

G.K. Chesterton, Natural Theology, and Apologetics

DPhil Thesis

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Shorter Abstract

In this dissertation I argue that G.K. Chesterton's work is built around a distinctive natural theology, which gives coherence and substance to his thinking across the various genres in which he wrote. In chapter one I introduce his natural theology and explain why this central aspect of his work has been very largely neglected in Chesterton scholarship up till now. In chapter two I outline the basic structure of his natural theology. Then, in chapter three, I explore the ways in which he developed it, in the course of his apologetics, demonstrating that it is in fact at the heart of all his work, across the numerous different genres he worked in.

In chapter four, I analyse this natural theology in relation to his apologetics, showing how it shaped that apologetics, and was expressed in terms of apologetics. My analysis investigates both his overall strategies and also the linguistic expression of his ideas. Then, in chapter five, I consider the main exception to this rule, Chesterton's treatment of the Incarnation. In chapter six, I review the arguments of the thesis, conclude that this understanding of Chesterton unites the seemingly disparate and unconnected aspects of his work in a coherent whole, and draw certain further conclusions.

This dissertation is original because the natural theology in Chesterton's work has been very little studied. It is significant because Chesterton's natural theology enabled him to pursue a very original and creative form of apologetics, and it has potential today to open up new possibilities in discussions between different religious and ideological views. Chesterton's natural theology also included creative use of narrative theology and of the imagination in theology, among other innovations.

Longer Abstract

The argument of the dissertation

In this dissertation I argue that G.K. Chesterton's work is built around a distinctive natural theology, which gives coherence and substance to his thinking across the various genres in which he wrote. In chapter one I introduce his natural theology and explain why this central aspect of his work has been, to a large extent, neglected in Chesterton scholarship up till now. In chapter two I outline the basic structure of his natural theology. Then, in chapter three, I explore the ways in which he developed it, in the course of his apologetics, demonstrating that it is in fact at the heart of all his work, across the numerous different genres he worked in.

In chapter four, I analyse this natural theology in relation to his apologetics, showing how it shaped that apologetics, and was expressed in terms of apologetics. My analysis covers both his overall strategies and also the linguistic expression of his ideas. Then, in chapter five, I consider the main exception to this rule, Chesterton's treatment of the Incarnation. In chapter six, I conclude that this understanding of Chesterton unites the seemingly disparate and unconnected aspects of his work in a coherent whole.

The significance and originality of this thesis

This dissertation is original because the natural theology in Chesterton's work has been very little studied. Most scholarship has neglected it, and those scholars who have touched on it have not explored the subject to any substantial extent. No one has mapped out Chesterton's natural theology to show how it is central in his thinking, and how it makes coherent sense of seemingly disconnected strands of thought, revealing an underlying

unity to his work. So far as I am aware, my argument in this thesis does this for the first time.

It is significant because Chesterton's natural theology enabled him to pursue a very original and creative form of apologetics, and it has potential today to open up new possibilities in discussions between different religious and ideological views. There are several dimensions to the originality of Chesterton's natural theology. In itself it opened up common ground for communicating Christianity in remarkably creative and positive ways without reliance on revelation. It made very strong links between Christianity and the arts, with very powerful consequences for cultural apologetics.

Chesterton's natural theology also included a pioneering role for narrative theology and for the imagination in theology. Histories of narrative theology often begin with Richard Niebuhr in 1941 but I argue that they should take Chesterton's work into account, as he both reflects on the relationship between narrative and theology and also uses theological narratives innovatively in his apologetics. In addition, he had a subtle, complex, and profoundly theological approach to questions of knowledge, in which he acknowledged the place of imagination and emotion alongside reason in the quest for knowledge, and balanced propositional truth with narrative, and communal knowledge with the role of the individual thinker.

An explanation of how I attempt to establish the conclusion
I begin by proposing and defending a working understanding of natural theology. I then outline the argument in brief, to show the reader how Chesterton's work relates to natural theology. I next analyse his work in detail, first revealing the central natural theology that underlies his work, then demonstrating how he developed that natural theology. I move on to show how his apologetics was consistently shaped by his use of natural theology, and

then make the case that aspects of his use of language embody and reflect his natural theology. After that I consider the main exception to the predominant role of natural theology in his work, namely his treatment of the Incarnation, and I argue that even his approach to the Incarnation was strongly shaped by his use of natural theology. My conclusion bring these strands of argument together to claim that they collectively prove the centrality of Chesterton's natural theology across the range of his work, and by doing so demonstrate the underlying coherence of his thinking.

List of chapters, with their contributions to the argument

1: Chesterton and Natural Theology

I begin by recalling some of the major, unresolved questions raised by Chesterton's work.

I ask the research question: 'Did Chesterton create a substantial, coherent body of thought?' I then propose that his own very personal natural theology provides the key to resolving those questions. In defence of this proposal, I spend the rest of the chapter attempting to answer three questions: First, can Chesterton's work really be understood in terms of natural theology? Secondly, if he was indeed a practitioner of natural theology, why did he never describe himself as such? Thirdly, if natural theology is central to his work, why has it been so neglected in over a century of Chesterton criticism?

Before attempting to answer these questions, I consider the vexed question of the definition of natural theology and suggest a working understanding, for the purposes of this thesis, that lies within the range of scholarly definitions.

In answering the first question, I explain how Chesterton's work relates to natural theology, and introduce the central features of my argument in outline, preparatory to laying them out in detail over the next four chapters. I make the distinction between his creative theology and his creedal theology: although he eventually gave his assent to

Roman Catholic theology, in his creative theology he continued largely to restrict himself to the kinds of natural theology that had connected with his earlier, less religious self. I introduce discussion of Chesterton's use of what he termed the 'method of the hypothesis' in his natural theology, and the relation between his work and the later concept of 'worldview'.

In relation to the second question, I consider Chesterton's own public distancing of himself from any kind of theology, as part of his apologetics strategy.

In relation to the third question, I survey Chesterton scholarship to date in relation to natural theology and show how this topic has been very largely neglected. I note that his work is so multifarious that many scholars have simply focused on other aspects of it, while those who have taken a more theological approach have neglected the place of natural theology entirely, or in some cases considered related areas without focusing on natural theology, or else only considered it in passing, as their main concerns have been elsewhere. I consider the influence of Newman, and his treatment of natural religion, on Chesterton's thinking.

2: The Structure of Chesterton's Natural Theology

I give a detailed analysis of the core of Chesterton's natural theology. First, I show that its originality has much to do with its origins. The influences that shaped Chesterton during his non-religious childhood and youth were often non-Christian or only marginally Christian. Thus his natural theology had many very original features, even though he came later to situate it within a Christian and Catholic framework. I discuss how the wonder and joy which are at the heart of his work were profoundly theological. I outline how his theology of creation gave rise to a complex and vibrant theological anthropology. I discuss his sacramental mysticism.

I then outline the strong sense of sin and evil which also characterise his work, and how he used the concepts of the Fall and of paradox to relate the seemingly contradictory elements of existence as he perceived it. I demonstrate that this fundamental structure of natural theology underlies his work across the many genres he worked in. I also note that natural theology was often the pathway but not the final destination of his apologetics (further discussion of this point in chapter five).

3: The Scope of Chesterton's Natural Theology

I consider Chesterton's natural theology in relation to the concept of worldview and his use of the method of the hypothesis, and with regard to the possible influence of Newman. I discuss the most important areas in which he employed natural theology, in the course of his work as an apologist, and assess the interaction between his natural theology and the issues and areas which related to his apologetics.

I begin with his theology of humour and play, then discuss his social theology, with its emphasis on the family, and its balancing of communal with individual forms of knowledge. I consider the way his social theology shaped his approach to politics, and his theologically based advocacy of both democracy and tradition. I then discuss his theological approach to history, arguing that his historical work is an extension of his theological anthropology, more than historical study in itself. I go on to discuss his theology of the Arts. I argue that key features of his approach to art and literature were expressions of his natural theology.

I next discuss his theological epistemology, considering it in relation to Newman's, with reference to the roles of imagination, reason, mystery, experience, communal knowledge, and emotional knowledge. After this, I discuss his narrative theology, and in particular his idiosyncratic use of the concept of 'romance'. I conclude the chapter by

discussing the relationship between theology and epistemology in Chesterton's work, with reference to Newman.

4: Strategy, Natural Theology, and the Apologist

In this chapter I discuss Chesterton's natural theology in relation to his apologetics strategies and his use of language. I begin by defining the boundaries of the working understanding of apologetics I am using in this thesis, with reference to the work of Avery Dulles, John Milbank, and Oliver O'Donovan. Next, I discuss Chesterton's strategies as an apologist in relation to his natural theology. First, I consider his positioning of himself as an apologist, the contexts in which he did apologetics, and the associations and alliances he made as part of his apologetics strategies. Then I discuss the influence of his natural theology on three important conceptual models of apologetics he used, and three characteristic forms his apologetics took. I also discuss the relationship between his natural theology and: his use of language, including aspects of his style; his modes of argument; his use of humour in apologetics. I also consider certain similarities between Chesterton's approach and Newman's.

I then suggest that this set of strategies, taken together, indicates a distinctive overall aim for his apologetics as a whole. I argue, with reference to the considerable previous discussion of defamiliarization in relation to Chesterton's work, that his overall aim in apologetics centred on revolutionizing the way his readers saw the world, through processes of defamiliarization of the secular and normalisation of the spiritual. I conclude the chapter by reviewing Chesterton's strategies and noting the close relationship between words and ideas, style and thought, in his work.

5: The Natural Theologian and the Incarnation

I begin this chapter with detailed analysis of *The Everlasting Man*. I argue that Chesterton's reliance on natural theology conditioned the structure of *The Everlasting Man* so that, there and elsewhere, he could only approach the Incarnation from certain limited perspectives, and that he compensated for the limitations his natural theology imposed on his discussions of the Incarnation through imaginative use of narrative theology.

I then consider other places where he engaged with Incarnational theology in his work, arguing that his reliance on natural theology shaped and conditioned his approach to the Incarnation; in this chapter I unpack my contention that, in Chesterton's case, natural theology is the road, but not always the destination of his apologetics, and that where his apologetics led to the Incarnation, the forms of his encounters with Incarnational theology were, to a large extent, determined by his use of natural theology. I discuss this in relation to his role as an apologist, endeavouring to demonstrate that he used natural theology to approach the Incarnation by routes accessible to the non-religious reader, before showing how natural theology breaks down when it encounters the Incarnation. I consider once more the possible influence of Newman.

6: Conclusion

In the conclusion I begin by reviewing my research question in relation to the working understanding of natural theology presented in chapter one. I suggest that the thesis has demonstrated that Chesterton did create a substantial, coherent body of thought, which has natural theology at its heart. I argue, further, that the thesis has advanced understanding of the relationship between natural theology and Chesterton's work in three main areas: his use of natural theology as a medium of communication; how his use of natural theology enabled him to vary the emphasis of his apologetics from the overtly Christian to the more

broadly theistic; and his demonstration of the capacity of natural theology to mediate Christian ideas in very varied literary and rhetorical forms across broad areas of cultural engagement. Hence the thesis provides a case study of natural theology and its use in apologetics.

I next discuss the possible influence of Newman on Chesterton, in relation to the concept of worldview, and suggest that Chesterton's work can be seen as, to a degree, a precursor of worldview apologetics, before that terminology had been invented. I assess Chesterton's contributions to apologetics, including his innovations in: the use of natural theology, the role and limitations of reason, the role of imagination, of communal and emotional knowledge, of paradox, of sacramental mysticism and of mystery, of narrative and worldview, of cultural engagement, and of tradition. In addition, I consider the contexts into which he introduced a Christian apologetic; his unusual models and forms of apologetics; his dextrous positioning of himself as neutral enquirer and sympathetic friend while also defender of the faith; the many indirect forms of apologetics he was able to incorporate into his work across a number of different genres; and his ingenuity in furthering the objectives of his apologetics by making associations and alliances.

I end by considering his legacy and suggest that neglected aspects of it could have profoundly valuable implications for certain modern discussions. In particular, I argue that his use of natural theology and narrative, and his approach to apologetics, might provide new means of communication which could open up new avenues of argument which might help in reducing the polarization and incomprehension which mar much debate concerning religions and ideologies at present, and so renewed attention to Chesterton's use of natural theology in apologetics might prove to be of significant value. I suggest further paths for the study of his work and its potential as a resource for apologetics and other branches of theology today.

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Titles of Chesterton's works abbreviated to acronyms

<i>A&CWCD</i>	<i>Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens</i>
<i>ATC</i>	<i>All Things Considered</i>
<i>CCC</i>	<i>The Catholic Church and Conversion</i>
<i>CFB</i>	<i>The Complete Father Brown Stories</i>
<i>CW</i>	<i>Collected Works</i>
<i>EM</i>	<i>The Everlasting Man</i>
<i>FVF</i>	<i>Fancies versus Fads</i>
<i>MWWO</i>	<i>The Man who was Orthodox</i>
<i>SHOE</i>	<i>A Short History of England</i>
<i>TT</i>	<i>The Thing</i>
<i>W&S</i>	<i>The Well and the Shallows</i>
<i>WWWTW</i>	<i>What's Wrong with the World</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>G.K. Chesterton at the Daily News</i>

Chapter I: Chesterton and Natural Theology

Introduction

This thesis is a work of analysis. Its aim is to examine, analyse, and attempt to clarify an issue which lies at the heart of the work of G.K. Chesterton. This issue concerns the substance and coherence of the thinking behind Chesterton's work: does his writing embody a genuinely significant body of thought? This question has been, and remains, much debated. I will endeavour to bring new light to the debate by relating the category of natural theology to the apologetics which is so central to Chesterton's work.

My method will be: first, to answer certain major objections to this thesis; secondly, to try to outline the structure and scope of his natural theology; next, to relate that natural theology to his apologetics; then, to address what may seem a substantial obstacle for my argument, the relationship between Chesterton's natural theology and his treatment of the Incarnation. Finally, I will draw some tentative conclusions.

This project attempts to make a strong case for the underlying coherence of Chesterton's thinking, and, further, to claim a significance beyond its contribution to our understanding of Chesterton himself. Its claim is that natural theology sheds light on

Chesterton's oeuvre in a way that opens up potentially fruitful avenues of enquiry with regard to: natural theology and cultural engagement, also the relationship between natural theology and other academic disciplines; the relationship between theology and literature; the influence of Newman, especially with regard to the development of British apologetics and of the concept of 'worldview apologetics'; and apologetics more generally, in relation, in particular, to imagination, narrative, emotion, communal knowledge, mysticism, sacramental imagination, and the role of association and alliance. I will now endeavour to provide evidence to substantiate this claim.¹

Chesterton: unresolved questions

G.K. Chesterton wrote in many different genres, as a poet, novelist, essayist, biographer, historian, dramatist, literary critic, social critic, political theorist, Christian apologist, and debater. When he died T.S. Eliot wrote that for 'the better part of a generation', Chesterton had presented '*the* ideas for his time that were fundamentally Christian and Catholic,' and had done 'more ... than any man of his time ... to maintain the existence of the important minority in the modern world', leaving behind 'a permanent claim upon our loyalty'.²

Since then, Chesterton's reputation and popularity have declined so much that, in Michael Hurley's words, 'No other figure so loved and influential in the twentieth century is now so little read or discussed in the twenty-first.'³ Such an eclipse, in itself, raises

¹ Material from this thesis has appeared in these articles: David Pickering, 'Chesterton, Natural Theology & Apologetics,' *The Chesterton Review* XXXIV, no. 3/4 (2018): 495-508. David Pickering, 'Chesterton, Apologetics, and the Art of Positioning,' *Journal of Inklings Studies* X, no. 1 (2020): 37-51. David Pickering, 'Natural Theology as a medium of communication: how the legacy of G.K. Chesterton can help philosophers and theologians to preserve the public square from secularization,' *The Heythrop Journal* LXI, no. 4 (2020): 660-70.

² T.S. Eliot, signed obituary article in *The Tablet*, 20th June 1936, in *G.K. Chesterton: the Critical Judgments: Part I: 1900-1937*, ed. D. J. Conlon (Antwerp: Universitaire Faculteiten Sint-Ignatius, 1976), 531-32. Eliot's italics.

³ Michael D. Hurley, *G.K. Chesterton* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2012), 1-2.

questions. Is this neglect merited, or an accident caused by the shifting tides of intellectual fashion? Chesterton remains widely quoted, if little read. His work has attracted both distinguished admirers and distinguished foes (see below); the participation of such eminent figures in the debates about his legacy suggests that his work deserves, at the least, further investigation.

It seems that Chesterton's work has been very hard to assess, for a number of reasons, not least among them the sheer vastness of his output, much of it written at high speed, and of very mixed quality. Another aspect of his work which has hampered balanced judgements is that he was determinedly populist, writing about major issues at a popular level. His ideas emerged in scattered and fragmentary ways, during the course of discussions and debates now long forgotten. It is hard even to categorise such multifarious writing by academic standards, let alone evaluate its significance.

Moreover, he wrote in a register that resists academic assessment: instead of sustained, systematic logical arguments, he used wit and humour, emotional appeal (often achieved through rhetorical writing), epigrams and paradox and subversive bursts of logic inserted into narratives. Those narratives themselves often mixed appeal to the imagination and the emotions with logical argument in unusual ways, and such a mixture can be very hard to analyse and to judge. How is such writing to be measured? Is there substance to his arguments, clothed as they are in these informal modes of discourse?

In spite of these questions, a number of distinguished Christian thinkers and writers have expressed strong admiration for his work, including C.S. Lewis,⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien,⁵

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by joy* (London: Collins, 2012), 220-22, 260.

⁵ Thomas M. Egan, 'Chesterton and Tolkien: the Road to Middle-Earth,' *VII: an Anglo-American literary review* IV (1983): 45-53. See also Alison Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: the fantasy of the real* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), x-xv.

