

# THE LEGACY OF G.K. CHESTERTON AND DOROTHY SAYERS

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*This is a shortened version of  
the original article.*

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If I were asked to identify a single root cause for the success of C. S. Lewis as academic, novelist, and, especially, Christian apologist, I would respond that the key to Lewis was his ability to fuse reason and imagination, logic and intuition, the rational and the emotional. Unlike such quintessentially American apologists as Josh McDowell and Lee Strobel, who are at their best when collecting data, sifting arguments, and marshalling witnesses in favor of Christ, the Bible, and Christian doctrine, Lewis took a more literary approach to defending the faith. Rather than divorce the *facts* of the Bible from the *power* it exerts over us, rather than separate the *historical claims* of Christ from the *mythic force* of His status as God-Man, rather than distinguish between the *forensic evidence* for the resurrection and the *numinous awe* that the event provokes in those who contemplate it, Lewis combined the testimony of head and heart, thinking and feeling, adult ratiocination and childlike wonder.

Though very few apologists have achieved this

combination with the success (and finesse) of C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), he was by no means the only apologist of the twentieth century whose defense of the faith was strengthened by his literary gifts and vision. Lewis's two-pronged head/heart approach was in great part patterned on the writings of G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) and was seconded in the apologetic works of Dorothy Sayers (1893–1957). In such timeless classics as Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* (1908) and *The Everlasting Man* (1925) and Sayers's *The Mind of the Maker* (1941), reason embraces imagination in such a way that the latter not only illustrates the former, but provides the primary vehicle for reaching and understanding some of the deepest truths of Christianity.

Though perhaps best known for his Father Brown detective series, the portly and prolific G. K. Chesterton wrote books, essays, newspaper articles, and poetry on every conceivable topic. He was heavily involved in the political issues of his day, writing books with such provocative titles as *What's Wrong with the World* and weighing in on such debates as women's suffrage—which he opposed, not because he had a low opinion of women, but because he felt that feminism de-emphasized the

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true feminine voice.

As a literary theorist, he remains one of the finest critics of the Victorian Age, authoring books not only on the era itself, but on such writers as Robert Browning (whom he considered one of the supreme love poets of all time) and Charles Dickens (from whom he learned that humanitarians are often people who love humanity but hate human beings).

Together with his books on Browning and Dickens, Chesterton also wrote brief but provocative biographies of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Thomas Aquinas. Backed by wide reading and research, yet written in a beguilingly accessible prose that speaks directly to the reader, these biographies open a window into the souls of two of the church's most enduring and beloved saints.

Chesterton, like C. S. Lewis and Dorothy Sayers, spent many years as an Anglo-Catholic; however, after a long period of soul-searching, he eventually followed the path to Rome. Still, though Chesterton defended Catholicism in many of his works, he, like Lewis and Sayers, chose to focus most of his apologetic efforts on what Lewis would call “mere” Christianity—that is, the basic tenets of the Nicene Creed (the Trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, and the resurrection). Also like Lewis after him, Chesterton would win the title of “apostle of common sense,” a testament to his skill at embodying orthodox Christian doctrine in a direct, contemporary way that challenged and engaged readers from every walk of life: from the altar boy to the priest, the sailor at the pub to the academic theologian. Indeed, in a series of popular debates, the indefatigable Chesterton courageously faced off against one of the most notorious skeptics of his day, George Bernard Shaw.

To read Chesterton's witty and forceful works is to have one's mind whipped into shape by a relentless athletic trainer. His famous prose style, partly inherited by Lewis, includes such distinctive features as a heavy use of irony to deflate modern arrogance, sudden twists



of thought that take the reader by surprise and force him to rethink accepted social norms and opinions, a relentless logic that traces every claim back to its presuppositions, and a love of, if not an obsession with, paradox. Though nearly all of his works contain some form of defense of the faith, his best-known apologetic works are *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man*. In the former, he champions both the romance and the reality of creed-based Christianity, showing how orthodoxy alone can steer us safely between the Scylla of Western materialism and the Charybdis of Eastern pantheism. In the latter, he offers a Christian outline of history that begins with a much-needed refutation of the cave man, continues by dividing the pre-Christian world into philosophers and myth-makers, and concludes by showing how the church synthesized all that came before it while protecting orthodox doctrine from its many enemies.

