

Welcome.

I'm glad you're here.

This is *Orthodoxy* by G. K. Chesterton, using the Project Gutenberg edition—read slowly, aloud, and in company.

These readings aren't lectures, and they aren't explanations. They're an invitation: to listen carefully, to follow an argument that wanders on purpose, and to allow surprise to do some of the work. So, let's take our time—and see where Chesterton leads us today.

Last time we followed Chesterton into a rather uncomfortable place, the mind of the madman, and found, somewhat to our surprise, that madness is not the loss of reason, but a kind of reasoning that has become... trapped. Complete, even convincing, but somehow cut off from the wider world.

And by the end of that reading, he left us with a question that is both simple and unsettling: If this is what drives a man mad, what is it that keeps him sane?

That's where we pick up today.

In this next section, Chesterton begins to turn that question toward an answer, not by offering a system or a proof, but by pointing toward something more elusive. Something he calls mysticism. Not as confusion, but as a kind of balance... a way of holding things together that don't seem, at first, to belong together.

And as he moves into that, he gives us one of his most memorable images—the contrast between the closed circle and the open cross—and begins to suggest that the difference between sanity and madness may not be how clearly we think... but how much we are willing to allow mystery to remain.

So let's turn now to the reading.

Reading 6 – lines 740 through 858 of Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy* (1908). Project Gutenberg eBook no. 16769.

All that concerns us here, however, is to note that this panegoistic extreme of thought exhibits the same paradox as the other extreme of materialism. It is equally complete in theory and equally crippling in practice. For the sake of simplicity, it is easier to state the notion by saying that a man can believe that he is always in a dream. Now, obviously there can be no positive proof given to him that he is not in a dream, for the simple reason that no proof can be offered that might not be offered in a dream. But if the man began to burn down London and say that his housekeeper would soon call him to breakfast, we should take him and put him with other logicians in a place which has often been alluded to in the course of this chapter. The man who cannot believe his senses, and the man who cannot believe anything else, are both insane, but their insanity is proved not by any error in their argument, but by the manifest mistake of their whole lives. They have both locked themselves up in two boxes, painted inside with the sun and stars; they are both unable to get out, the one into the health and happiness of heaven, the other even into the health and happiness of the

earth. Their position is quite reasonable; nay, in a sense it is infinitely reasonable, just as a threepenny bit is infinitely circular. But there is such a thing as a mean infinity, a base and slavish eternity. It is amusing to notice that many of the moderns, whether sceptics or mystics, have taken as their sign a certain eastern symbol, which is the very symbol of this ultimate nullity. When they wish to represent eternity, they represent it by a serpent with his tail in his mouth. There is a startling sarcasm in the image of that very unsatisfactory meal. The eternity of the material fatalists, the eternity of the eastern pessimists, the eternity of the supercilious theosophists and higher scientists of to-day is, indeed, very well presented by a serpent eating his tail, a degraded animal who destroys even himself.

This chapter is purely practical and is concerned with what actually is the chief mark and element of insanity; we may say in summary that it is reason used without root, reason in the void. The man who begins to think without the proper first principles goes mad, the man who begins to think at the wrong end. And for the rest of these pages we have to try and discover what is the right end. But we may ask in conclusion, if this be what drives men mad, what is it that keeps them sane? By the end of this book I hope to give a definite, some will think a far too definite, answer. But for the moment it is possible in the same solely practical manner to give a general answer touching what in actual human history keeps men sane. Mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity. The ordinary man has always been sane because the ordinary man has always been a mystic. He has permitted the twilight. He has always had one foot in earth and the other in fairyland. He has always left himself free to doubt his gods; but (unlike the agnostic of to-day) free also to believe in them. He has always cared more for truth than for consistency. If he saw two truths that seemed to contradict each other, he would take the two truths and the contradiction along with them. His spiritual sight is stereoscopic, like his physical sight: he sees two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for that. Thus he has always believed that there was such a thing as fate, but such a thing as free will also. Thus he believed that children were indeed the kingdom of heaven, but nevertheless ought to be obedient to the kingdom of earth. He admired youth because it was young and age because it was not. It is exactly this balance of apparent contradictions that has been the whole buoyancy of the healthy man. The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. The morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The mystic allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything else becomes lucid. The determinist makes the theory of causation quite clear, and then finds that he cannot say "if you please" to the housemaid. The Christian permits free will to remain a sacred mystery; but because of this his relations with the housemaid become of a sparkling and crystal clearness. He puts the seed of dogma in a central darkness; but it branches forth in all directions with abounding natural health. As we have taken the circle as the symbol of reason and madness, we may very well take the cross as the symbol at once of mystery and of health. Buddhism is centripetal, but Christianity is centrifugal: it breaks out. For the circle is perfect and infinite in its nature; but it is fixed for ever in its size; it can never be larger or smaller. But the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms for ever without altering its shape. Because it has a paradox in its centre it can grow without changing. The circle returns upon itself and is bound. The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travellers.