Evelyn Waugh,⁶ Charles Williams,⁷ Ronald Knox,⁸ Herbert Marshall McLuhan,⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers,¹⁰ W.H. Auden,¹¹ Graham Greene,¹² and (with significant reservations) T.S. Eliot.¹³ Chesterton has also influenced a range of not necessarily religious writers and thinkers in different disciplines, including Anthony Burgess¹⁴ and Jorge Luis Borges.¹⁵ George Bernard Shaw described him as ‘a great force,’¹⁶ and as ‘a man of colossal genius’.¹⁷ Ronald Knox spoke of his ‘intellectual greatness’.¹⁸ The Thomist scholar Étienne Gilson wrote that ‘Nothing short of genius’ could account for the success of his *St. Thomas Aquinas*.¹⁹ The philosopher Ernst Bloch called him ‘one of the most intelligent men that ever lived.’²⁰ Such an array of distinguished supporters, ranging from philosophers to creative writers, suggests that there must be more to him than his critics

⁶ Evelyn Waugh, ‘Chesterton’, *The National Review* (New York), April 22, 1961, 251, quoted in Ian Boyd, ‘Philosophy in Fiction,’ in *G.K. Chesterton: A Centenary Appraisal*, ed. John Sullivan (London: Elek, 1974), 40-57.

⁷ Charles Williams, ‘Chesterton’s Poetry,’ in *Critical Judgments*, 454-62.

⁸ Ronald Knox, ‘G.K. Chesterton: The Man and his Work,’ in *G.K. Chesterton: a Half Century of Views*, ed. D. J. Conlon (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 1987), 46-50.

⁹ Herbert Marshall McLuhan, ‘G.K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic,’ in *Half Century of Views*, 1-10. See also McLuhan’s introduction to Hugh Kenner, *Paradox in Chesterton* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948), xi-xxii.

¹⁰ Dorothy Sayers, ‘Chesterton’s *The Surprise*,’ in *Half Century of Views*, 123-26.

¹¹ G.K. Chesterton, *G.K. Chesterton: a selection from his non-fictional prose*, ed. W. H. Auden (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), 11-18. See also W.H. Auden, ‘The Gift of Wonder,’ in *Half Century of Views*, 318-24.

¹² Graham Greene, ‘G.K. Chesterton,’ in *Half Century of Views*, 59-60.

¹³ T.S. Eliot, signed obituary article in *The Tablet*, 20 June 1936, in *Critical Judgments*, 531-32.

¹⁴ Anthony Burgess, ‘The Level of Eternity,’ in *Half Century of Views*, 251-54.

¹⁵ For more regarding Borges and other science fiction writers who have acknowledged Chesterton’s influence, see Stephen R.L. Clark, *G.K. Chesterton: thinking backward, looking forward* (Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), 7.

¹⁶ George Bernard Shaw, ‘The Chesterbelloc: A Lampoon,’ in *Critical Judgments*, 135-43.

¹⁷ George Bernard Shaw, reported by T.E. Lawrence, quoted in G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), XI, 30.

¹⁸ For Ronald Knox’s view of what he called Chesterton’s ‘intellectual greatness’, see Ronald Knox, ‘G.K. Chesterton: The Man and his Work,’ in *Half Century of Views*, 46-50.

¹⁹ Étienne Gilson, O.S.B., in *Critical Judgments*, 510.

²⁰ Quoted in Norbert Waszek, ‘Being Somebody Else: Smith’s “Sympathy” and Chesterton’s “Secret”,’ *VII: an Anglo-American literary review* VII (1986): 21-40 (27, endnote 50).

would concede, and that the continuing controversy created by Chesterton is worth investigating.

Yet, set against this plentiful appreciation, a torrent of critical opinion must also be taken into account, going back to the first reception of his earliest work.²¹ Chesterton's writing has never received much attention in academic circles²² and, since his death, his reputation has languished more widely.²³ As Michael Shallcross has noted, Chesterton's reputation has suffered from a 'cycle of obloquy' in which the 'isolated voices' of his admirers have been largely drowned out by 'a wider academic consensus ... that has learned to shun Chesterton ... as an aesthetically negligible and socially reactionary anomaly' with 'little of relevance to contribute to the philosophically pluralistic age of postmodernism.'²⁴ His opponents have often simply dismissed him as insignificant. The line of attack which Wilfrid Ward took note of in a review of *Orthodoxy* has been repeated many times down the years: 'The critics ... speak of his thought as "superficial" ... They regard him as primarily a purveyor of acrobatic feats of the intellect – exciting and enjoyable ... but not to be taken seriously.'²⁵

Some critics have been much harsher than that, either about Chesterton's ideas or his style, or both. One reviewer described Chesterton's *What's Wrong with the World* as full of 'discussions that are ... dreary and meaningless' and 'page after page of the thickest

²¹ See *Critical Judgments*, 17-21.

²² See *Centenary Appraisal*, ix-xi, 179-81. See also John Coates, *G.K. Chesterton as Controversialist, Essayist, Novelist, and Critic* (Lewiston, N.Y.; Lampeter: E. Mellen Press, 2002), 179.

²³ David Lodge wrote, in 1971, that Chesterton had 'suffered a steep decline in popularity over the last three decades.' David Lodge, 'The Chesterbelloc and the Jews,' in *The Novelist at the Crossroads: and other essays on fiction and criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 145-58 (145).

²⁴ Michael Ronald Shallcross, *The Worshipper's Half-Holiday: G.K. Chesterton and Parody* (Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/10662/>, 2014), 18.

²⁵ Wilfrid Ward, 'Mr Chesterton among the Prophets,' in Wilfrid Ward, *Men and Matters* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914), 105-44 (105).

dotted nonsense it was ever our misfortune to read.’²⁶ Dean Inge (William Ralph Inge, Anglican apologist and Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral), described Chesterton as ‘that obese mountebank who crucifies truth head downwards.’²⁷ All writers receive varied reactions, but very few drive their critics to such opposite poles. This provokes several questions. Why is there still such extreme controversy over his work and its significance? How seriously should the world of scholarship take him? How significant was his achievement, beyond the surface impression of scattershot brilliance?

There are a number of considerations to take into account when reflecting on this issue. One is the vexed question of Chesterton’s style: those who have attacked his writing have often concentrated on its style rather than its content. For instance, a review of his second essay collection, *Twelve Types* (1902), complained of its ‘sledge-hammer judgements’ and his ‘hungry devil of rhetoric’.²⁸ Some criticism has been coloured by ideological disagreement, such as George Orwell’s accusation that Chesterton ‘chose to suppress his sensibilities and his intellectual honesty in the cause of Roman Catholic propaganda.’²⁹ In other cases, Chesterton has been criticised for shallowness by those who could discern no coherence or structure in his thought,³⁰ yet that might denote either a fault in him or a lack of discernment in his critics. Was he a deeper thinker than he is often given credit for? How did he come to influence a number of serious writers if he is the intellectual lightweight his critics depict? Is there an underlying source of unity in his vast, uneven body of work?

²⁶ Unsigned review, *The Evening Standard*, 28 June 1910, in *Critical Judgments*, 243.

²⁷ Quoted in Christopher Hollis, *The Mind of Chesterton* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1970), 78.

²⁸ Unsigned review, ‘Assurance doubly sure,’ *The Academy and Literature*, 1 November 1902, in *Critical Judgments*, 46-47.

²⁹ George Orwell, ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians,’ in *Half Century of Views*, 102-03.

³⁰ See, for example, Bernard Levin, ‘Pantomime Horse,’ in *Half Century of Views*, 177-80.

It should perhaps also be mentioned that a different kind of controversy has overshadowed aspects of Chesterton's life and career and the cloud this has cast may have reduced the attention paid to his writing. He has, at various times, been accused of racism, sexism and anti-Semitism, and it is, sadly, certainly true that he imbibed some of the racist,³¹ sexist,³² and antisemitic³³ attitudes of his time. As Adam Schwartz has written, his 'prejudice was rooted in personal, political, and social, not religious or racial, beliefs.'³⁴ These prejudices were the norms of late Victorian England, imbibed from early childhood; in spite of those deeply entrenched inherited prejudices, his thinking did over time develop enough for him to speak out for the Jews of Germany against the Nazis, so that Rabbi Stephen Wise, one of the founders of the World Jewish Congress, could write in tribute to him as 'one of the first to speak out' against 'Hitlerism'.³⁵

Nevertheless, some of Chesterton's attitudes leave deeply troubling questions. His defenders have protested that his opinions have been caricatured and the true picture is more nuanced, his views more sympathetic than his critics have claimed.³⁶ It is true that even the greatest thinkers have often been unable to escape prejudices that were prevalent in their own times; to respond by turning our backs on all of their ideas would be to renounce the thought of the past almost entirely. Careful sifting, however, is clearly required, in the case of Chesterton or any other thinker. Other than that imperative, such a

³¹ See, for example, G.K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XV, 230, 325.

³² See, for example, G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (London; New York: Cassell, 1910), 111-80.

³³ See, for example, *The End of the Armistice*, in Chesterton, *CW*, V, 579-82. See also Lodge, 'The Chesterbelloc and the Jews,' 145-58.

³⁴ Adam Schwartz, 'Review of Ann Farmer, *Chesterton and the Jews: Friend, Critic, Defender*, (Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2015),' *VII: an Anglo-American literary review* XXXIV (online supplement) (2017): 1.

³⁵ Quoted in Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1944), 228.

³⁶ Ann Farmer, *Chesterton and the Jews: friend, critic, defender* (Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2015), 474-84. See also D. J. Conlon, *G.K. Chesterton: A Reappraisal* (York: Methuen & Co, 2015), 349-407.

controversy goes beyond the scope of a thesis such as this, which must remain within its own terms of reference.

Even within that frame of reference, the cross-currents of admiration and denigration inspired by Chesterton leave the reader at a crossroads, besieged by questions. For many, he remains known only as the source of brilliant, witty quotes, but not as a thinker who developed important ideas or even displayed any underlying coherence in his writing. I will analyse his work to attempt to resolve the central question which lies beneath many of the debates raised by Chesterton's writing: amid his many ideas and insights, did he create a substantial, coherent body of thought?

A possible way forward?

There seems to be no consensus about what holds Chesterton's approach together. Is there an analysis of Chesterton which can bring a unified critical approach to the various puzzling aspects of his sprawling corpus of work? Can a perspective be found which clarifies our understanding of the many seemingly disjointed features of his writing? My suggestion is that answers to those questions may perhaps be discerned through careful investigation of his apologetics. Apologetics is widely agreed to be a central part of his oeuvre, and careful analysis of this aspect of his work could yield significant insights into the underlying structures of his thought.

Numerous critics have noted the importance of apologetics in Chesterton's writing. A.L. Maycock points out that during Chesterton's career, 'A great many people' complained about 'his habit of ... dragging religion into everything he wrote,'³⁷ and they were not wrong to do so, because there was an element of Christian apologetics running

³⁷ G.K. Chesterton, *The Man who was Orthodox*, ed. A. L. Maycock (London: D. Dobson, 1963), 13-80 (41).

through all his work, even when writing in seemingly non-religious genres. Apologetics is the most substantial unifying theme which relates the seemingly disparate content of Chesterton's creative output.

Indeed, John Sullivan has suggested that apologetics is 'a consistent theme ... running like a golden thread throughout his work.'³⁸ In my view, Sullivan is essentially correct, and apologetics is present in one way or another in almost all that Chesterton wrote. Sometimes it is what might be called 'direct apologetics,' in works arguing directly for Christianity, such as *Orthodoxy*.³⁹ At other times it is what might be called 'indirect apologetics', which, I will argue, runs through almost all his other work, from detective stories to biographies.

Yet, in spite of the consensus about the importance of apologetics in Chesterton's work, no analysis yet, so far as I am aware, has been able to explain the original and personal form of Chesterton's apologetics. This includes many distinctive features, such as: his dramatic and positive approach; his unusual use of language; his ability to present Christian apologetics in very varied contexts and literary genres, from daily newspapers to poems, biographies, novels, social, political, and historical writing, and detective stories; the curious manner in which he managed to conduct so many controversies without being a conventional controversialist; the surprising way he managed to defend Christianity so much while defending Christian doctrine so little, putting himself forward as a defender of the Christian faith while insisting that he avoided discussing Christian theology.

I will suggest that there are clues in the idiosyncratic nature of his apologetics which, when investigated, may uncover a key part of his thought, and thus reveal a surprising

³⁸ John Sullivan, 'The Everlasting Man: G.K. Chesterton's answer to H.G. Wells,' *VII: an Anglo-American literary review*, II (1981): 57-65 (59)

³⁹ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 209-366.

unity across all the genres of his vast output. In my view, this important aspect of his thought has remained largely undiscussed because it lies beneath the surface of his work, and he never overtly made it a part of his own discussions, so that it has remained almost unexplored, and its full significance has eluded his interpreters.

I will argue that the distinctiveness of Chesterton's apologetics stems from this hidden, sub-surface feature of his thought, which is an implicit and idiosyncratic natural theology. I will be developing a case for the claim that a natural theology he discovered for himself explains the shape of his apologetics, because he built his work in apologetics around it. I will argue that this feature of his thinking is, in fact, the internal guiding force of the apologetics which runs throughout his oeuvre.

It is my contention that careful analysis of Chesterton's apologetics reveals this implicit natural theology and its relationship with the explicit apologetics at the heart of his work. If I may use an image to illustrate this theory, I am suggesting that Chesterton's apologetics is based on his natural theology rather as a building is based on its foundations, and, as the shape of the building above the surface is dictated by the shape of the foundations below the surface, so the idiosyncratic shape of Chesterton's apologetics is dictated by the shape of his very personal natural theology.

By putting forward this argument, I will seek to answer the research question with which I began: did he create a substantial, coherent body of thought? Up till now, although apologetics has been identified as being at the heart of Chesterton's writing, it has not been possible to analyse that apologetics in a way that reveals its substance and coherence. Why not? In my view, because such an analysis would require an understanding of Chesterton's natural theology. In analysing that natural theology, I will also be providing an analysis of his apologetics, through which that natural theology is expressed; and the relationship between the two, which is crucial. I will also argue that Chesterton's natural theology

shaped both his approach to the Incarnation and his use of language, so that an understanding of the substance and coherence of his natural theology brings a much clearer understanding, at several levels, of his work as a whole.

The suggestion that natural theology is at the heart of Chesterton's work may well provoke scepticism. In particular, it may bring three major questions to the reader's mind.

First, can Chesterton's work really be understood in terms of natural theology? If the definition of natural theology is largely restricted to rational arguments concerning the relationship between science and religion, or for the existence of God, then it would seem not. Moreover, how far can a journalist and writer of detective stories be described as a theologian?

Secondly, if he was indeed a practitioner of natural theology, why did he never describe himself as such? Surely we should base our understanding of his work on his own self-description?

Thirdly, if natural theology is central to his work, why has it been so neglected in over a century of Chesterton criticism? Why has Chesterton scholarship not investigated natural theology, if it is so important?

In this chapter, I will answer each of these objections in turn.

Did Chesterton create a natural theology?

Before attempting to answer this crucial question, there is a prior question: can Chesterton, who worked all his life as a journalist, be seen as any sort of theologian, let alone a natural theologian? If he cannot be categorized in theological terms at all, he is disqualified from being a natural theologian. Fortunately, two eminent theologians have recently provided a great deal of evidence to suggest that it is right to understand Chesterton in theological

terms. In 2008, Alison Milbank wrote *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real*,⁴⁰ and the following year, Aidan Nichols wrote *G.K. Chesterton, Theologian*.

Nichols surveys Chesterton's work as a whole and argues powerfully that he should be taken seriously as a theologian.⁴¹ During the course of his detailed discussions of the major theological themes in Chesterton's thinking, Nichols gathers abundant material to illustrate the profoundly theological nature of Chesterton's work. I will discuss the limitations of Nichols' approach below, when answering possible questions about the neglect of natural theology in Chesterton scholarship, but it would be invidious not to recognise that, as an evidence-gathering exercise in support of the claim that Chesterton is a theologian of significance, Nichols' book is extremely successful.

Milbank writes on Chesterton and Tolkien together, arguing that their 'theurgic theology is practical in taking the reader into an intuition of being through the enchanted experience of art.' Her focus is thus on what might be called their intertwining of the literary and the theological, which she refers to as 'a theology of art as practice.' Her contention is that 'Chesterton's and Tolkien's ideas ... are literary constructs in which ... the theology emerges within and through the stylistic modes and tropes that they employ to tell their stories.'⁴² This approach brings attention to the close relationship between words and ideas in Chesterton's work: his thinking, including his theological thinking, cannot be understood apart from his use of language. His theology is not just stated but also embodied in the style and structure of his work.

⁴⁰ Milbank, *Chesterton*, especially 8-95, 121-22, 166-69.

⁴¹ Aidan Nichols, *G.K. Chesterton, Theologian* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2009), 55-200.

⁴² Milbank, *Chesterton*, 166, 25.

Other writers who have analysed Chesterton in theological perspective include: Bernard Lonergan,⁴³ Garry Wills,⁴⁴ Christopher Hollis,⁴⁵ Ian Boyd,⁴⁶ Adam Schwartz,⁴⁷ Stratford Caldecott,⁴⁸ David Fagerberg,⁴⁹ Mark Knight,⁵⁰ Stephen Clark,⁵¹ John Coates,⁵² and Ralph C. Wood.⁵³ Etienne Gilson affirmed that he valued Chesterton ‘first of all, as a theologian.’⁵⁴ All these writers, as well as Milbank and Nichols, demonstrate that Chesterton has a strong claim to be taken seriously as a theologian. In spite of their important work, however, the theological nature of Chesterton’s work has not always been recognised, but between them they have made an extremely strong case.

If it be granted that it is correct to see Chesterton’s oeuvre in theological terms, in spite of its informal, creative style, then the question ‘Should he be seen in theological

⁴³ Bernard Lonergan, ‘Chesterton the Theologian,’ *The Chesterton Review* XXX, no. 1/2 (2004): 51-53. Originally published in 1943, in *The Canadian Register*.

⁴⁴ Garry Wills, *Chesterton, man and mask* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961). See especially 166-72, 180-210 (206).

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Hollis, *Mind of Chesterton*, 66-77, 215-18, 237-39, 270-71.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Ian Boyd, ‘A Theological Reading of *The Man Who Was Thursday*,’ *The Chesterton Review* XXXIV, no. 3/4 (2008).