Dorothy Sayers, like Chesterton, was a bold defender of orthodoxy with an equally wide-ranging knowledge of church history. And yet she too, like Chesterton, is often best known and remembered for her fiction and her literary criticism. Indeed, the success of Chesterton's Father Brown series is rivaled by that of Sayers's beloved Lord Peter Wimsey detective novels (though the latter series, unlike the former, does not engage Christian themes or issues). Whether there is a direct link between the incisive logic and intuition that Father Brown and Lord Peter use to sift through the evidence and testimonies to reveal the killer, and



the equally incisive logic and intuition that Chesterton and Sayers used to uncover the flaws in the logic of anti-creedal theologians may never be known; but there is little doubt that the ability of Chesterton and Sayers to entertain a wide audience of readers helped infuse their defenses of doctrine with a kind of energy and vivacity that is unique in the world of apologetics.

Sayers's mastery of what I like to call "genial apologetics" may also be linked to a project to which she devoted a prodigious amount of effort: a translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, complete with well-researched notes that open up Dante's medieval Catholic vision for modern readers. Although Sayers died before she could finish all of *Paradise* (the translation was completed by Barbara Reynolds), her work on the *Comedy* demonstrated her ability to bring to life both Dante's poetic power and his Christian orthodoxy. Along with her work on Dante, Sayers also helped bring alive for her fellow Englishmen the full divinity and humanity of Jesus by writing a well-crafted series of radio plays based on the life of Christ that were aired on the BBC

(*The Man Born to Be King*). At the time, Sayers received considerable resistance from believers who felt that featuring Christ in a radio play bordered on idolatry, but she held firm and graced her country with a powerful portrait of the Incarnate Word.

Though the essays collected in her playful but convicting *The Whimsical Christian* highlight Sayers's Chestertonian gift for making orthodoxy vital and dramatic (see, e.g., "The Dogma Is the Drama," "What Do We Believe?" and "Creed or Chaos?"), to my mind her masterpiece is *The Mind of the Maker*. In this challenging but lucid book, one that offers one of the most original defenses of the Trinity and incarnation ever written, Sayers provides a rare glimpse into the mind of the divine Maker by examining closely the minds of human makers.

In what follows, I shall demonstrate the power and effectiveness of Chesterton and Sayers's literary apologetics by first summarizing arguments from *Orthodoxy*, *The Everlasting Man*, and *The Mind of the Maker* that arrive at deep theological insights by traveling down the road of the imagination, and then indicating briefly how apologists today can carry on the legacy of Chesterton and Sayers. . . .

## CHESTERTON AND SAYERS'S LITERARY APOLOGETICS

In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton shows, through a variety of different arguments, that Christianity is the only system of belief that can make sense of us and our world and inspire true growth and progress. In contrast to the anti-humanistic gloominess of materialism—the belief that nature is all that there is and that all human phenomena can be explained on the basis of blind physical mechanisms—Chesterton, the seeker after truth, finds in Christianity not only a robust health, but a kind of wonder and magic that speaks to the perennial child within.

Like Lewis after him, Chesterton was a great lover

of, and advocate for, fairy tales; indeed, he believed that fairy tales, far from being frivolous stories for immature children, embodied the collective wisdom of mankind. Long before the adult Chesterton took up the Bible as God's authoritative Word, the child Chesterton had learned from fairy tales to discern the true magic in nature and its Creator. Materialism tries to systematize everything in the universe, but fairy tales open our eyes to the mystery inherent in every tree, every frog, and every man. This kind of eye-opening helped prepare Chesterton to accept the miracles of Jesus as being consistent with the God who created nature rather than as violations of natural law.

In Chapter 4 of *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton, the apologist for fairy tales and the Gospels, answers the critique of materialists who claim that the clockwork nature of our universe precludes the existence of a personal Creator. What if, he suggests, the fact that the sun has risen and set in a fixed pattern since time began does not indicate an empty, mechanical lifelessness, but a dynamic divine activity? When we play a game with our children and they enjoy it, they will ask us to repeat it again and again until we are bored, exhausted, or both. For you see, counsels Chesterton, we grown-ups "are not strong enough to exult in monotony."

But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we. The repetition in Nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical encore.