Symbols alone are of even a cloudy value in speaking of this deep matter; and another symbol from physical nature will express sufficiently well the real place of mysticism before mankind. The one created thing which we cannot look at is the one thing in the light of which we look at everything. Like the sun at noonday, mysticism explains everything else by the blaze of its own victorious

invisibility. Detached intellectualism is (in the exact sense of a popular phrase) all moonshine; for it is light without heat, and it is secondary light, reflected from a dead world. But the Greeks were right when they made Apollo the god both of imagination and of sanity; for he was both the patron of poetry and the patron of healing. Of necessary dogmas and a special creed I shall speak later. But that transcendentalism by which all men live has primarily much the position of the sun in the sky. We are conscious of it as of a kind of splendid confusion; it is something both shining and shapeless, at once a blaze and a blur. But the circle of the moon is as clear and unmistakable, as recurrent and inevitable, as the circle of Euclid on a blackboard. For the moon is utterly reasonable; and the moon is the mother of lunatics and has given to them all her name.

CHAPTER III.-- The Suicide of Thought

The phrases of the street are not only forcible but subtle: for a figure of speech can often get into a crack too small for a definition. Phrases like "put out" or "off colour" might have been coined by Mr. Henry James in an agony of verbal precision. And there is no more subtle truth than that of the everyday phrase about a man having "his heart in the right place." It involves the idea of normal proportion; not only does a certain function exist, but it is rightly related to other functions. Indeed, the negation of this phrase would describe with peculiar accuracy the somewhat morbid mercy and perverse tenderness of the most representative moderns. If, for instance, I had to describe with fairness the character of Mr. Bernard Shaw, I could not express myself more exactly than by saying that he has a heroically large and generous heart; but not a heart in the right place. And this is so of the typical society of our time.

I just ran into a curious computer situation. My cloud backup kept circling on one file. I don't even know which one because it wouldn't tell me. It did reveal a spinning wheel and a number of files that need backing up. That file number started the morning at 11, but by late morning, it had moved to 33. I had to find an answer. After hours of plumbing the depths of online wisdom, I found that the answer. One unknown file in the local database called for downloading from the cloud. The application made the request. The cloud responded, "It's already the same. You don't need it!" To which my PC responded, "I need the file, please let me download it." It became a circular problem as files piled up.

Sanity. I just needed to restore sanity. I eventually deleted the local database files. The backup program loaded fresh. I signed in, and, low and behold, all the files were synced and everything restored to normal.

Is Chesterton inviting us to delete the database of our preconceptions of the circular logic of the universe to break free into the wonder and mystery of all things truly being possible?

Can we modern break the circle of cultural programming long enough to allow the unknown, the mysterious, to creep into the way we move forward, experiencing and finding new models, even if they appear as foolish as returning to land fairie, where unlimited universes and potential arise?

If this is sanity, how do we navigate the paradox of having to keep one foot in the rational space and one in the horizon of imagination in a world that is built and runs on pure materialism? Do we have to compromise between one or the other? Or maybe live in tension?

Next time we will follow Chesterton into an even deeper question, not just whether we can think clearly, but whether the mind itself can be trusted.

Session 7: The Mystery That Keeps Us Sane (Reading 6)

Let's meet again in two weeks. Until then, God bless and keep well.

Session: 7

Reading: 6

Project: Chesterton Orthodoxy Reading Series

Primary Text: G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy (1908)

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