⁴⁷ Adam Schwartz, ‘Theologies of History in G. K. Chesterton's "The Everlasting Man" and in David Jones's "The Anathemata",’ *The Chesterton Review* XXIII, no. 1/2 (1974): 65-83.

⁴⁸ Stratford Caldecott, ‘Was Chesterton a Theologian?’, *The Chesterton Review* XXIV, no. 4 (1998): 465-81.

⁴⁹ See David W. Fagerberg, *The size of Chesterton's Catholicism* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 63-180.

⁵⁰ See Mark Knight, *Chesterton and Evil* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 1-28, 72-77, 125-51 in particular.

⁵¹ Clark considers Chesterton more in terms of philosophy than theology, although at certain points his discussion takes a theological turn. For instance, Clark, *Chesterton*, 73-75, 174-86.

⁵² In the course of a review of Aidan Nichols’ *G.K. Chesterton, Theologian*, Coates writes of Chesterton’s ‘work as a theologian’ and suggests that he can be understood ‘as a theologian working in the essay form,’ before stating that Nichols has ‘convincingly affirmed’ Chesterton’s ‘status as a theologian.’ John Coates, ‘Chesterton and Theology,’ *The Chesterton Review* XXXVII, no. 1/2 (2011): 59-78 (70, 68, 76).

⁵³ See Ralph C. Wood, ‘The Argument from Joy: The Current State of Scholarship on G.K. Chesterton as Thinker and Theologian,’ *VII: an Anglo-American literary review* XXVII (2010): 85-92. Wood notes that Chesterton’s theology ‘is largely implied rather than overtly stated.’ See also Ralph C. Wood, *Chesterton: the Nightmare Goodness of God* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2011), 1-38, 187-221.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Ian Boyd, ‘Chesterton and the Bible,’ *The Chesterton Review* XI, no. 1 (1985): 21-33 (31). Boyd is quoting an unpublished letter, written in 1966, from Gilson to a priest in England, in which Gilson writes, of Chesterton: ‘Here in Toronto we value him, first of all, as a theologian.’

terms?’ is replaced by the question ‘What kind of theology informs Chesterton’s work?’ In particular, what relationship does his work have with natural theology? Does natural theology provide the framework within which his writing can best be understood? Before these questions can be answered, it is necessary to try to find a working understanding of the notoriously contested term ‘natural theology.’

Conceptions of natural theology

It must be noted that natural theology is a very broad and complex field and has been subject to many different attempts at definition. The most that can be done in the context of a thesis such as this is to establish a working understanding, for the purposes of this study, one that lies within the boundaries of the range of definitions to be found in academic discourse. The term ‘working understanding’ is more appropriate than ‘definition’ in this context because it recognises that defining natural theology is an ongoing debate with no end in sight and settles for the humbler enterprise of finding sufficient definition for a thesis such as this.

I should add that, as I am studying a writer in the Christian tradition, I will be discussing natural theology only in relation to that tradition and constructing a working understanding for a natural theology that is seen in the light of, and defined in the terms of, the Christian religion. The relationship between natural theology and other religions is beyond the scope of this thesis.

One of the least controversial starting points for a definition of natural theology might be to refer to the famous and influential Gifford Lectures, established by the will of Adam Lord Gifford (1820-87) for “Promoting, Advancing, Teaching, and Diffusing the

study of Natural Theology,” in the widest sense of that term.’⁵⁵ One of the clauses in his will, by which the lectures were established, was that the lecturers were to ‘treat their subject ... without reference to or reliance upon any supposed special exceptional or so-called miraculous revelation.’⁵⁶

Since 1888, many of the most distinguished thinkers in this area have spoken in the Gifford lectures, accepting that stipulation. Therefore, an avoidance of any reliance on any kind of miraculous or divine revelation may be taken as a widely agreed beginning for a definition of natural theology. Of the many possible examples showing how widespread this agreement is, one might cite Keith Ward’s article ‘Natural Theology’ in *The Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, where Ward simply states: ‘Natural theology is the part of theology that does not depend upon revelation.’⁵⁷ This gives what might be called the negative aspect of a definition of natural theology, stating what must be excluded from it without specifying what may be included. The positive aspect of a such definition, however, is vastly more debatable and has been very much debated.

There have been many attempts to flesh out a definition of natural theology and these definitions vary considerably in the scope they accord to it, some being rather limited, others much more expansive. Russell Re Manning, in his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, takes a positive approach to this variation in definition. He goes so far as to say that one of the ‘primary aims’ of the Handbook is to ‘highlight the rich diversity of approaches to, and definitions of, natural theology,’ and

⁵⁵ See <<https://www.giffordlectures.org/lord-gifford/will>> [accessed 21 May 2018].

⁵⁶ See <<https://www.giffordlectures.org/lord-gifford/will>> [accessed 21 May 2018].

⁵⁷ Keith Ward, ‘Natural Theology,’ in *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, ed. J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen (New York; London: Macmillan Reference, 2003), 601-05 (601).

declares that ‘throughout this Handbook individual contributors give their own definitions of natural theology and there has been no editorial attempt to impose consistency.’⁵⁸

This suggests that there is a reasonable degree of freedom available to a project such as this in attempting to attain a working understanding of natural theology. At the same time, considerable caution is called for with a subject so amorphous and ambiguous. Before attempting to construct even a limited working understanding, it may help to set up certain reference points by first considering natural theology in historical perspective, then referring to the Catholic tradition within which Chesterton worked, and finally consulting the work of leading contemporary theologians.

With regard to historical perspective, David Fergusson gives a helpful survey in his study of types of natural theology. He points out that a wide range of Christian thinkers, among them Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, and Emil Brunner, have embraced very different understandings of natural theology and its scope, and these understandings have been influenced by the contexts in which they were shaped.⁵⁹ His survey leads him to suggest that, historically, ‘the term “natural theology” has been stretched to comprehend a wide variety of theological tasks that cannot be reduced merely to a reformulation of the traditional philosophical arguments for God’s existence.’⁶⁰ This indicates that more limited definitions of natural theology do not reflect the historical range of understandings he outlines.

Fergusson’s historical approach receives support from Clement Webb and Richard Swinburne. Webb examines the work of seven natural theologians, from Plato, via five

⁵⁸ *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, ed. Russell Re Manning, John Hedley Brooke, and Fraser N. Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

⁵⁹ David Fergusson, ‘Types of Natural Theology,’ in *The Evolution of Rationality: Interdisciplinary Essays in Honor of J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen*, ed. J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen and F. LeRon Shults (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006), 380-93 (380-89).

⁶⁰ Fergusson, ‘Types of Natural Theology,’ 380-393 (389).

medieval theologians, to Lord Herbert of Cherbury. In so doing, he demonstrates powerfully the variation to be found in natural theology.⁶¹ Richard Swinburne gives a survey from biblical times to the present, illustrating some of the varied kinds of natural theology that have been seen over the last 2,000 years. He asserts: ‘almost all Christian theologians of the first 1750 years of Christianity (as well as several of the biblical authors) have taught that there are cogent arguments of natural theology available for those who need them. ...’⁶² Nor does he see natural theology’s remit as exhausted, declaring that ‘most people today need both bare natural theology (to show that there is a God) and ramified natural theology (to establish detailed doctrinal claims),’ and ‘Christian tradition has generally claimed that cogent arguments of natural theology (of both kinds) are available.’⁶³ Like Webb, Swinburne demonstrates that natural theology provides copious and varied resources for theologians.

These historical perspectives suggest that a description or definition of natural theology needs to have considerable breadth. This is significant with regard to Chesterton’s work: he did not major on ‘reformulation of the traditional philosophical arguments for God’s existence’ but instead engaged on ‘a wide variety of theological tasks’; Fergusson and Swinburne’s historical studies indicate support for a broad understanding of natural theology which can accommodate a writer such as Chesterton. It should perhaps also be noted here that, while much natural theology in recent times has focused on the area of science and religion, its scope is much more extensive, as these historical studies indicate, and, in recent decades, there may have been a relative neglect of the fact that natural theology’s investigation of human nature can include the investigation

⁶¹ Clement Charles Julian Webb, *Studies in the history of natural theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915), 1-84 especially.

⁶² Richard Swinburne, ‘Natural Theology, Its “Dwindling Probabilities” and “Lack of Rapport,”’ *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* XXI (2004): 533-46 (536).

⁶³ Swinburne, ‘Natural Theology,’ 533-46 (533).

of any of the products of human nature, including all of human culture, history, and experience.

As for the Roman Catholic Church,⁶⁴ natural theology has deep and ancient roots in Catholic tradition, yet Catholic approaches to natural theology have varied significantly in different eras. There is a considerable contrast between the treatment of natural theology at the First Vatican Council (1869-70) and that in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (promulgated in 1992). The First Vatican Council taught: ‘from the things that were created, God can be known with certainty through the natural light of human reason,’⁶⁵ reflecting, or at least coinciding with, the Enlightenment stress on reason.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, on the other hand, refers to natural theology in much broader terms: ‘openness to truth and beauty’, the ‘sense of moral goodness’, ‘freedom’, ‘the voice of ... conscience’, and ‘longings for the infinite and for happiness’, together with ‘signs’ of the ‘spiritual soul’.⁶⁶ The attitude taken at the time of the First Vatican Council seems to have been somewhat restrictive, while the *Catechism* shows that a Catholic approach can be more expansive.

With regard to contemporary definitions or descriptions of natural theology in academic circles, I will focus on those put forward by three noted theologians: James Barr, Keith Ward, and Alister McGrath. Barr’s is the most relatively limited definition, and is written with particular regard for his own speciality of biblical theology: ‘Traditionally “natural theology” has commonly meant something like this: that “by nature”, that is, just

⁶⁴ Because Chesterton was at one time part of the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England, then joined the Church of Rome, it might be confusing to use the term ‘Catholic’ in church contexts in this essay, therefore I will use terms ‘Anglo-Catholic’ and ‘Roman Catholic’ for clarity. The term ‘Catholic’ will be used, as Chesterton often used it, to distinguish the broadly Catholic from the Protestant in cultural and other contexts, including reference to ‘Catholic Christianity’ as opposed to ‘Protestant Christianity’.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Gerald O’Collins and Edward G. Farrugia, *A concise dictionary of theology*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 170-71.

⁶⁶ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 16 (Section One: Chapter One: Man’s Capacity for God (para. 33)).

by being human beings, men and women have a certain degree of knowledge of God and awareness of him, or at least a capacity for such an awareness; and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God made through Jesus Christ, through the Church, through the Bible.’⁶⁷ Any definition of natural theology is likely to include this ‘capacity’ for ‘awareness’ or ‘knowledge’ of God ‘by nature’; a number of definitions go rather further.

Keith Ward, for one, has a more encompassing approach, seeing natural theology as involving the assembly of ‘the best human knowledge in all the diverse areas of human activity,’ showing ‘how it can reasonably be construed, and even shaped into a more coherent form, by the insights of religion’ in ‘the attempt to show how science, history, morality, and the arts are so related that a total integrating vision of the place of humanity in the universe may be formulated.’ This is an enormously broad and constructive vision of natural theology. He highlights that creative aspect as he adds: ‘This will be more of an imaginative art than an inferential or deductive science. It will not be the intellectual foundation or prelude for faith, but will involve the construction of a general worldview within which faith can have an intelligible place.’ Ward’s vision is so inter-disciplinary that it somewhat stretches the usual boundaries of theology, although he anchors it with ‘reference to an encompassing reality that is transcendent in power and value.’⁶⁸

Alister McGrath shares more ground with Ward than with Barr. He presents a ‘natural theology project’ which involves ‘a re-imagining of reality in a manner that is consonant with the Christian faith’.⁶⁹ He sees this not as ‘a warrant or proof of the Christian faith, but ... its outcome,’ one which ‘involves recognizing an intellectual

⁶⁷ James Barr, *Biblical faith and natural theology: the Gifford lectures for 1991, delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 2.

⁶⁸ Ward, ‘Natural Theology,’ 601-05 (604-05).

⁶⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Re-imagining Nature: the promise of a Christian natural theology* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 176, 52.

resonance, congruence, or consilience between the Christian vision of reality and what is actually seen and experienced within nature’, giving us ‘an intellectual framework which allows us to make sense of what we experience and observe’.⁷⁰ McGrath is less ambitious than Ward when it comes to attempting a definition. He draws back from that challenge and suggests that attempts at defining natural theology should be seen in terms of ‘process’ rather than more conventional forms of theological definition, as natural theology ‘can broadly be understood as a process of reflection on the religious entailments of the natural world, rather than a specific set of doctrines.’⁷¹

The approaches of Ward and McGrath have much in common. Both take a very extensive view of natural theology. Both see a role for natural theology in terms of integrating different areas of human knowledge – Ward refers to natural theology as ‘an integrating activity.’⁷² Both see a major role for the imagination, alongside reason. Both seem to be in harmony with the idea that ‘natural theology is concerned with proffering insight rather than asserting proof’ (to quote John Polkinghorne).⁷³ Both may perhaps downplay too much the role of natural theology as a ‘foundation’, ‘prelude’, ‘warrant’, or ‘proof’ of faith, neglecting the part it can play as each of these. Both present a vision of natural theology that can incorporate the insights of Barr’s definition while going considerably beyond it. Both argue powerfully for a vision of natural theology that has great breadth and depth.

The expansive nature of Ward and McGrath’s descriptions of natural theology might be challenged by more sceptical theologians. Nevertheless, the broadly-based theological work to be found in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* provides

⁷⁰ McGrath, *Re-imagining Nature*, 176-79.

⁷¹ McGrath, *Re-imagining Nature*, 12-18.

⁷² Ward, ‘Natural Theology,’ 601-05 (604-05).

⁷³ John Polkinghorne, ‘The New Natural Theology,’ *Studies in World Christianity* I, no. 1 (1995): 41-50 (42).

support for their arguments. Russell Re Manning's introduction to that book, reflecting the work of the numerous theologians who contributed to it, notes the 'rich diversity of approaches to' natural theology, its 'significance ... in the history of ideas', and 'the importance of natural theological themes in contemporary theology, both for religious reflection on the relations between reason and revelation and for the contemporary concerns of inter-religious dialogue, the environment, and secularization,' as well as for 'aesthetic engagement with the natural world and the complex relations between theology and the arts,' including 'the role of the imagination'.⁷⁴ This is an enormously broad canvas, built up from the research of a distinguished gallery of scholars.

To ignore or marginalise all this scholarly research is to restrict a creative and constructive area of theological investigation and prevent it from reaching its full potential. Therefore, a working understanding needs to recognise the very wide-ranging possibilities of natural theology, while respecting the enormous difficulties of framing the positive aspect of a working understanding of such a subject. (The negative aspect, as noted earlier, may be simply put: natural theology is theology that does not rely on revelation.) One way around this conundrum is to frame the positive aspect of a working understanding in terms of the methodology and resources available to natural theology; in other words, to focus on how natural theology operates in practice, and on what it relies, without being overly prescriptive. Also, of course, any definition must clearly distinguish natural theology from systematic theology, which depends for its primary sources on revelation.

In terms of its resources, a natural theology (unlike a dogmatic or doctrinal theology) will not give special status, privilege, or authority to the Christian scriptures, or to the texts produced by any other Christian authorities (such as the decrees of church councils or of the papacy). It may reference them as historical sources, alongside other

⁷⁴ *Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, 1-2.

historical sources, but not as oracles unchallengeable or untestable. In terms of its methodology, a natural theology will employ only methods and approaches that could be employed by anybody, regardless of their beliefs. That is to say, none of the methods or resources of a natural theology will rely on any particular faith commitment.

That means that the viewpoint of the author plays no part in a definition of natural theology. A Christian, Jewish, or Muslim author might use natural theology to argue for their own religion; someone whose viewpoint is spiritual but not religious could use natural theology to argue against all organized religions. In other words, the arguments of natural theologians may point in many different directions, what unites those arguments is their authors' avoidance of reliance on revelation. Their own belief commitments must not be allowed to transgress the 'no reliance on revelation' rule of natural theology.

All this is not to say that natural theology cannot be used to develop or defend a Christian worldview, only that for it to remain natural theology it must restrict itself to the resources and methods outlined above. Its practitioners may often actually have faith commitments of their own, but, when they are practising natural theology, whatever their own convictions, Christian or not, they must avoid reliance on any form of divine revelation, if they are to operate within the boundaries of this branch of theology.

The practitioners of a Christian natural theology must relate to the Bible and other Christian authorities with the following understanding: natural theology's investigations may end by arriving at conclusions that might alternatively have been derived from revelation, but it may not use ideas which depend on revelation as its starting point, nor rely on them as authoritative, nor may it use methods that depend on Christian revelation or other Christian authorities. The practitioners of natural theology may argue towards revealed Christian doctrines as conclusions but not rely on them as premises. That is to

say, natural theology must argue to, not from, Christian doctrines, except for those which may be understood without benefit of divine revelation.

In terms of resources, natural theology is limited by its refusal to appeal to anything which requires a faith commitment. Some of the narrower definitions of natural theology have further limited it by restricting it to the use of reason alone, and not to other resources of the human mind. E. L. Mascall refers to it as ‘a purely rational activity.’⁷⁵ Broader definitions of natural theology, such as those referenced above, allow it greater resources. In addition to the use of reason, these fuller definitions allow theology in general, and natural theology in particular, the use of imagination, intuition, or any of the other resources available to the human mind without benefit of divine revelation.

Moreover, because it is not tied to the authoritative texts of Christianity in the same way that dogmatic or doctrinal theology is, natural theology has scope to investigate the good, the true and the beautiful, wherever they are to be found. This includes exploration of imagination, of beauty, of the sense of wonder, of the arts, and of other aspects of human culture. These areas may be beyond the bounds of much academic theology, but in the light of the Christian doctrine of creation, a Christian natural theology is by definition free to explore any aspect of creation, so long as it restricts its resources and methods to those which can be employed by a person of any faith, or none.

This means that natural theology is free to consider less positive aspects of nature and of human nature, wherever they are to be found; evil, as well as goodness, is a subject for its study. It is also important to note that, since human nature is within its remit, this means that all the products of human nature, such as human culture, experience and history, are also within the scope of natural theology’s investigation of creation. This vast

⁷⁵ E. L. Mascall, *The openness of being: natural theology today* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 4.

breadth means that natural theology lends itself to inter-disciplinary investigations, in partnership with philosophy and other disciplines.