It was the fairy tales that first spoke to Chesterton

of God's eternal appetite, and it was the fairy tales as well that first revealed to him why we live in a state of estrangement from that divine exaltation and joy. Chesterton learned from fairy tales that though we are all meant to dwell in the Garden of Eden, our residence in that most beautiful of fairy tale kingdoms is always, always conditional. Moderns dismiss the fall of man as *only* a myth, but Genesis discerns the truth behind the myth: that we can have anything we want as long as we don't pluck a flower, or open a box, or speak a forbidden word. Experience, fairy tales, and orthodoxy tell us that we are involved in a drama in which our choices are real and have consequences; we can win all, but we can also lose all.

Today, a growing number of young—and not so young—people have come to see that materialism is ultimately a dead end, one that offers neither hope, nor beauty, nor wonder. Filled with the "eternal appetite of infancy," but unsure how to feed that appetite, they have increasingly turned to alternative religions: the New Age, Gaia worship, yoga, Wicca, and so forth. Many in the church, who privilege the logical and rational to the detriment of the intuitive and the mystical, dismiss such religious seekers as freaks and fools. Chesterton, whose road to Christ led past the world of faeries, provides us with a different response and approach. Let us use apologetics to direct such seekers toward a fully realized Christian universe in which God is both the Creator of, and a Participant in, that sacred story that stretches from the Fall to the death and resurrection of Christ to the Final Redemption of man and his world.

## THE SPLENDOR OF TRIUNE CREATIVITY

. . . In *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers leads us from fairy tales and providential history into the even stranger and more mystical world of human creativity. Sensitive to the fact that many moderns reject the central Christian doctrines of the Trinity and incarnation

because they think them foreign and anti-human, Sayers counters by offering analogies for the Trinity and incarnation that make them seem surprisingly human, familiar, and close-to-home.

According to Sayers, every work of art consists *simultaneously* of Idea, Energy, and Power. The Idea is the invisible conception of the entire work that resides outside of time and space in the mind of the artist. The Energy takes the invisible Idea and embodies it in the material, space/time reality of our world; it proceeds from the Idea while still being one with it. The Power proceeds from both Idea and Energy; it allows a reader to experience the Idea through its embodiment and the artist to really *see* his work. Ideally, Sayers adds, the Power (captured in the published book) is fruitful and will inspire the reader to proceed through his own creative trinity. Although the fullness of the book exists in the Idea that exists only in the head of the artist, the world would have no knowledge of that Idea if it did not proceed from Idea to Energy and Energy to Power.

The triune nature of human creativity, argues Sayers, is a direct reflection of the triune God in whose image we were made. God the Father is the Idea of the Trinity; he exists outside of time and space and cannot be seen. God the Son is the Energy that Incarnates the Idea and makes it visible. God the Spirit is the Power that enables the Incarnate Idea to be experienced directly by believers; the Spirit indwells the church, we might say, as the Power of the published book indwells all who read it. It is no wonder, writes Sayers, that theologians have always had a hard time defining the Holy Spirit; the Power is not so much something we see as something that empowers us to see. We do not look at it, but by it, and therefore it is difficult to define.

In the same way that the threefold process of human creativity helps mortals bound within the confines of time and space to conceive of the eternal and boundless Trinity, so does it provide us with a window into the related mystery of the incarnation. Sayers delves into this

mystery by highlighting the human art of autobiography. When an artist writes an autobiography, she explains, he is at once the Idea (for he conceived the work) and the Energy (for he himself is the main character of the work). In his persona as author (Idea) he is not bound by any constraints, but in his persona as character (Energy) he is bound by the limits of language and the form of the work. Just so, Christ, while fully one with the Father (Idea), in His incarnation is a character (Energy) bound by the constraints of time/space and the human body. Though equal in essence with the Father, Christ in His incarnation is limited in *expression* to that which can be revealed through the human form.

A critic of Sayers might counter that what she offers here is more an analogy than a formal proof, and the critic would be right. But the critique does not in any way diminish the power of her argument. Indeed, in our modern, and now postmodern, world, what many seekers truly yearn for is not so much a logical demonstration of the accuracy of the Bible, as an assurance that the teachings of the Bible and the church have something to do with us—that they are intimately related to what it means to be human and not just laws imposed from outside. As an apologist who balanced reason and imagination, Sayers can teach us how to present the timeless truths of Christianity in such a way that the leap from Nicene Creed to God-With-Us seems not a leap at all.

## NOTE

Portions of this essay have been adapted from chapters 8–10 of Louis Markos, *Apologetics for the 21st Century* (Crossway, 2010).