants evolution to produce” (96). What sort of man does
Christianity want to produce? How does Christianity’s answer to this question differ from the answers of the modern philosophies he addresses in earlier chapters?

15. Chesterton writes in the final chapter: “Man is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial. Melancholy should be an innocent interlude, a tender and fugitive frame of mind; praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul” (151). Does this mean that grief and melancholy are wrong behaviors? How are praise and joy related? How do we make praise and joy “the permanent pulsation of the soul”?

16. Does Chesterton adequately prove his central thesis, that the “central Christian theology (sufficiently summarized in the Apostle’s Creed) is the best root of energy and sound ethics” (5)? Why or why not? Defend you claims with evidence from the text.

17. Why is this book’s genre identified as apologetics?