All of this provides support for the following concise working understanding of a Christian natural theology:

Natural theology may be understood as a form of theology whose methods and resources do not rely on divine revelation or any particular faith commitment, but on the abilities and understandings human beings have by nature, and on the truths which can be known from nature. It may use only methods and resources which do not depend on any kind of divine revelation; it may use any theological methods or resources which do not depend on divine revelation.

I am basing this working understanding on the recent research I have discussed above, in particular the work of Barr, Ward, McGrath, Polkinghorne, and the scholars represented in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*. Taken together, this recent research indicates a very wide-ranging role for natural theology, as do the historical perspectives of Swinburne, Webb, and Fergusson, and the evidence from the Catholic tradition cited earlier.

Therefore, I propose to adopt this working understanding of natural theology for the purposes of this thesis. It is both broad and narrow: narrow in that its methods and resources eschew those which depend on Christian revelation or other Christian authorities; broad in that it can use any of the creative and analytical gifts of the human mind, and that, in the light of the Christian belief that God is the creator of all things, it can range across any aspect of reality, so long as it keeps its methods and resources restricted to those outlined above. Where the resources involved come from the Christian tradition, it will treat them as testable and debatable in the same way that it would treat any other methods and resources; it will not give them special and unchallengeable status. Not only that, it will naturally work in partnership with philosophy and its broad scope raises the

possibility of other inter-disciplinary partnerships, involving history, literature, and other academic disciplines.

Chesterton's apologetics and natural theology

Having established a working understanding of natural theology, for the purposes of this thesis, the next step is to ask if what Chesterton wrote can be categorised as natural theology. Is there something that corresponds to this working understanding of natural theology in the methods and resources Chesterton uses in his apologetics? I will be arguing that there is, and that he very largely uses methods and resources which fall within the terms of this working understanding, even if he does not explicitly acknowledge this. If this is correct, the working understanding of natural theology outlined above should be of considerable use in clarifying our understanding of Chesterton's work. In this chapter, to answer the objection, 'Can Chesterton's work really be understood in terms of natural theology?' I will try to set out reasons why Chesterton may be regarded as a natural theologian.

I will argue that he, in his very personal natural theology, formulated his own versions of several ideas which appear in Christian theology. These ideas included idiosyncratic understandings of the doctrines of creation, the Fall, and original sin. He found it possible to argue for these personalised doctrines on the basis of human nature, human experience, and the natural world, without any need to appeal to divine revelation. Then, having introduced these personalised doctrines into his discourse without recourse to revelation, he could incorporate them into his natural theology, referring to them as ideas framed by natural theology, in spite of their close resemblance to revealed Christian doctrines, and even if the role they played in his thinking was largely equivalent to the role those revealed doctrines might have played. This is an aspect of his theological method

open to considerable critique. It results in a creative but somewhat equivocal basis for his theology: how far can he regard his own theological ideas as equivalent to revealed Christian doctrines, while also treating them as not part of any systematic theology but only of his own natural theology? I will address this issue in chapter two.

I will also argue that Chesterton does not treat Christian theology as something that is privileged and unchallengeable because coming from an unquestionable divine revelation. Instead, in keeping with the understanding of natural theology set out above, he treats Christian ideas as a set of ideas which can and should be tested against other sets of ideas, and judged by the same criteria as other ideas, in terms of their explanatory power, that is, their ability to explain human history, culture, and experience.

I will amplify the points I make in this chapter in the following chapters. I will also provide an examination for my proposal by attempting to outline the development of Chesterton's natural theology in chapters two and three, and by assessing and analysing that theology to find out if a coherent picture emerges. Then I will further test my proposition that this natural theology clarifies our understanding of Chesterton's work: in chapter four, I will analyse his apologetics in relation to natural theology, including certain linguistic aspects of his apologetics; in chapter five, I will discuss his approach to the Incarnation. These chapters will show if the case I am making brings greater clarity to our understanding of Chesterton's work and reveals a coherent and substantial body of thought at the heart of it.

Chesterton's idiosyncratic natural theology

A part of my argument is that his natural theology needs to be seen in the framework provided by his work as an apologist, and both need to be seen in the light of his own personal development. Why? First, because he was convinced that 'We must either not

argue with a man at all, or we must argue on his grounds and not ours,' and wished that 'all Christian apologists' would take this approach.⁷⁶ Natural theology enabled him to meet this central challenge of apologetics: how to engage non-religious readers with theological ideas.

His own background and creative abilities gave him a unique way of doing this. He could argue on his opponents' grounds by reaching back into his own past. He had himself grown up in a non-religious environment, so had genuine empathy with his non-religious readers and could place himself back in a non-religious framework of thought, that is to say, in his readers' framework of thought, for the purposes of argument. He had thought himself out of that worldview to the very threshold of Christianity by means of natural theology, so could honestly use that same natural theology to guide his readers on that same journey, restricting himself to the methods of natural theology and the intellectual approach he had adopted when he genuinely was a neutral enquirer himself.

If this thesis is correct, natural theology is the clarifying concept which uncovers a logical structure relating the seemingly disparate elements of Chesterton's vast output. To give one example, it helps to explain why Chesterton's defence of Christianity is so very positive, putting the case for Christianity 'upon a note of triumphant challenge'.⁷⁷ He rarely writes negatively, because he is constantly expressing a positive theology. It also enables us to understand better why Chesterton is a writer who defends Christianity so much and Christian doctrine so little. For an apologist, he spends remarkably little time defending and explaining specific doctrines.

⁷⁶ *St. Thomas Aquinas*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 476. Chesterton continues: 'It is no good to ... imagine that one can force an opponent to admit he is wrong, by proving that he is wrong on somebody else's principles, but not on his own.'

⁷⁷ As A.L. Maycock puts it in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 13-80 (57).

As I will seek to demonstrate in chapters two and three, this is partly because his own natural theology focuses strongly on a relatively limited number of key Christian ideas, and partly because his interest is in the application, rather than the explication, of those ideas. In chapter two I give an account of the development of his thinking which shows the very varied sources that gave his natural theology its extremely personal composition. In chapter three I will argue that he expanded his natural theology considerably as he engaged in a programme of cultural apologetics, in the course of which he developed a form of social and political theology, as well as a theology of humour and theologies of history and of the arts, especially literature. He also developed his own narrative theology and created an implicit and incomplete theological epistemology.

I will argue that Chesterton's use of natural theology explains why he refers so much to experience and to the explanatory power of Christianity. Because he is avoiding any reliance on revelation or other Christian authorities, he cannot argue for Christian ideas by reference to revelation, so must turn instead to the effects of those ideas in human experience, history, and culture to provide validation for them, arguing, for example, in *Orthodoxy* that 'orthodoxy is not only ... the only safe guardian of morality or order, but is also the only logical guardian of liberty, innovation and advance.'⁷⁸

I will seek to demonstrate that this validation works in two, reciprocal ways. He argues that Christian ideas explain human history, experience, and culture better than any alternative philosophy, ideology, or religion can. He also argues that a huge amount in human experience, history, and culture supports the ideas of Christianity. For instance, he claims that 'the common sense of all mankind' is on the side of Christianity against rationalist materialism in believing in 'the general existence of a world of spirits and of

⁷⁸ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 346.

strange mental powers.’⁷⁹ Chesterton makes maximum use of the appeal to experience by not limiting it to the experiences of individuals but including that of communities and even of all humanity. By such means, Chesterton is able to support the arguments of his natural theology with evidence from history, philosophy, literature, psychology, and even legend, rather than systematic theology. He relies in his theological argumentation on the support of these other disciplines, making extensive use of the way natural theology lends itself to inter-disciplinary investigations.

The development of Chesterton’s natural theology

In addition, I will be arguing that Chesterton extends the scope of his natural theology by taking explicitly Christian theological ideas out of the framework of systematic theology and putting them to work within the framework of his natural theology, as ideas which do not rely on Christian theology for validation but must stand or fall on their own independent merits. As he does so, he uses various devices to separate these ideas from any sense of reliance on revelation or other Christian authority. Typically, when he brings Christian doctrines into his arguments he either treats them as hypotheses (see below), or leaves aside the truth claims they bring with them and asks his readers simply to consider their effects in actual practice. By focusing on the actual effects of religious beliefs in history and experience, and setting aside questions of truth, he can bring theological ideas into interaction with history, philosophy, psychology, and other disciplines, without reliance on religious revelation or authority.

For instance, he uses respect for ordinary people as an example of how a religious dogma can have a beneficent social effect. He argues:

⁷⁹ ‘Miracles and Modern Civilization,’ in *The Blatchford Controversies*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 386-89 (389).

For Catholics it is a fundamental dogma of the Faith that all human beings, without any exception whatever, were specially made, were shaped and pointed like shining arrows, for the end of hitting the mark of Beatitude. . . . the point is that anyone believing that all these beings were made to be blessed, and multitudes of them probably well on their way to be blessed, really has a sound philosophic reason for regarding them all as radiant and wonderful creatures, or seeing all their heads in haloes. That conviction does make every human face, every human feature, a matter of mystical poetry.⁸⁰

As he points out here, the ‘conviction’ itself has a positive social effect, whether or not it happens to be true. Although he starts from belief in a ‘fundamental dogma’, his argument moves quickly to ‘philosophic reason’ and so places itself within the bounds of natural theology by discussing religious belief, not in itself, but as the cause of ‘a sound philosophic reason’ for taking a very high view of the value of ordinary people, and by considering said belief as a social phenomenon with beneficial communal effects. He does not ask his readers to assent to the dogma, but instead to scrutinise the social effects of a religious belief in practice, and to consider a theological idea, not as a theological idea, but as the cause of ‘a sound philosophic reason’. By taking his readers from ‘fundamental dogma’ to ‘philosophic reason’ he brings Christian ideas to bear on social issues while remaining within the boundaries of natural theology.

This is a key part of Chesterton’s apologetics. In effect, for the sake of his apologetics he puts his own theology through processes of translation and transposition into the terms of natural theology so as to approach non-religious readers on what that they can perceive as common ground: he either translates Christian concepts into non-religious terminology, or keeps the theological term but transposes it into a non-theological framework. To take an example, consider his treatment of the Christian idea of the Fall: ‘The Fall is a view of life. It is not only the only enlightening, but the only encouraging

⁸⁰ ‘Is Humanism a Religion?’, in *The Thing: Why I am a Catholic*, first published in 1929, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 146-56 (150).

view of life. It holds, as against the only real alternative philosophies ... that we have misused a good world, and not merely been entrapped into a bad one.’⁸¹ Here, he keeps the theological term but transposes it, treating the Fall, not as a Christian doctrine but as a philosophy of life. This enables him to bring the idea of the Fall into a debate with non-religious dialogue partners, while keeping it separate from a religious context or reliance on revelation.

Another important aspect of the relationship between Chesterton’s natural theology and his apologetics is revealed when he makes declarations such as this: ‘I believe very strongly in the mass of the common people’ and in ‘a sort of creed, a catalogue of maxims, which I am certain are believed’ by the poor and not the elites; he calls these beliefs of the poor ‘the ancient sanities of humanity; the ten commandments of man.’⁸² He treats these ‘ancient sanities’ as signposts to the sacred, intuitions which, although not derived from Christian revelation, correlate well with related points in Christian theology.⁸³ He differentiates himself from the secular elites of his day by asserting, not just that as a Christian he is on the side of the poor, but that as a Christian he shares many beliefs that are held by the poor and not held by the elites in English society, whether those elites be Socialist, Liberal, or Conservative.

Here, and elsewhere, his use of natural theology enables him to affirm that numerous beliefs which are held by those who may not be committed to Christianity, as part of their own natural theologies, are compatible with Christian beliefs and can form a part of the architecture of meaning within which he operates; he does not restrict the number of

⁸¹ ‘The Outline of the Fall,’ in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 309-13 (311).

⁸² G.K. Chesterton, ‘Why I am not a Socialist,’ *The Chesterton Review* VII, no. 3 (1981): 189-95 (193). First published in *The New Age*, 4 January 1908.

⁸³ For another, similar example, see G.K. Chesterton, ‘What is Right With the World,’ in G.K. Chesterton, *The Apostle and the Wild Ducks, and other essays* (London: Elek, 1975), 161-69 (167). Here he places himself of the side of ‘the living and labouring millions’ against ‘a few prigs on platforms’ in his defence of ‘local affections’ and the ‘romance of life’.

beliefs he finds acceptable to those that might be found in a Christian systematic theology. This inclusive approach helps Chesterton to forge alliances with those beyond the bounds of any church. These alliances are an important part of his apologetics strategy, and I will discuss them in chapter four.

The method of the hypothesis

Perhaps the most important of the ways in which Chesterton extends the scope of his natural theology is what he calls ‘the method of the hypothesis’. He explained this method most clearly in a 1903 *Daily News* article called ‘The Return of the Angels’, which also illustrates several other aspects of his use of natural theology in apologetics, and deserves to be considered in some detail. In this article, he insists that many of ‘the young’:

Have returned to a certain doctrine of the spiritual ... not because of this argument or that argument, but because the theory, when it is adopted, works out everywhere ... The return to the spiritualist theory rests ... like the movement towards evolution, on the fact that the thing works out. We put on the theory like a magic hat, and history becomes translucent like a house of glass ... We have not returned to the spiritual theory because of this or that triviality ... We have returned to it because it is an intelligible picture of the world. We have returned to it [the spiritual theory] because, by the rejection of rationalism, the world becomes suddenly rational.⁸⁴

The term ‘worldview apologetics’ had not, so far as I know, been invented when Chesterton wrote those words. When he argues that Christianity provides ‘an intelligible picture of the world’ and explains that that he and others have returned to Christianity ‘not because of this argument or that argument, but because the theory, when it is adopted, works out everywhere,’ his words may well suggest a question in the minds of twenty-first century readers: is he, in effect, advocating something very much like worldview

⁸⁴ G.K. Chesterton, ‘The Return of the Angels’, in the *Daily News*, 14 March 1903, in G.K. Chesterton, *G.K. Chesterton at the Daily News: literature, liberalism and revolution, 1901-1913*, ed. Julia Stapleton (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), II, 22-26 (24-26).

apologetics? He specifically states that it is not a question of individual arguments, not ‘this argument or that argument’ but of ‘the theory’ of Christianity as a whole.

This is very reminiscent of worldview apologetics, as is a further argument he makes, which he claims is true of both Christianity and evolution, as explanatory theories:

I hear ... of a certain theory about the universe. As a trial, I assume it to be true; then if I discover ... that once assumed it explains the boots on my feet and the nose on my face, that my umbrella has a new and radiant meaning, that my front door suddenly explains itself, that truths about my cat and dog and wife and hat and sideboard crowd upon me all day and every day, I believe that theory, and go on believing it more and more. ... We know that with this idea inside our heads a million things become at once transparent as if a lamp were lit behind them ... the fulfilments pour in upon us with so natural and continual a cataract that at last is reached that paradox of the condition which is real belief. We have seen so many evidences of the theory that we have forgotten them all. The theory is so clear to us that we can scarcely even defend it.⁸⁵

He suggests that both the theory of Christianity and the theory of evolution work like this, couching their verification not in terms of metaphysical truth but of empirical fact. This avoidance of metaphysical truth claims is a characteristic part of his natural theology: he appeals to verifiable facts of history and experience rather than to forms of truth which might need validation from revelation, and might make Christianity seem distant from everyday life. By pairing Christianity and evolution he suggests that Christianity belongs to the same world of scientific fact as evolution, not to some separate religious realm, and can be tested and verified in human experience, as scientific theories can.

‘The Return of the Angels’ also exemplifies another typical aspect of Chesterton’s apologetics: he avoids specifically Christian language. Rather than state that he is defending Christianity he writes instead of ‘a certain doctrine of the spiritual ... the spiritualist theory ... the spiritual theory.’ He is able to avoid Christian terminology so

⁸⁵ ‘Return of the Angels,’ in Chesterton, *DN*, II, 22-26 (23-24).

much because he largely restricts himself to natural theology, and so can distance himself from language associated with systematic theology in his efforts to create common ground with his readers.

‘The method of the hypothesis’ allows him to use that process of translation, noted above, which enables him to extract even very distinctively Christian ideas from their contexts in systematic theology and bring them into play in discussions on the neutral terrain of natural theology. He treats the method of the hypothesis as a scientific way of measuring the validity of different ideas. In ‘The Return of the Angels’ he declares that:

the greatest of all the triumphs of science ... was the discovery not of a fact but of a method, the mother of innumerable facts. That method is, of course, what is known in scientific theory as the method of the hypothesis. It is the replacing of the very slow, logical method of accumulating, point by point, an absolute proof by a rapid, experimental and imaginative method which gives us, long before we can get absolute proof, a very good working belief.⁸⁶

By linking this method, which he uses himself, with ‘the greatest of all the triumphs of science’ he presents himself as one using scientific methods to discover truth. By referring to Christianity as a ‘spiritual theory’, and as a ‘hypothesis’ that is testable by reason and by ‘experimental and imaginative’ methods, he creates a powerful methodology for his apologetics. By ‘the method of the hypothesis’ he can translate Christian ideas into non-theological terms and test them by their explanatory power and their effects in human culture, history, and experience.⁸⁷ Taking this approach he can stay within the perspective and the boundaries of natural theology even when he is specifically writing to argue the case for Christianity.

‘The Return of the Angels’ may be the nearest Chesterton ever came to writing an apologetics manifesto, and much of his subsequent work can be seen in terms of expansion

⁸⁶ ‘Return of the Angels,’ in Chesterton, *DN*, II, 22-26 (24-26).

⁸⁷ ‘Return of the Angels,’ in Chesterton, *DN*, II, 22-26.

and enactment of the themes he lays out here, in particular with regard to his explicit use of hypothesis and the implicit worldview aspect of his apologetics. I will provide further evidence during the course of this thesis to support the contention that Chesterton was, in fact, engaging in an early version of what would now be called worldview apologetics, even though use of that term with reference to him would be anachronistic.

