

Chesterton the Theologian

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The following article by the Canadian philosopher-theologian Bernard Lonergan, S.J. (1904-1984) appeared in the November 13, 1943, edition of The Canadian Register. It was one of several essays on Chesterton, and Lonergan, then teaching at the L'Immaculée-Conception, the Jesuit seminary in Montreal, was asked to write about "Chesterton the Theologian." Of Lonergan, Hugo Meynell wrote in 1991, "Of all the contemporary philosophers of the first rank, Bernard Lonergan has been up to now the most neglected." That neglect is presently being remedied as the University of Toronto Press is presently publishing the twenty-six volumes of the Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan. Lonergan had a life-long love of Chesterton, having written another article on him in the Loyola College Review in 1931. This article was written while Lonergan was a young Jesuit Regent teaching in Montreal. References to Chesterton appear throughout his works.*

Lonergan will most probably be remembered for his two ground-breaking works, Insight: An Essay on Human Understanding (1957) and Method in Theology (1972). Both these works are foreshadowed in the following essay on Chesterton. The distinction Lonergan makes in this essay between scholastic-scientific theology and what might be called a "communications theology"—at which Chesterton was a consummate master—foreshadows the distinction Lonergan will make in Method in Theology between eight functional specialties in theology, the last two of which are "systematics" and "communications." Finally, all that Lonergan wrote about "insight" in his classic work by that name is foreshadowed in this essay by Lonergan's emphasis on Chesterton's insistence that answers be "right on the nail."

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When asked to write on Chesterton as Theologian, naturally I was tempted to twist my terms of reference and switch to the more obvious and abundant themes of Chesterton as Metaphysician or Chesterton as Apologist. There is an unmistakable metaphysical strain to the man who explained the development of a puppy into a dog as a matter of becoming more doggy. There is an overwhelming apologist in the man who made enormous fun of the endless fallacies current from “Heretics” to “The Thing.” But how can a theologian be made of a man who repeatedly implied and often affirmed he was not one?

Chesterton had the profoundest respect for the technicalities in which centuries of reflection on the faith had deposited and crystallized and tabulated their findings. He set upon the “provincial stupidity of those who object to ‘creeds and dogmas’ ” as upon the absurdity that “Love your neighbor” is all you really need to know. With trenchant exasperation and tumbling images he insisted on the complexity of things, on the fact that without fixed beliefs there are only passing moods, on the infinite dangers of religious emotion running to a destructive flood when without the dams and walls of intellectual content.

But it is perhaps a Chestertonian paradox that Chesterton himself never became adept in these technicalities. When *Orthodoxy* appeared in 1908 Father Joseph Keating in *The Month* ended an article on the interesting young man with the remark: “Had we the power we should banish him to Monte Cassino for a year there to work through the *Summa of St. Thomas* with Dante as his only relaxation. On his return, we fancy, he would astonish the world.” Now Chesterton did astonish the world; he even studied St. Thomas and wrote a book on him; but the book proposed to deal mainly with the figure, briefly with the philosopher, and with the theologian hardly at all.

Still there is a sense in which Chesterton was a theologian. Suppose that he wrote in the eleventh century instead of the twentieth. Then he could be ranked with St. Anselm, for of that age no one expects the intellectual elaborations later evolved. Then being a theologian was simply a matter of a cast of mind that seizes the fitness and coherence of the faith, that penetrates to its inner order and harmony and unity. Such penetration was the soul of Chesterton. Years before his conversion he could write:

It may be, Heaven forgive me, that I did try to be original; but I only succeeded in inventing all by myself an inferior copy of the existing traditions of civilized religion. I did try to found a heresy

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of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered it was orthodoxy. I was always rushing out of my architectural study with plans for a new turret, only to find it sitting there in the sunlight shining, and a thousand years old. There was a time when I could have invented the marriage vow (as an institution) out of my own head; but I discovered, with a sigh, that it had been invented already.”

Such grasp of fitness and coherence is the essential object of the theologian at all times. But there is a further point in throwing Chesterton back upon the background of the medieval scene. More than any other modern man he shared the fresh and fearless vitality of medieval inquisitiveness. His questions go to the roots of things. The answers he demands must be right on the nail. He combined a whole-hearted contempt for the irrelevant with an ability to appreciate enormously, one might say inordinately, what really was relevant. In his famous “Meditations on the Manichees” with an ingenuous profundity reminiscent of Aquinas, he sets up parallels and contrasts that seem hopeless over-simplifications until—until you get the point. He does not fear to assert that because Christ was risen, Aristotle too had to rise again. He does not hesitate to leap from Manicheism to Calvinism and throw in fakirs and Albigensians on the way. He does not, in modern style, nicely trace the influences of Christian tradition, Greek thought, and Arabic culture on the mind of Aquinas; he sets up a cosmic background, names him St. Thomas of the Creator, and contrasts him with the Buddha and Nietzsche.

This medieval insistence on the relevant is to be found in anything but medieval dress. Perhaps his deepest theological intuition is to be found in the most bizarre of mystery yarns. “The Man who was Thursday” is a labyrinth of double roles, of plots and counter-plots, of aimless, painful quests, of buffoonery and high seriousness, that lures the unsuspecting reader face to face with God and the problem of evil. Chesterton now knows better, though not differently, the Man who was Sunday.



Derwentwater, looking towards Borrowdale, near Keswick