Chesterton's creative and creedal theologies

At this point I should explain an important distinction between what might be referred to as Chesterton's 'creedal theology,' and his 'creative theology'. This distinction refers to the difference between the full set of doctrines to which he gave his intellectual assent, and those doctrines which featured significantly in his apologetics. It is possible to measure his 'creedal theology' by his public declarations of faith and his 'creative theology' by the theological ideas which actually feature in his own writing. My concern in this thesis is with his 'creative' rather than his 'creedal' theology, that is, with those parts of his beliefs which shaped his work and can be discerned in the texts he left behind him.

Chesterton's 'creedal theology' developed substantially. He was brought up in a not very religious, semi-Unitarian home. As Maisie Ward reports, 'When the family went to church – which happened very seldom – it was to listen to the sermons of Stopford Brooke,' who was a well-known Unitarian preacher⁸⁸ (see chapter two). By the time Chesterton began to be published he was slowly and gradually arriving at Christian faith. By the time he wrote *Orthodoxy* (published in 1908) he was happy to defend the Apostles'

⁸⁸ Ward, *Chesterton*, 20. See also Cecil Chesterton, *G.K. Chesterton, a Criticism [by C.E. Chesterton]*, ed. (ed. Michael W. Perry) (Seattle: Inkling Books, 2007 (original publication: 1908)), 8-9.

Creed, and by 1922 he was ready to join the Roman Catholic Church. To do so he must have given assent to the full teaching of that church.

By 1922, then, his ‘creedal theology’ had come a long way. In the light of that development, it is remarkable how little his ‘creative theology’ changed. The vast bulk of what he wrote after 1922 could have been written before that date, and even his earliest writings show great consistency with his later work, even though his ‘creedal theology’ had developed substantially. In his creative work he continued to restrict himself very largely to natural theology (this was important for his apologetics strategies, see chapter four).

This is not to deny that there is some variation and development in terms of tone and style in his later writing, and it is true that after 1922 he wrote more often on specifically religious topics, and was called upon on numerous occasions to defend specifically Roman Catholic teachings, yet almost all he wrote after that date reflected the same ‘creative theology’ that had animated his writing for many years before, with natural theology at its heart. In *The Catholic Church and Conversion*⁸⁹ (published in 1926) and in other works on specifically Catholic topics, he is very consistent, avoiding reliance on Christian revelation or authority, and therefore avoiding reference to systematic theology, which might require an apologist to resort to that reliance on revelation which he so resolutely avoids. He is very clear about this, declaring in *St. Francis of Assisi* (published in 1923) ‘I am not going to discuss here the doctrinal truths of Christianity,’⁹⁰ and in *St. Thomas Aquinas* (published in 1933), that he has only been able to deal with ‘the biography’ and a little of ‘the philosophy’ but ‘left out’ Aquinas’ theology, even though it is ‘the only important thing’.⁹¹

⁸⁹ *The Catholic Church and Conversion* in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 59-124.

⁹⁰ *Francis*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 36.

⁹¹ *Aquinas*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 420, 539.

It should be noted that natural theology, while it is central to Chesterton, is not the sum total of his theology. Although he avoids doctrinal and dogmatic theology to a very surprising extent (surprising for a Christian apologist, that is), certain other doctrines appear here and there in his writing. Only one revealed Christian doctrine can be said to be at the heart of his thought, however: the Incarnation. Even here, it is his natural theology which shapes his approach to Incarnational theology, as I will show in chapter five. Moreover, while the Incarnation is important to Chesterton, the same might be said of almost any significant Christian theologian or apologist. His Incarnational theology is not what makes him distinctive, it is something he shares with Christians of all kinds. Rather, it is his natural theology which creates his unusual approach to theology and apologetics. That is why this study, while acknowledging the importance of the Incarnation in Chesterton's thought, focuses on natural theology.

I have attempted to give a preliminary answer to the first and most basic objection to my thesis: 'Can Chesterton's work really be understood in terms of natural theology?' I have argued that Chesterton's work should indeed be seen in terms of natural theology by giving a brief introduction to what is meant by 'natural theology', and how it relates to Chesterton's work. This preliminary answer will be developed further throughout the rest of this thesis. I will now address the second obvious objection.

Why did Chesterton not use the term 'natural theology' of his own work?

The second major question that will inevitably be raised about this thesis is: if Chesterton is using natural theology, why does he never use the term 'natural theology' of his own

work? To answer this particular question, it necessary to consider his general use of terminology with regard to philosophy, theology, and religion.

In *The Everlasting Man* he declares: ‘I have called the fourth and final division of the spiritual elements into which I should divide heathen humanity by the name of The Philosophers. I confess that it covers in my mind much that would generally be classified otherwise; and that what are here called philosophies are very often called religions.’⁹² In *The Blatchford Controversies*, he refers to Christianity as ‘the best religious philosophy’⁹³ and declares: ‘What matters about a religion is not whether it can work marvels ... but whether it has a true philosophy of the Universe.’⁹⁴ In *Heretics* he refers to ‘philosophy or religion, our theory, that is, about ultimate things.’⁹⁵ In the *Daily News*, 1 August 1903, he writes: ‘There was a time when art and morals together were part of a great general view of life called philosophy or religion.’⁹⁶ At such times he uses ‘religion’ and ‘philosophy’ as if they were interchangeable terms, or as if the essence of religions is their philosophy.

In *George Bernard Shaw*, he refers to ‘that great and systematic philosophy of Calvinism’,⁹⁷ although Calvinism is conventionally categorised in theological terms. His book on Thomas Aquinas ends with a treatment of Aquinas’ theology of creation, yet this treatment appears under the chapter heading ‘The Permanent Philosophy,’ even though he acknowledges in that chapter that this ‘world of created things’ is ‘especially the world of the Christian Creator’.⁹⁸ In a book review in *The Speaker* in 1901, he describes the idea of creation developed by the ancient Israelites as ‘an inspiration, a sudden and startling

⁹² *The Everlasting Man*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 135-407 (255-56).

⁹³ ‘Why I believe in Christianity,’ in *Blatchford*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 381-85 (381).

⁹⁴ ‘Miracles and Modern Civilization,’ in *Blatchford*, in Chesterton, *CW*, 386-89 (389).

⁹⁵ ‘Introductory remarks on the Importance of Orthodoxy,’ in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, 39-46 (42).

⁹⁶ *Daily News*, 1 August 1903, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 117.

⁹⁷ Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XI, 382.

⁹⁸ *Aquinas*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 409-551 (524-39).

glimpse of an enormous philosophic truth,⁹⁹ even though he is talking about a theological concept in a theological context. On these and other occasions he refers to theology as if it were philosophy.

On the first page of *Orthodoxy*, he says that the book will be about his ‘philosophy’; on the second page, he declares, ‘I wish to set forth my faith’;¹⁰⁰ having moved from philosophy to religion in a single page, he proceeds to write a personal narrative which is informed by natural theology,¹⁰¹ and which culminates in Incarnational theology,¹⁰² while repeatedly describing what he is doing as philosophy.¹⁰³ His references to philosophy in this book are revealing: he refers to the Christian creed as expressing the ‘philosophy of Christianity’ where it would normally be seen as expressing Christianity’s theology. He insists that the Christian ‘religion ... has revealed itself as a truth-telling thing ... this philosophy has again and again said the thing that does not seem to be true, but is true.’ Here he replaces reference to ‘religion’ with reference to ‘philosophy’ as though ‘philosophy’ could serve as a synonym for ‘religion’. He also, very significantly, refers to his ‘general position’ as ‘my personal philosophy or natural religion’, showing that he sees his ‘personal philosophy’ and his ‘natural religion’ as forming a single entity; such a fusion implies a central role for natural theology, because ‘natural religion’ and ‘philosophy’ meet in natural theology.¹⁰⁴ All these examples show that Chesterton

⁹⁹ G.K. Chesterton, ‘‘Jews Old and New’ – review of *The Ancient Scriptures of the Modern Jew* by David Baron (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1901),’ *The Chesterton Review* IX, no. 1 (1983): 6-11. Originally published in *The Speaker* (March 2, 1901).

¹⁰⁰ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 211-12.

¹⁰¹ See chapters two and three, and Milbank, *Chesterton*, 9-15.

¹⁰² *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 365-66.

¹⁰³ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 218, 252-53, 286, 335, 337, 341, 346, 362-63.

¹⁰⁴ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 286, 361-62, 252. Similarly, in *St. Francis of Assisi*, while discussing ‘natural religion’, he comments that Christianity, unlike paganism, brings ‘philosophy’ and ‘religion’ together. *Francis*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 41.

conflates religion and theology with philosophy and is liable to refer to both ‘religion’ and ‘theology’ as ‘philosophy’.

Chesterton’s remarkably confusing use of terminology is indefensible from an academic point of view, yet it was, perhaps, useful in his apologetics. He did not ever explain it, as far as I know; what can be said is that as an apologist he made a great effort to create common ground with his readers, and to present his apologetics to those readers as being written from a neutral perspective (see chapter four). Hence it serves his purposes to refer to theology or religion as ‘philosophy’, so that he can present his discourse as operating on the relatively neutral terrain of philosophy rather than that of theology, or religion, which might be seen in more partisan terms. In such a context, ‘philosophy’ is a much more neutral term for him to use of his work than ‘theology’; talking about his work as philosophy rather than natural theology certainly suits his strategies as an apologist.

It is pertinent to note that natural theology exists at the meeting-point of theology and philosophy and is by its nature something of a bridge between theology and philosophy. Indeed, the partnership between natural theology and philosophy is so close that natural theology has sometimes been claimed as a branch of philosophy rather than theology.¹⁰⁵ This can perhaps be seen, at least in part, as legitimising Chesterton’s reference to his work as philosophy rather than theology: if natural theology can be claimed as a branch of either discipline, he is free to choose which of them he will present himself as practising, because natural theology is an area where the two disciplines overlap.

¹⁰⁵ E.L. Mascall, for example, quotes approvingly Dom John Chapman’s verdict that natural theology is ‘a part of philosophy’ in Mascall, *The openness of being*, 1.

It is clear that his aversion to describing his work in terms of any kind of theology fits his purposes in apologetics very well.¹⁰⁶ He consistently seeks to show his readers that Christianity can be defended on grounds which the non-religious can trust, such as philosophical grounds, without reliance on revelation or other Christian authorities, which appear much less neutral to secular readers. In short, his purposes as an apologist and his tendency to conflate ‘religion’, ‘theology’, and ‘philosophy’ provide an adequate explanation for his use of the term ‘philosophy’ rather than the term ‘natural theology’ to describe his work.

Why has natural theology been so neglected in Chesterton criticism?

I now come to the third major stumbling block for this thesis: if natural theology is so important in Chesterton’s work, why has its significance not been explored earlier? If a natural theology plays such a substantial role in Chesterton’s work, why has it seemed so invisible to so many readers and critics? Even the scholars who have recognised the theological nature of Chesterton’s work, as discussed earlier, have not usually named it as natural theology (with exceptions, which I will consider below). What reasons could there be for such critical neglect?

There are a number of factors, which may be summed up under four main headings. The first is his own terminology, a question that I have addressed above. This leaves three

¹⁰⁶ It might also be relevant that Chesterton began writing at the time of the Modernist Crisis in the Roman Catholic Church, which may perhaps have made Catholic theology seem dangerous ground to him, its contentious areas best avoided. See Emile Poulat, ‘The Catholic Church in the Modernist Revolution,’ *The Chesterton Review* XV, no. 1/2 (1989): 36-49.

important issues: the neglect of natural theology in academia generally, especially the areas of natural theology that Chesterton worked in most; the multifarious nature of his output, which has led many critics to focus on non-theological aspects of his work; and the agendas of the critics who have studied his theology, agendas in which natural theology has generally not featured in any significant way.

In spite of these issues, however, several scholars have come close to identifying natural theology as a major part of Chesterton's work, and three have discussed it, albeit only briefly. Before considering the insights of these scholars, I will sketch out the broad range of factors which have militated against considering natural theology in relation to Chesterton's work.

Natural theology under eclipse

The background issue is the neglect of natural theology in academia generally. Over much of the last century or so natural theology has been under something of a cloud in academic circles, criticised as, at best, 'a self-limited exercise' capable of producing only 'restricted insights'.¹⁰⁷ Such a negative attitude is a relatively recent development. The philosopher Richard Swinburne has pointed out that 'almost all Christian theologians' before 1750 saw 'cogent arguments' in natural theology.¹⁰⁸

Since 1750, as Swinburne and David Fergusson point out, natural theology has suffered powerful attacks from both without and within the church: from without the church by Hume, Kant, Marx, Freud, and various of the followers of Darwin; from within the church by the towering figure of Karl Barth.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps as a result of these attacks,

¹⁰⁷ Polkinghorne, 'New Natural Theology,' 41-50 (50).

¹⁰⁸ Swinburne, 'Natural Theology,' 533-46 (536).

¹⁰⁹ Swinburne, 'Natural Theology,' 533-46 (536-37). See also Fergusson, 'Types of Natural Theology,' 380-93.

‘natural theology is not widely endorsed by contemporary theologians,’¹¹⁰ as John Polkinghorne has noted. This lack of endorsement may be one of the reasons for the lack of enthusiasm for Chesterton’s work in much of academia, since he relied so greatly on natural theology.

In the Catholic tradition, the tradition in which Chesterton worked, natural theology is too well established to be eclipsed as it has been in much Protestant theology. It may, however, have been seen in Chesterton’s day in relatively limited terms, as noted in the comparison made above between the First Vatican Council and the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Chesterton’s approach is more in harmony with that of the *Catechism* than that of the earlier council; in this, perhaps, he may have been ahead of his time.

Even where academic discussion has paid attention to natural theology, it has tended to focus on the area of science and religion, or on systematic rational arguments for the existence of God, and these aspects of natural theology were not major concerns of Chesterton’s work. He relates more closely to less travelled paths of natural theology, and this is another reason why natural theology has been ignored in relation to his work: he had little to do with the aspects of natural theology which have usually been most prominent in the discussions of the academy.

I would suggest that there are several other factors involved in the difficulty scholars have had in recognising his work as natural theology. One is that his theology was expressed in the form of apologetics, rather than as an exercise in pure theology, and the nature of that apologetics may have distracted attention from the theology embodied in it. Another is that much of his theology was expressed in terms of narrative before narrative

¹¹⁰ Polkinghorne, ‘New Natural Theology,’ 41-50 (41).

theology had achieved the recognition in academic circles that it has since come to enjoy and he used the imagination theologically in far-reaching and innovative ways at a time when imagination had been somewhat eclipsed by reason in the perception of much of the theological world (see chapter three). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, eminent theologians queue up to extol the value of the imagination in theology. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was not so. The most diligent researcher might struggle to find similar support from academia for the place of imagination in theology at that time. In his use of the imagination, as in his use of narrative, Chesterton was too far ahead of his time for his way of doing natural theology to be fully understood or appreciated. Modern developments in the understanding of narrative theology and of the role of the imagination in theology may make it easier for modern students to understand his work.¹¹¹

Overall, in an account of the neglect of natural theology in relation to Chesterton's work, the background does much to explain the foreground. The low value placed on natural theology generally in much of Protestantism and academia; a rather narrow vision of natural theology in Catholic circles; a further lack of interest in the particular areas of natural theology on which Chesterton focused; a lack of appreciation for the use of imagination and narrative (so important to Chesterton) as resources for natural theology: all these added together have made it easy for the role of natural theology in his work to be obscured. When something is so deeply out of fashion, readers are unlikely to search for it.

¹¹¹ I will develop and defend this claim in chapters three and six. The existence of a number of academic centres in which study of the role of the imagination in theology has a prominent place witnesses to this point. Such centres include: The Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture at Oxford University; The Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts at St Andrews University; the Yale Centre for Faith and Culture at Yale Divinity School.

The many angles of enquiry

Another reason for the neglect of the study of natural theology in Chesterton's work is that his writing is so many-sided that it is easy to lose sight of even important themes in the torrent of ideas and verbal fireworks. Already, in 1910, Henry Murray observed that the reviewer of Chesterton felt 'as a man might feel who was ordered to "review" the British Museum.'¹¹² Natural theology may have been left unexplored partly because there was so much else on the surface of Chesterton's work that drew critical interest.

His contemporaries mostly saw him in creative rather than theological terms. The reviews of his work gathered in *G.K. Chesterton: The Critical Judgements (Part I: 1900-1937)*,¹¹³ show how overwhelmingly his contemporaries saw him as a literary and journalistic figure, or as a public intellectual and controversialist. Even Hilaire Belloc saw his work in primarily 'literary' and 'historical' terms.¹¹⁴ If his contemporaries did not see him as a theologian at all, they could hardly see him as a natural theologian. Gradually, some of his subsequent readers have come to set a higher value on the theology and apologetics woven through his creative writing.¹¹⁵

A comparison with Samuel Taylor Coleridge may be helpful here: Coleridge's fame as a poet and literary critic long overshadowed his achievements in philosophy and theology, so that his importance as a theologian has only relatively recently begun to receive the attention it deserves.¹¹⁶ Chesterton's fame as a creative writer across many genres has similarly served to obscure his theological achievement.

¹¹² Henry Murray, signed review of *WWWTW* in *The Bookman*, August 1910, in *Critical Judgments*, 250.

¹¹³ *Critical Judgments*, 23-555.

¹¹⁴ Hilaire Belloc, *On the place of Gilbert Chesterton in English letters* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1940), 16.

¹¹⁵ See, for example: I.T. Ker, *G.K. Chesterton: a biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Nichols, *Chesterton*.

¹¹⁶ See, for example, J. Robert Barth, *Coleridge and Christian doctrine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), especially vii-ix, 1-13.

Moreover, there are simply so many sides to his work that many Chesterton scholars have addressed themselves to other particular aspects of his thinking, rather than surveying his theology and apologetics. To name just a selection of these writers, Hugh Kenner has written on paradox in Chesterton,¹¹⁷ Lynette Hunter on Chesterton and allegory,¹¹⁸ Joseph McLeary on Chesterton's historical imagination,¹¹⁹ Zachary Rhone on Chesterton and others in relation to mythopoeic imagination,¹²⁰ Nicholas Boyle on Chesterton and others in relation to Christian Humanism,¹²¹ Duncan Reyburn on Chesterton in relation to philosophical hermeneutics.¹²² Much of the existing research on Chesterton has tended to concentrate more on the cultural, social and political aspects of his oeuvre, for example: Thomas Peters on Chesterton and the arts;¹²³ Jay Corrin and Margaret Canovan on his social and political work;¹²⁴ John Coates on his context and his cultural criticism;¹²⁵ Julia Stapleton on his important contribution to early twentieth-century debates over political philosophy and British identity.¹²⁶

¹¹⁷ Kenner, *Paradox*.

¹¹⁸ Lynette Hunter, *G. K. Chesterton: explorations in allegory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979).

¹¹⁹ Joseph R. McCleary, *The historical imagination of G.K. Chesterton: locality, patriotism, and nationalism*, Studies in major literary authors, (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹²⁰ Zachary A. Rhone, *The Great Tower of Elfland: The Mythopoeic Worldview of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, and George MacDonald* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2017).

¹²¹ Nicholas Boyle, *Who are we now? Christian humanism and the global market from Hegel to Heaney* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).

¹²² Duncan Reyburn, *Seeing Things as They Are: G.K. Chesterton and the Drama of Meaning* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016).

¹²³ Thomas C. Peters, *The Christian imagination: G.K. Chesterton on the arts* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000).

¹²⁴ Jay P. Corrin, *G.K. Chesterton & Hilaire Belloc: the battle against modernity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981). Margaret Canovan, *G. K. Chesterton: Radical Populist* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

¹²⁵ Coates explicitly limits his focus, stating, 'I am concerned with the cultural, rather than the specifically religious or political aspects of his work.' John Coates, *Chesterton and the Edwardian cultural crisis* (Hull, England: Hull University Press, 1984), 2. He does, however, acknowledge 'Chesterton's religious philosophy' as 'vital and intrinsic to his work'. Coates, *Controversialist*, 186.

¹²⁶ Julia Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism, and Nationhood: the England of G.K. Chesterton* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

These scholars, and most of the others who have worked on Chesterton, have not focused on Chesterton's apologetics and its theological basis. As a result, they have sometimes written of what is secondary in his work as if it were primary, and central to his thinking. For example, Michael Shallcross suggests that 'Chesterton's existential vision ... is based on the truth value of the grotesque as a mode of accumulative appreciation;'¹²⁷ Julia Stapleton sees 'Chesterton's identity with England and his English sensibilities as the cornerstone of his thought.'¹²⁸ Nevertheless, these scholars have given valuable insights on other parts of the extraordinary range of his work. In some cases, their neglect of natural theology may have been influenced by a lack of attention to the possibilities of that field. One might cite Ralph C. Wood's assertion that 'Chesterton was no simple-minded advocate of natural theology,'¹²⁹ as if simple-mindedness and natural theology were related.

There are certain scholars of Chesterton who have made substantial analyses of his work to discern his central ideas. They have discovered numerous important aspects of his thinking, but have neglected the importance of natural theology. The distinguished Chesterton expert and long-term editor of *The Chesterton Review*, Ian Boyd, C.S.B., has largely focused on the fictional side of Chesterton's work, especially in studying the social and political aspects of Chesterton's novels.¹³⁰ This emphasis is reflected in his view of Chesterton as essentially a writer of 'religious allegory' based on a sacramental idea of the universe.¹³¹ This description touches on important aspects of Chesterton's work, but misses the central role of his natural theology.

¹²⁷ Shallcross, *The Worshipper's Half-Holiday*, 13.

¹²⁸ Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism*, 209. Hilaire Belloc also wrote that Chesterton's leading characteristic was that he was 'national'. Belloc, *Gilbert Chesterton*, 14-15, 17-27.

¹²⁹ Wood, 'The Argument from Joy,' 85-92.

¹³⁰ Ian Boyd, *The novels of G. K. Chesterton: a study in art and propaganda* (London: Elek, 1975).

¹³¹ Ian Boyd, 'In Search of the Essential Chesterton,' *VII: an Anglo-American literary review I* (1980): 28-46 (39).

When Boyd writes that ‘the essential Chesterton ... is found in the imaginative argument’,¹³² he overstates, focusing so much on one of Chesterton’s most important gifts that he neglects other aspects of his achievement, including his use of reason and his theological insights. Boyd’s assertion, ‘It is clear that Chesterton considered politics as his central concern as a writer,’¹³³ neglects the central role of apologetics in Chesterton’s work. Loyalty to his brother’s memory may have involved Chesterton more heavily in the partly-political work of Distributism than he might have wished in later life, but at the same time he was producing a great deal of religious and fictional writing.¹³⁴

William Oddie¹³⁵ and Ian Ker¹³⁶ have written on Chesterton in the context of biographical writing. Oddie has done a great deal to clarify the development of Chesterton’s thought, and Ker has provided a magnificently complete picture of his life in relation to his work. As their central concerns have been biographical, however, neither has made an in-depth analysis of Chesterton’s theology, or explored the theme of natural theology.

One particularly important recent book is by Michael Hurley, who has made a stimulating and incisive study of Chesterton’s thought in relation to his writing.¹³⁷ He makes many significant observations but lacks the overall framework which Chesterton’s natural theology provides. I will not discuss Hurley further here as I will be giving detailed consideration to his work in chapter four.

¹³² Boyd, ‘Essential Chesterton,’ 28-46 (32).

¹³³ Boyd, ‘Essential Chesterton,’ 28-46 (33).

¹³⁴ Ward, *Chesterton*, 399-413, 521-30.

¹³⁵ William Oddie, *Chesterton and the romance of Orthodoxy: the making of G.K.C., 1874-1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹³⁶ Ker, *Chesterton*.

¹³⁷ Hurley, *Chesterton*.

Theological analysis near and far from natural theology

As noted above, only a few scholars have focused their studies on Chesterton's theology, and, with three exceptions, natural theology has not had a significant place on their agendas. Most have had other interests and discussed other aspects of his work. Several critics have, however, come very close to identifying the role of natural theology in Chesterton's work, only to pause on the threshold, then pass on without actually naming natural theology and the part it plays in Chesterton's oeuvre.

As early as 1937, Emile Cammaerts wrote: 'Chesterton never starts his argument from Revelation, he leads to it.'¹³⁸ This observation is both correct and highly suggestive. It begs several questions: if an argument ends in revelation, that means that its end at least is theological, so how does theology enter into the rest of that argument? If Chesterton's arguments end in revelation, are they theological from the start, or do they become theological at some point in their course? Several of the possible answers to these questions involve natural theology, but unfortunately Cammaerts does not develop his own insight further.

In 1981, in an article for *The Chesterton Review* on 'The Theological Background of Chesterton's Social Thought,' Yves Denis gave a number of pointers towards the role of natural theology in Chesterton's work without actually following his own ideas to their possible conclusion and naming natural theology. He observes that Chesterton is generally more concerned to show man in light of God than investigate God; he notes that Chesterton focuses on 'man in his very essence, that is, man as related in his own self to God' and that in Chesterton's work 'All things cover up some mystery; all things are veils that cover up God,' without relating these insights to natural theology; he names six pillars

¹³⁸ Emile Cammaerts, *The Laughing Prophet; the Seven Virtues and G. K. Chesterton* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1937), 54.

of Chesterton's thought as 'Philosophy bound up with theology, metaphysics grafted onto mysticism, humanism wedded to Christian Faith.'¹³⁹ These three pairs of terms all suggest aspects of Chesterton's natural theology, and Denis' observations point towards that natural theology but he does not colligate his ideas to reveal the role of natural theology in Chesterton's apologetics.

Certain other writers, at certain moments, have come close to perceiving the role of natural theology in his apologetics. Stanley Jaki, while discussing Chesterton in relation to science, comments 'All this, so it may seem, brings in natural theology,' and then passes on to other topics without developing his own observation.¹⁴⁰ John Coates notes that Chesterton presents Christian doctrines 'in themselves as explanations of the nature of life and of man's place in the world,' but he does not consider that natural theology might be the locus for this mode of operation, with Christian ideas reconfigured into aspects of Chesterton's distinctive natural theology so they can be examined 'in themselves', apart from their Christian doctrinal context, 'as explanations' which combine to show how a Christian worldview explains 'the nature of life and man's place in the world'.¹⁴¹ Margaret Canovan suggests that Chesterton's 'aim was to present Christianity as the doctrine of common-sense sanity which corresponds to ordinary human experience.'¹⁴² Canovan does not, however, perceive the theological framework within which Chesterton works: he knows that Christian doctrine is not limited to 'common-sense sanity', but he is able gain traction for his apologetics by translating certain Christian ideas into terms of natural

¹³⁹ Yves Denis, 'The Theological Background of Chesterton's Social Thought,' *The Chesterton Review* VII, no. 1 (1981): 57-72 (58, 64, 71).

¹⁴⁰ Jaki's concern is with science, not natural theology. Stanley L. Jaki, *Chesterton, a seer of science* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 87-116 (98).

¹⁴¹ Coates, *Controversialist*, 28, 186.

¹⁴² Canovan, *Chesterton*, 28.

theology and showing how they align with ‘common-sense sanity’ and explain ‘ordinary human experience’.

Of the other writers who have considered Chesterton’s apologetics and theology, David Fagerberg insightfully discusses the relationship between Chesterton’s thinking, paganism, natural religion, and Roman Catholic theology. Fagerberg sets the tone for his discussion by reminding his readers that the Roman Catholic Church ‘understands grace to perfect nature, and is therefore capable of perfecting natural religion. ... Catholic Christianity rests on natural religion’s footing.’¹⁴³ As part of this discussion, he considers Chesterton’s thinking on natural religion but does not go on to analyse his natural theology.¹⁴⁴

Aidan Nichols, as noted above, is concerned to make a case for Chesterton to be taken seriously as a theologian in *G.K. Chesterton, Theologian*: he makes a number of acute observations regarding aspects of Chesterton’s theology, but is less concerned to attempt to reveal the structure of Chesterton’s thought than to highlight his particular, individual insights, with a view to encouraging others to see him as an important and genuinely theological thinker. While Nichols is a subtle and enormously erudite scholar, and he makes a strong case for Chesterton’s theological significance, his account of Chesterton’s theology is unbalanced in several important respects: he does not fully take

¹⁴³ Fagerberg, *Chesterton*, 15, 63-84, 99-100 (63, 76-77). See also Quentin Lauer, *G.K. Chesterton: Philosopher without Portfolio* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988), 158-66.

¹⁴⁴ Fagerberg writes, for example, that ‘Chesterton ... is neither startled nor alarmed by affinities between natural religion (humankind’s natural appetite for God, organized) and the revealed fulfilment of that appetite.’ See Fagerberg, *Chesterton*, 170-72. See also 85-103.

into account a number of the formative influences on Chesterton's thought;¹⁴⁵ he neglects Newman almost entirely;¹⁴⁶ and he does not mention natural theology at all.

Nichols is not the only scholar to neglect the importance of Newman's influence on Chesterton; with certain notable exceptions, in particular Ian Ker,¹⁴⁷ also Sheridan Gilley, Dermot Quinn, and David Paul Deavel,¹⁴⁸ this relationship has received relatively little critical attention, even though there is clear evidence that Chesterton had read a great deal of Newman's work by the early years of his career. In 1904, he wrote an article on 'The Style of Newman' in *The Speaker*;¹⁴⁹ by 1907, he could write a letter to the editor of *The Nation* (published in *The Nation*, 14 December 1907) in which he said of Newman: 'I have read most of his books;'¹⁵⁰ in 1913, he wrote about Newman in *The Victorian Age in Literature*.¹⁵¹ Later in life, he was sure enough of his knowledge of the late cardinal's work to say, 'You cannot catch me out about Newman.'¹⁵²

¹⁴⁵ Compare the account of those influences given at the start of chapter two with Nichols, *Chesterton*, 3-21.

¹⁴⁶ Nichols attempts to situate Chesterton's thinking by reference to the early Church Fathers and Aquinas, missing out the vital importance of Newman. See Nichols, *Chesterton*, 72-73, 80, 141-48, 166.

¹⁴⁷ Ian Ker has done important work in this area. Among other things, Ker points out that Wilfrid Ward saw Chesterton as 'the successor of Newman as an apologist for Christianity', and that Chesterton read, and wrote appreciatively of, Ward's biography of Newman, published in 1912, which deals extensively with Newman's theology. Ker, *Chesterton*, 277-78.

¹⁴⁸ David Paul Deavel, 'An Odd Couple? A First Glance at Chesterton and Newman,' *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 10, no. 1 (2007): 116-35 (especially 126-28). See also Dermot Quinn, 'Newman, Chesterton and the Logic of Conversion,' *The Chesterton Review* XXXIX, no. 3/4 (2013): 49-60 (especially 58). See further Sheridan Gilley, 'Newman and Chesterton,' *The Chesterton Review* XXXII, no. 1/2 (2006).

¹⁴⁹ 'The Style of Newman,' in G.K. Chesterton, *A Handful of Authors: Essays on Books and Writers* (London; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1953), 130-33.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Ian Boyd, 'Chesterton's Anglican Reaction to Modernism,' *The Chesterton Review* XV, no. 1/2 (1989): 5-35 (15-16).

¹⁵¹ G.K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in literature* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), 40-48.

¹⁵² This remark is quoted in Maisie Ward's biography. Unfortunately, she does not date the quote, but its place in the book suggests that it was spoken after 1922. Ward, *Chesterton*, 475.

As Ker has pointed out, there are many points of similarity between aspects of Chesterton's work and aspects of Newman's.¹⁵³ In light of the fact that Chesterton had read 'most' of Newman's work by an early stage in his career, it is reasonable to argue that these similarities indicate possible influence. I will discuss a number of these points in chapters two, three, four, and five. First, however, I will mention an area of great relevance to this thesis: natural religion and natural theology.

Newman argues that Christianity 'is a religion in addition to the religion of nature ... [it] does not supersede or contradict it', claims that 'we find in Scripture our Lord and His Apostles always treating Christianity as the completion and supplement of Natural Religion,' and even writes that those who are likely to respond to arguments for Christianity are 'those only whose minds are properly prepared for it; and by being prepared, I mean to denote those who are imbued with the religious opinions and sentiments which I have identified with Natural Religion.'¹⁵⁴ This is an enormously positive view of natural religion, one which finds strong echoes in Chesterton's treatment of natural religion and his use of the theological dimension of natural religion, that is, natural theology.

As discussed above, Chesterton presents to his readers what he refers to, in *Orthodoxy*, as his 'personal philosophy or natural religion',¹⁵⁵ using natural theology for the first and much the greatest part of his apologetics, so that he only brings his readers into engagement with the Incarnation when their 'minds are properly prepared for it', in Newman's terms; in other words, his actual methods as an apologist fit very well with

¹⁵³ See Ker, *Chesterton*, 84, 223, 226-27, 239, 277-78, 353, 404, 501, 507-08, 600, 620. Also, personal communication from Ian Ker.

¹⁵⁴ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, Ind ; London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979 (orig. pub. 1870)), 302, 303, 323. (Henceforward abbreviated to *GA*.)

¹⁵⁵ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 252.

Newman's ideas. His use of specifically natural theology rather than natural religion, as such, in his apologetics may be accounted for by the likelihood that his readership was, generally speaking, more secular, less religious than Newman's.

Newman's verdict that revealed Christianity 'does not supersede or contradict' natural religion but is its 'completion and supplement' is echoed in Chesterton's judgement, in 1924, that his own journey to Catholicism had 'only crowned and confirmed' the 'vision of things' which was a part of his own childhood natural religion;¹⁵⁶ in 1929, he wrote that the end of that journey had not 'come to destroy but to fulfil' his earlier religious convictions.¹⁵⁷ Chesterton's use of natural theology and natural religion¹⁵⁸ relates to Newman's views on natural religion sufficiently closely for influence to seem extremely plausible.

Scholarly discussion of Chesterton's natural theology

Recently, three theologians have discussed Chesterton's natural theology, without investigating it in depth. In *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians*, Alison Milbank points out, in relation to *Orthodoxy*, that in this work Chesterton develops a 'natural religion' and 'a personal form of natural theology'. She remarks that it is 'unusual' to seek 'to establish a natural philosophical theology in the modern period,'¹⁵⁹ but she does not expand on the point, as it is not greatly relevant to the main argument of her book, which is concerned with analysing Tolkien and Chesterton's theological poetics via stylistics.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ G.K. Chesterton, 'George MacDonald,' in G.K. Chesterton, *G.K.C. as M.C.: being a collection of thirty-seven introductions by G.K. Chesterton*, ed. J.P. De Fonseka (London: Methuen & Co., 1929), 163-172 (163).

¹⁵⁷ G.K. Chesterton, 'Dedication to E.V. Lucas,' in Chesterton, *M.C.*, v-viii (vii).

¹⁵⁸ See Fagerberg, *Chesterton*, 63-84, 99-100.

¹⁵⁹ Milbank, *Chesterton*, 9-11, 121.

¹⁶⁰ Milbank, *Chesterton*, xv.

Jon Coutts and Brett Speakman have also written briefly on Chesterton's natural theology.¹⁶¹ In the course of a discussion on Barth, Chesterton, and 'the basis of Christian knowledge,' Coutts notes that Chesterton creates a 'sacramental, "Incarnation-approved" form of natural theology,'¹⁶² but he does not explore that theology or even discuss such central features of it as wonder and joy (nor does he significantly clarify what 'Incarnation-approved' might have meant for Chesterton). Speakman, on the other hand, concentrates on wonder to the exclusion of other important aspects of Chesterton's theology. He points out that 'Chesterton introduced a distinctive natural theology that contained wonder as its primary and fundamental characteristic,'¹⁶³ but does not develop that insight into a full picture of Chesterton's theology. Instead, he focuses very closely on wonder and discusses it as if it were the sum of Chesterton's theology, treating the part as if it were the whole, with very little conceptual development.

Coutts, who is comparing Chesterton's view of Christian knowledge to Barth's, tries to situate Chesterton in relation to a Barthian frame of reference, emphasising the importance of the Incarnation in Chesterton's thought and writing dismissively that Chesterton was 'no mere natural theologian.'¹⁶⁴ Speakman, on the other hand, follows Nichols¹⁶⁵ in overplaying the role of Thomism in Chesterton's thought.¹⁶⁶ This error is

¹⁶¹ Jon Coutts, 'Karl Barth, G. K. Chesterton, and the Basis of Christian Knowledge,' *The Chesterton Review* XXXIX, no. 1/2 (2013): 101-09. Brett H. Speakman, 'The extraordinary of the ordinary: G.K. Chesterton, imagination and the wonder of a natural theology,' in *Poetry, Philosophy and Theology in Conversation: Thresholds of Wonder*, ed. Francesca Bugliani Knox & Jennifer Reek (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2019). 87-99 (Ebook).

¹⁶² Coutts, 'Barth, Chesterton,' 101-09 (103).

¹⁶³ Speakman, 'Extraordinary of ordinary,' 87-99 (87).

¹⁶⁴ Coutts, 'Barth, Chesterton,' 101-09 (102).

¹⁶⁵ For instance, Nichols overstates when he claims 'complete congruence' between 'Thomas's philosophical-theological outlook' and Chesterton's 'commitment to a theistically ordered realism.' Nichols, *Chesterton*, 73. A strong affinity there was, but Chesterton's own outlook was informed by numerous other influences, see chapter two and my discussion of Newman above.

¹⁶⁶ Speakman goes so far as to suggest that 'Chesterton's natural theology locates its foundation in Thomistic metaphysics.' This is a misreading of the influences that shaped Chesterton's thinking, as I will show in chapter two. Speakman, 'Extraordinary of ordinary,' 87-99 (89, see also 89-91).

very understandable as Chesterton's ideas were certainly very compatible with Thomism. He had a number of very learned Roman Catholic friends, at a time when Thomist influence was at a peak in the Roman Catholic Church, in the wake of Pope Leo XIII's 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*.¹⁶⁷ These included at least one scholarly Dominican (Vincent McNabb), and another highly cultured priest who translated Jacques Maritain's very influential *Art and Scholasticism*¹⁶⁸ (John O'Connor), not to mention intellectuals including Hilaire Belloc and Maurice Baring. McNabb was certainly writing in *The New Witness*, on topics including Aquinas, while Chesterton's brother Cecil was editing it and Chesterton himself was a regular contributor.¹⁶⁹ Chesterton must have had some familiarity with Thomist ideas, via such friends.

In addition, Chesterton's very well-received book on Aquinas (not written till 1933) has led, at times, to his relationship with Thomism being overstated. Notwithstanding the brilliance of that book, Chesterton's insights were shaped by a literary, philosophical and theological context very different from the scholastic and patristic background of Thomism (see chapter two). He himself, in his *Autobiography*, testifies to his younger self's lack of knowledge of Aquinas, saying that he began with 'an inchoate and half-baked philosophy of my own ... I should have been amazed to know how near in some ways was my Anything to the *Ens* of St. Thomas Aquinas.'¹⁷⁰ It is necessary to balance recognition of his surprising similarities with certain aspects of

¹⁶⁷ This singled Aquinas out for special honour and ordered the study of his ideas in Roman Catholic educational institutions. See <http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html> [accessed 27 November 2017]. See also Owen Chadwick, *A History of the Popes 1830-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 281-83.

¹⁶⁸ Milbank, *Chesterton*, 16-25.

¹⁶⁹ Vincent McNabb, 'The Dumb Ox of Thought,' *The New Witness (formerly The Eye-Witness)* 5 December 1912, collected vols., 1912-23, Vol. I, No. 5, 149-50.

¹⁷⁰ G.K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton* (London: Hutchinson, 1936), 150-151. First published in 1936.

Thomism with awareness of the other influences on his work to gain a proper perspective on the distinctiveness of his own unique way of thinking.

This brief survey provides the first part of an answer to the question, ‘Why has natural theology been disregarded in Chesterton criticism?’ The neglect of natural theology in the academy has left few theologians concerned to consider it; the multifarious nature of Chesterton’s work has meant that most of his critics have been interested in other aspects than the theological; those who have discussed his theology have often had agendas which did not involve natural theology. In spite of those negative factors, these three theologians have touched on Chesterton’s natural theology, but they have not developed their analysis. Each has discerned certain aspects of his natural theology, without developing those initial insights or creating a substantial picture of his theological thinking. In sum, Chesterton scholarship has yet to put together a convincing theological framework for his work. In chapters two and three I will attempt to go further and construct a robust and comprehensive account of his theological thinking, built upon his natural theology.

There is a second part to the answer to the question, ‘Why has natural theology been disregarded in Chesterton criticism?’ This relates to its hidden, sub-surface role in Chesterton’s apologetics. His natural theology emerges in passing, in the course of his apologetics. It remains implicit and has to be disentangled from his apologetics work to be seen plainly. Because it is embodied in apologetics, the attention of the reader is directed towards the ways Chesterton communicates Christian ideas to his non-religious readers, rather than back towards the origins of those ideas in his natural theology. In addition, as his brother Cecil pointed out, Chesterton himself created a major problem by his ‘habit of illustrating his thesis by references to obviously ephemeral phenomena in life or literature. ... [and] the transient fashions of politics.’ This unfortunate habit has greatly hindered

analysis and appreciation of the serious theological thinking at the heart of Chesterton's work; it, and the reasons given above, have made it hard to see his natural theology clearly.

The function of natural theology in Chesterton's apologetics

Having addressed the three major objections to my suggestion that natural theology is at the heart of Chesterton's work, I will now develop my thesis. I have surveyed the existing writing on Chesterton and noted the absence of substantial investigation into natural theology, which I am arguing is a central theme in his work. I will now continue an investigation of that theme, aiming to show that natural theology is the clarifying concept which provides the essential framework for Chesterton's thinking and thus enables the reader to connect the scattered elements of his thought in much clearer ways than has hitherto been possible. Chesterton himself wrote that 'the essence of every picture is the frame,'¹⁷¹ and finding the correct frame for his work helps us to appreciate the substance and coherence beneath the sometimes confusing surfaces of his writing. It also assists the student in seeing how to place him in relation to other Christian thinkers, discerning what in his work is most original and what most in harmony with more conventional theologians.

It should perhaps be noted, at this point, that a coherent thinker is not always a systematic thinker; in the case of Chesterton, as with many other creative thinkers, the coherence of his thought may best be discerned by analysis in terms of pattern, not

¹⁷¹ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 243.

analysis in terms of system. Certain consistent patterns run through his writing and, I will argue, some of the most important of those patterns are marked out by the shape of his natural theology.

In the following chapters, I will make the case that Chesterton's natural theology provides a convincing explanation for the nature of his apologetics and of the theological aspects of his writing through his whole career. I will argue that his 'creative theology' was very largely constructed from natural theology, and that he arrived at the essentials of that 'creative theology' very early in his career and continued to work from those essentials for the rest of his life, using those theological ideas to explore artistic, literary, political, moral, social, and other cultural areas of life in a highly distinctive way. This marked reliance on natural theology, was evident throughout his career, even after 1922, when, as a well-known Roman Catholic writer, he was asked to write in defence of the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁷²

I will attempt to demonstrate that natural theology's partnership with philosophy and its openness to other inter-disciplinary partnerships, involving history, literature, art and other disciplines, is particularly important across much of Chesterton's work. He constantly coupled theology and philosophy in his writing, and closely linked theology with historical, literary, and other cultural studies as well. In this way, when doing apologetics, he could reinforce the restricted resources of natural theology with lines of enquiry from other disciplines. I will also argue that he gives his natural theology a mediating function, that is to say, he forges a form of natural theology that he can use as a medium of communication to express Christian ideas in terms accessible to non-religious readers and hearers.

¹⁷² See the analysis of *CCC* in chapter four.

I will make my case by analysing the structure, methods, resources, and scope of Chesterton's natural theology, and its relationship to his apologetics and to the importance of the Incarnation in his thought. In so doing, I will seek to demonstrate that the concept of natural theology can lead to explanations for a number of previously confusing aspects of his work and reveal the underlying structures of thought which underpinned his writing. This may enable the reader better to understand the coherence and the substance of his thought.

The structure of this thesis

In chapters two and three, in seeking to demonstrate that there is indeed a unifying structure beneath the varied surfaces of Chesterton's work, I will analyse at some length his implicit and idiosyncratic natural theology, which gives consistency and substance to his work across the many genres in which he worked. In chapter four I will argue that this natural theology enables a better understanding of his apologetics, and test my thesis by analysing aspects of Chesterton's style, modes of argument, and use of language in light of the arguments I have advanced concerning his natural theology and its relationship to his apologetics.

In chapter five I will address the issue of Chesterton's approach to the Incarnation: whereas his interest in the Incarnation might seem inconsistent with my argument that natural theology is central to his work, I will attempt to show that, in fact, it is his natural theology which explains the unusual features of his approach to the Incarnation. In the Conclusion, I will suggest that the view of Chesterton's natural theology which I am presenting can bring a new perspective to assessments of the significance of Chesterton's writing, enabling better judgements to be made about the value of his work in many areas.

Chapter II:

The Structure of Chesterton's Natural Theology

Introduction

In this chapter, I will attempt to outline the basic structure of Chesterton's natural theology and to describe the ideas which were central to that theology. My investigation will begin with a survey of the early influences which shaped his thinking, and I will then explore the fundamental concepts of his natural theology.

Origins and influences

*Orthodoxy*¹ is perhaps Chesterton's most famous book, but several of his strongest early influences came from sources far from any kind of Christian orthodoxy. He came from a home which was not characterised by religious interest, but by literary and artistic enthusiasm, and political liberalism.² His brother Cecil confirmed in 1908 that the 'politics and religion of his parents were emphatically Liberal,'³ unlike the later religion of both their sons.

¹ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 209-366.

² See Ada Elizabeth Chesterton, *The Chestertons* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1941), 19-41. See also Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton* (London ; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952), 12-105.

³ Cecil Chesterton, *A Criticism*, 29.

This background helps to explain the phrasing of his assertion, in *Orthodoxy*, that ‘orthodoxy is not only (as is often urged) the only safe guardian of morality or order, but is also the only logical guardian of liberty, innovation and advance.’⁴ Such statements demonstrate that, while Chesterton moved on from the religious liberalism of his parents, elements of the political and cultural liberalism in which he was raised stayed with him and shaped aspects of his later theological outlook; he came to see Christianity, rather than political liberalism, as the ‘guardian of liberty, innovation, and advance’, yet, as Julia Stapleton has commented, ‘He attempted to salvage “true” Liberalism, Christianity, and even art and poetry at the same time.’⁵

The sense of wonder which so strongly characterizes his work first came to him at a young age through home and family, rather than church: ‘What was wonderful about childhood is that anything in it was a wonder. It was not merely a world full of miracles; it was a miraculous world.’⁶ As his *Autobiography*⁷ and his brother’s memoir unselfconsciously reveal,⁸ the home he grew up in was a very English home, and he grew up in the late Victorian era of great patriotism and national pride. These things stayed with him, so that Stapleton can even refer to ‘Chesterton’s identity with England and his English sensibilities as the cornerstone of his thought.’⁹ That is an overstatement, for the cornerstone of his thought was religious and theological, as I will seek to show, but his Englishness and his patriotism were certainly significant factors, alongside his political liberalism, in his thinking throughout his life. For him, theology always had political implications, and Pietism was never a possibility.

⁴ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 346.

⁵ Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism*, 26.

⁶ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 38.

⁷ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 9-79.

⁸ Cecil Chesterton, *A Criticism*, 27-52.

⁹ Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism*, 209.

As for religion, Cecil characterised the kind of religion his brother imbibed at home, in ‘an atmosphere of free inquiry,’ as ‘a theology which was called undogmatic, because its dogmas were so simple and humane that they seemed to their exponents to be self-evident ... a vague theo-philanthropy.’¹⁰ Gilbert Chesterton’s own verdict was: ‘In the purely religious sense, I was brought up among people who were Unitarians and Universalists.’¹¹

This initial ‘vague theo-philanthropy’ was developed through contact with a famously powerful orator. The family went to church ‘very seldom’,¹² but when they did they went to hear the well-known preacher Stopford Brooke (who was Anglican till 1880, Unitarian by 1884).¹³ Chesterton wrote of Brooke in his *Autobiography* as ‘that large-hearted and poetic orator,’ (identifying him first by his rhetorical powers, rather than any religious characteristic) and added, ‘I long accepted the sort of optimistic theism that he taught,’ calling it ‘my first faith.’¹⁴ Exposure to Brooke’s famously powerful rhetoric at a formative age may have influenced Chesterton’s own style; Brooke’s ‘optimistic theism’ may have had an effect on the optimistic nature of Chesterton’s own theism.¹⁵

In addition, at the heart of this ‘first faith’ were the very strong connections Brooke made between theology and literature; Chesterton’s own later theology also had substantial literary links. Moreover, Brooke discerns in the poets he discusses a kind of natural theology which may also have influenced Chesterton: Brooke asserts, in his book *Theology in the English Poets*, that ‘The poets of England ever since Cowper have been more and more theological ... But the theology of the poets is different from that of

¹⁰ Cecil Chesterton, *A Criticism*, 29-30.

¹¹ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 171.

¹² Ward, *Chesterton*, 20.

¹³ Oddie, *Chesterton*, 68-72.

¹⁴ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 172.

¹⁵ For a sample of this rhetoric, see Stopford Augustus Brooke, *Short sermons* (London; New York: Macmillan, 1892), 1-11.

churches and sects, in this especially, that it is not formulated into propositions, but is the natural growth of their own hearts;’ in other words, it is a kind of natural theology. Brooke goes on to insist that poets are ‘sure to have a theology – that is, a Doctrine of God in his relation to Man, Nature, and their own soul – which will be independent of conventional religious thought.’¹⁶ In the case of Wordsworth, he goes so far as to declare that ‘The whole of his poetry is full, not of systematic theology, but of his own theology.’¹⁷ Chesterton was to see the relationship between the theology of poets and ‘conventional religious thought’ so differently that he might be said to have turned his mentor’s ideas on their head; exposure to such ideas, however, may have had an influence as he came to develop his own natural theology.

In *Theology in the English Poets*, Stopford Brooke declares that he aims ‘to rub out the sharp lines drawn by that false distinction of sacred and profane. If what I believed were true ... then there was no subject which did not in the end run up into Theology, which might not in the end be made religious. I wished then to claim as belonging to the province of the Christian ministry, political, historical, scientific, and artistic work, in their connection with Theology.’¹⁸ The reader might well discern a kinship between the programme Brooke mapped out for himself and aspects of Chesterton’s own later apologetics. Chesterton was to harbour similar ambitions, and to extend the reach of theological investigation into numerous subjects, including the ‘political, historical ... and artistic.’ Others might have felt such subjects to be separated from theology, but Chesterton, like Brooke, believed that this ‘distinction of sacred and profane’ was ‘false’

¹⁶ Stopford Augustus Brooke, *Theology in the English poets: Cowper-Coleridge-Wordsworth and Burns* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1874), 1.

¹⁷ Brooke, *English poets*, 75.

¹⁸ Brooke, *English poets*, xii. See also Brooke, *Short sermons*, 1-11.

and all these subjects did ‘run up into Theology.’ His understanding of what that meant, however, came to be far more Catholic than Brooke’s.

Another important figure for Chesterton was the writer and Christian minister George MacDonald, whose influence was also both literary and spiritual. Chesterton saw MacDonald’s spirituality as a ‘glamorous mysticism’, and felt that his ‘optimistic Calvinism’ was ‘substantially the same’ as Stopford Brooke’s ‘optimistic theism.’¹⁹ In 1924 he declared that MacDonald’s fairy story *The Princess and the Goblin*, which he read in childhood, ‘has made a difference to my whole existence ... helped me to see things in a certain way from the start; a vision of things which even so real a revolution as a change of religious allegiance has substantially only crowned and confirmed’.²⁰ Chesterton’s comment demonstrates the bond between the literary and the spiritual in his thought, and the powerful role imagination played in his theology, even across doctrinal boundaries: MacDonald’s ‘optimistic Calvinism’ provided a way ‘to see things’ which was not contradicted but ‘crowned and confirmed’ by Chesterton’s later Catholicism.²¹

Under the influence of this ‘optimistic theism’ and ‘optimistic Calvinism’, half of the dozen poems Chesterton wrote for *The Debater*, a school magazine he helped to found, were on religious themes.²² His mind was clearly working theologically from a young age, if in naïve ways. Indeed, three of his central theological ideas can be seen in formation in the years immediately after he left school. The first is the sense of wonder as the starting point for all his thinking. In his youth in the mid-1890s he developed his own ‘mystical theory’ which was:

substantially this: that even mere existence, reduced to its most primary limits, was extraordinary enough to be exciting. ... At the back of our brains, so to speak, there was a forgotten blaze or burst

¹⁹ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 172.

²⁰ Chesterton, *M.C.*, 163.

²¹ Chesterton, *M.C.*, 167-71.

²² Oddie, *Chesterton*, 55-67.

of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the artistic and spiritual life was to dig for this submerged sunrise of wonder; so that a man sitting in a chair might suddenly understand that he was actually alive, and be happy.²³

This sense of wonder and surprise is a constant theme in his work. He returns to it many times, and I will consider it in depth shortly. It is important to note that he brackets ‘the artistic and spiritual life’ together as both searching for this ‘sunrise of wonder’; this partnership between the artistic and the spiritual was to be a central feature of his work, as I will seek to demonstrate.

The second of Chesterton’s theological foundations, I will argue, was his mystical and sacramental view of life. An essay published in his school’s senior magazine, *The Union*, in the summer of 1893 provides evidence that the sacramental aspect, in particular, was already developing strongly by that date. The essay was called ‘The Fallacy of the Material’. In the essay, he compares Michelangelo and Giotto, in these terms: ‘Michael Angelo is not only greater than Giotto, he is more religious; he is greater because he is more religious. ... By exactly so much as the greater artist takes in and recognises the material world with all its facts and functions and processes, by so much is he more spiritual than the other.’ By making the artist’s attitude to the material the test of the artist’s spiritual stature, Chesterton begins to set out a sacramental view of life, without using theological language.

He then contrasts ‘two classes’ of men: those who have practised false and true religion. He asks: ‘Which of the two classes have been the spiritual men? There is only one answer: those who attached its just value to the material world.’ He reveals the thinking behind this assessment when writing of Walt Whitman, whom he terms ‘the most spiritual of modern poets,’ although Whitman was far from orthodox Christianity. He

²³ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 93-95. See also Wills, *Chesterton*, 24-26.

asserts that Whitman ‘treats of the roots of life,’ and adds: ‘the joys of life as Whitman presents them, ... are merely valuable as so many evidences of the love at the heart of all things.’ For Chesterton, the love at the heart of all things can only be the imprint of a divine creator.

He ends the essay with a ringing appeal to his readers: ‘If we can grasp once for all that religion is not a curtailment of human life, but an expansion of it, that it is not a rejection of the material, but a comprehension of it, that it is not a more vague but a more vivid humanity, then ... We shall begin to do justice to life itself.’²⁴ His rhetoric is already well practised, and he uses it here to bring his sacramental approach together with his understanding that religion should be a life-enhancing force, in the light of the wonder of creation. Overall, the essay contains a strongly sacramental view of religion, which might even be seen as propounding the beginnings of a kind of ‘sacramental mysticism’, in non-technical language. It also demonstrates several other ideas which were to recur throughout his work: true religion as a positive force in human life, and an insistence that there is a very close relationship between the artistic and the spiritual.

The reference to Whitman in that essay is significant.²⁵ Chesterton himself said that he ‘owed much of my deliverance from the decadent cynicism that was corrupting most of the young men of my generation’²⁶ to Whitman, and that Whitman defined ‘the point of view of unfathomable wonder at the energy of Being, the power of God,’²⁷ crediting this

²⁴ G.K. Chesterton, ‘The Fallacy of the Material,’ *The Union Magazine* I, no. 1 (July, 1893): 111-14. *The Union Magazine* is to be found in The Chesterton Archive, St Paul’s School, London.

²⁵ See Adam Schwartz, *The Third Spring: G.K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, Christopher Dawson, and David Jones* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 40-41.

²⁶ Chesterton, ‘On My Anti-Americanism,’ in *The Illustrated London News*, 21 April 1928, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXXIV, 509-13 (511). *The Illustrated London News* will henceforward be referred to in footnotes as *ILN*.

²⁷ Chesterton, ‘What We All Mean,’ in *The Speaker*, 16 February 1901, quoted in Schwartz, *Third Spring*, 40-41.

American poet with a major influence on him and on his own sense of wonder. His brother Cecil wrote:

The effect which Whitman's poems produced on him was electric. They seemed to sum up the aspirations of his own youth. They gave him a faith to hold to, and a gospel to preach. ... He embraced passionately the three great articles of Whitman's faith, the ultimate goodness of all things implying the acceptance of the basest and meanest no less than the noblest in life, the equality and solidarity of men, and the redemption of the world by comradeship.²⁸

Versions of these three themes recur throughout his early work, showing how they helped to shape Chesterton's own natural theology, while at the same time being adjusted to fit in with his developing thought. Whitman's rather mystical ideas about 'the ultimate goodness of all things' chimed with Chesterton's own growing mysticism and sense of wonder at creation, while lacking the understanding of sin and evil Chesterton was developing. Chesterton's democratic instincts welcomed Whitman's emphasis on 'the equality and solidarity of men' and on 'comradeship,' although Chesterton was coming to believe that it would take more than human comradeship to achieve 'the redemption of the world'.

Together, these three themes in Whitman's work fed into a major aspect of Chesterton's growing understanding of humanity: the idea that humans are created by God, in the image of God, and are therefore of value and goodness, in spite of human sinfulness. This understanding of what it is to be human was to develop into Chesterton's own, distinctive theological anthropology, as I will outline later in this chapter. Whitman's optimism may also have helped to reinforce Chesterton's own optimistic bent, and perhaps may have done so too strongly, as Chesterton has been criticised for taking too sunny a view of life and not paying sufficient attention to the darker and more difficult aspects of

²⁸ Cecil Chesterton, *A Criticism*, 36.

many people's lives.²⁹ To the extent that he erred in this way, Whitman may be partly to blame.

Robert Louis Stevenson also had a strong influence on Chesterton,³⁰ who related closely to 'Stevenson's enormous capacity for joy', which, in Chesterton's view, 'flowed directly out of his profoundly religious temperament,' and gave him the 'gaiety of the mystic'.³¹ This joyful enthusiasm for life was one common factor Stevenson shared with Whitman, with Chesterton himself, and with another early influence, Robert Browning. Chesterton saw Browning as 'passionately interested in and in love with existence ... a great poet of human joy',³² and in those respects felt him as a kindred spirit.

A second common factor shared by Whitman, Stevenson, and Browning was that they all dealt with spiritual themes in their work but none was any kind of orthodox Christian. Indeed, Whitman³³ and Browning might be said to have created theistic but not Christian natural theologies, in the case of Browning usually via characters in his poems.³⁴ Stevenson, though he avowed himself an atheist in his youth, thought in terms sufficiently similar to natural theology for Chesterton to refer to him as 'a Christian theologian without knowing it'.³⁵

It can be argued that Brooke, Whitman, Browning, and Stevenson all preceded Chesterton as practitioners of one kind of natural theology or another.³⁶ It is not surprising that the natural theology he developed shows traces of their ideas, and their influence may

²⁹ See Wills, *Chesterton*, 4-6.

³⁰ Hollis, *Mind of Chesterton*, 242-49. See also Cecil Chesterton, *A Criticism*, 42-43.

³¹ Chesterton, *Handful of Authors*, 1-9 (3).

³² G.K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (London & New York: Macmillan & Co., 1903), 186.

³³ See Alfred Kazin, *God & the American writer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 107-19.

³⁴ Chesterton certainly saw Browning's poetry in this light. See Chesterton, *Browning*, 177-202.

³⁵ *Robert Louis Stevenson*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XVIII, 140.

³⁶ For Stevenson, Browning, and Whitman, whatever theology they practised must have been natural theology, as none of them acknowledged any religious authorities or divine revelation. In other words, their sense of divine presence in nature and human nature comes within the scope of the working understanding of natural theology given in chapter one.

well have contributed to its unusual shape. For all their impact on his thinking, however, his own natural theology was to be very different from any of theirs, and far more orthodox. With such literary and spiritual influences, it is perhaps also not a surprise that Chesterton came to look back on his youthful self as being ‘almost entirely Pagan and Pantheist’.³⁷ (That pagan element may perhaps be partly responsible for the considerable sympathy he retained throughout his life for Europe’s pagan past, particularly its great writers.)³⁸

None of Chesterton’s early literary or spiritual influences were responsible for the third of the key concepts he developed at this time: a conviction of the reality and power of evil in the world, which he came to associate with the Christian doctrine of original sin. He spent a year at the Slade School of Art, 1893-94, during which he experimented with the occult and came into contact with the aesthetic or decadent movement, which espoused ‘art for art’s sake,’ and of which he took an exceedingly negative view.³⁹

Looking back on that time from the perspective of 1908, when he wrote the dedication to *The Man who was Thursday*, he saw it as a time when there was ‘a sick cloud upon the soul,’ when ‘art admired decay,’ and it seemed that ‘the world was old and ended.’⁴⁰ He emerged from those years with a strong conviction of the reality of evil and of sin.⁴¹ As he put it in his *Autobiography*, that ‘period of youth ... has left in my mind for ever a certitude upon the objective solidity of Sin.’⁴² The phrase ‘objective solidity’ indicates that he saw his view of sin in terms of fact and experience rather than as an abstract theological doctrine.

³⁷ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 148.

³⁸ See, for example, *G.K.’s Weekly*, 25 September 1926, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 157-58.

³⁹ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 80-104. See also Oddie, *Chesterton*, 84-125.

⁴⁰ G.K. Chesterton, *The man who was Thursday: a nightmare* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972 (orig. pub. 1908)), 5-7.

⁴¹ See Dudley Barker, *G.K. Chesterton: a biography* (London: Constable, 1973), 47-59.

⁴² Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 80.

Chesterton's religious ideas gained clarity steadily after he met Frances Blogg, his future wife, in 1896. She startled him because, while the circles they moved in were full of people who loved to talk about religion and philosophy, 'she actually practised a religion.'⁴³ She was a committed Anglo-Catholic. In the dedication to 'The Ballad of the White Horse' he wrote that she 'brought the Cross to me',⁴⁴ crediting her with leading him to a definite Christian commitment.⁴⁵

Before that point, however, it is important to note that he had already discovered the basic building blocks of his natural theology: a belief in divine creation, producing a deep sense of wonder and joy; a mystical and sacramental approach to life; the beginnings of a theological anthropology; counterbalancing these, a deep awareness of evil and sin.⁴⁶ All these he discovered through his own experience, rather than through formal Christian instruction, while he was moving in not particularly religious circles. The fact that experience was the path by which he discovered these things may partly help to explain why he relied on experience so much in his own theology. He charted this progress himself in *Orthodoxy*,⁴⁷ and William Oddie's painstaking research has filled in many of the details of the development of Chesterton's beliefs.⁴⁸ The tension between Chesterton's joyful understanding of creation and his sense of the reality of evil and sin produced two further major themes: that some kind of idea of a 'Fall' was needed to resolve the contradiction between the goodness of creation and the present state of things; and that paradox is central to human life. I will consider these two themes later in this chapter.

⁴³ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 152.

⁴⁴ 'The Ballad of the White Horse,' in G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Poems of G.K. Chesterton* (London: C. Palmer, 1927), 202.

⁴⁵ See Barker, *Chesterton*, 60-65, 76-77.

⁴⁶ As Alison Milbank puts it, writing of Chesterton's theology: 'the bizarre truth is that he seems to have invented it for himself,' Milbank, *Chesterton*, 15.

⁴⁷ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 209-366.

⁴⁸ See Oddie, *Chesterton*.

Through his Anglo-Catholic wife-to-be, from 1896 onwards, Chesterton began to move in Anglo-Catholic circles. He became friends with some of the leading Anglo-Catholic clergy of the day, including Conrad Noel, Percy Dearmer, Henry Scott Holland, and Charles Gore. He also made friendships with a number of Roman Catholic intellectuals, including Hilaire Belloc (whom he met in 1900), Maurice Baring, John O'Connor, Vincent McNabb, and Ronald Knox. With such friends it is not surprising that his theological ideas became clearer, and more clearly Catholic.

There remained a kind of dialogue in his theology between the earlier intuitions which shaped his natural theology and the subsequent Anglo-Catholic and Roman Catholic influences. The formal Christian theology he discovered through his wife, his friends, and his own reading served to complete and to confirm his own earlier intuitions; it did not contradict those early insights, nor change the direction of travel he had been moving in before he came under the influence of any church.⁴⁹ In 1929, he wrote, as the introduction to a collection of his introductions (the earliest of which had been written in 1903): 'I am rather surprised to see how little my fundamental convictions have changed. For my final conviction, which was also a conversion, did not come to destroy but to fulfil.'⁵⁰

While he worked within the framework of a broadly Catholic theology, and his creedal theology developed over time, his writing remained very much built on the creative theology he had discovered for himself on his path towards Christianity, on his ideas about Creation, sin and evil, and, within those broad areas, the powerful and personal themes outlined above. These concepts were at the heart of his natural theology. They form the principal guiding ideas across the whole range of his creative work, together with the Incarnation, to be considered in chapter five. I am not suggesting that these doctrines

⁴⁹ Cecil Chesterton, *A Criticism*, 63-74.

⁵⁰ Chesterton, *M.C.*, vii.

form the sum of all his theology. Other theological concepts are present around them, but these concepts are predominant; the reader sees them at the heart of his stories and arguments, again and again. I will now examine the structure and main themes of this theology.

Chesterton's understanding of Creation

The sense of wonder is the keynote of Chesterton's thought. He returns to it again and again, throughout his career: in 1903 he wrote, 'Of one thing I am certain, that the age needs, first and foremost to be startled; to be taught the nature of wonder;'⁵¹ in 1930, in an article in *G.K.'s Weekly*, he referred to the 'art of wonder, which is the life of man;'⁵² and in a 1931 interview, he said: 'From the beginning I think I was staggered by the stupendous marvel of existence ... This marvel fascinated me, as it does today.'⁵³ The words 'from the beginning' remind us that his sense of the wonder of creation predated his acceptance of revealed Christian doctrines, or his role as an apologist; it was something he came to as part of his earlier construction of his own natural theology (as noted above).

To take the sense of wonder as one's starting point is not in itself particularly novel.⁵⁴ What is distinctive about Chesterton and the sense of wonder is the way he develops it. First, he links this sense of wonder and surprise, and consequent gratitude and

⁵¹ Chesterton, in *Black and White*, 14 February 1903, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 160.

⁵² G.K. Chesterton, 'The artistic side,' *G.K.'s Weekly* XII, no. 298, Week ending, 29 November 1930, 183.

⁵³ Chesterton, in the *Daily Sketch*, 14 May 1931, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 170.

⁵⁴ Plato has Socrates describe 'the feeling of wonder' as the 'starting point' of philosophy. Plato, *Theaetetus*, ed. John & Brown McDowell, Lesley, Oxford World's Classics, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 155 d. Aristotle writes: 'It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize.' Aristotle, *The metaphysics*, 2 vols., ed. G. Cyril & Tredennick Armstrong, Hugh, Loeb classical library, (London, Cambridge, Mass., New York: Heinemann; Harvard University Press; Putnam, 1933), 982b 12.

humility, back to the idea of creation. In one of the biographical parts of *Orthodoxy* he relates how he discovered that this intuition of his matched the implications of the Christian doctrine of divine creation.⁵⁵ As he makes clear in *St. Thomas Aquinas*, his understanding of creation is not of a remote deity setting the universe in motion, but of the immediate presence of God, actively creating all of existence moment by moment, ‘for God with all His powers at every instant is immortally in action’.⁵⁶

This sense of God’s direct ordering of the universe explains Chesterton’s oft-repeated emphasis on the importance of shapes, limits, and boundaries of all kinds as part of the given-ness of the created order. He abhors shapelessness, in any sphere, from paintings lacking structure to secular philosophies lacking clear moral guidance. He expressed this conviction in the *Daily News*, on 9 September 1905: ‘Man is the animal that draws black lines. Sometimes they are lines round a land, and they make patriotism. Sometimes they are lines round an animal, and they make humanity. But in all cases this is true, that men learn to love their limitations, that men learn to love not only the picture, but the frame.’⁵⁷

One of the central results of Chesterton’s theology of creation is its effect on the idea of gratitude. In 1932, in *Chaucer*, he writes, with reference to the idea of creation, to what he calls ‘the abyss of actuality, of existence:’

He who has realized this reality knows that it does outweigh, literally to infinity, all lesser regrets or arguments for negation, and that under all our grumblings there is a subconscious substance of gratitude. ... This is something much more mystical and absolute than any modern thing that is called optimism; for it is only rarely that we realize, like a vision of the heavens filled with a chorus of giants, the primeval duty of Praise.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 269-284.

⁵⁶ *Aquinas*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 531.

⁵⁷ Chesterton, *MWWO*, 107-08.

⁵⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *Chaucer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 36-37. First published in 1932.

This praise of 'Praise' indicates that, in the light of his doctrine of creation, Chesterton sees gratitude as a vital part of life, a gratitude that is deeper than ordinary optimism.

His doctrine of creation also leads him to a commendation of humility. He argues that it is the humble who see the 'vision of things as they really are',⁵⁹ goes so far as to commend the message (which he found in Dickens' writing) that 'humility is the only possible basis of enjoyment,'⁶⁰ and links the loss of humility with the loss of joy: 'If humility has been discredited as a virtue at the present day, it is not wholly irrelevant to remark that this discredit has arisen at the same time as a great collapse of joy in current literature and philosophy. Men have revived the splendour of Greek self-assertion at the same time that they have revived the bitterness of Greek pessimism.'⁶¹ These statements stem from his sense of the givenness and goodness of creation, which leads him to a reevaluation of humility as well as gratitude, and relates both to joy. In his view, humility and joy go together because they both follow the sense of wonder which he felt was the only appropriate response to creation.

Partnership between religion and the arts

Another important aspect of Chesterton's understanding of creation is the relationship it implies between theology and the arts. In his book on Chaucer, he writes:

There is at the back of all our lives an abyss of light, more blinding and unfathomable than any abyss of darkness and it is the abyss of actuality, of existence, of the fact that things truly are, and that we ourselves are incredibly and sometimes almost incredulously real. It is the fundamental fact of being, as against not being ... That light

⁵⁹ 'A Defence of Humility,' in G.K. Chesterton, *The Defendant* (London: J. M. Dent, 1914; original publication 1901), 130-39 (137).

⁶⁰ 'Preface to *Dombey and Son*,' in *A&CWCD*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XV, 317-27 (326).

⁶¹ 'A Defence of Humility,' in Chesterton, *Defendant*, 130-39 (133).

of the positive is the business of the poets, because they see all things in the light of it more than do other men. ...⁶²

Here he sees the poet's role (and by implication, the role of other creative artists) in spiritual and metaphysical terms.⁶³ Others might challenge this. For Chesterton it means that his own creative and theological enterprises are very closely related. He relates the 'glimpses' that 'the artist gives us' of the wonder of existence back to the doctrine of creation: 'These things belong to the same world of wonder as the primary wonder at the very existence of the world ... Creation was the greatest of all Revolutions.'⁶⁴ In *The Everlasting Man* he writes that 'every true artist does feel consciously or unconsciously that he is touching transcendental truths'⁶⁵ because, in his view, art, as well as religion, is informed by the wonder of creation.

In Chesterton's vision, this is the fundamental fact that conditions all intellectual, spiritual and artistic explorations. He places the artistic and the spiritual in a close relationship, as both begin with the same 'fundamental fact of being,' the 'world of wonder' which is hidden from plain sight because of the Fall, and of which, in his view, the arts can give glimpses and the spiritual guidance of Christianity can give a full picture. He frequently brackets the artistic and the spiritual life together as means of rediscovering the hidden truth of the wonder of creation, for instance writing that the 'human soul ... has brought forth poetry and religion in order to explain matters.'⁶⁶

⁶² Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 36-37.

⁶³ In his novel *Manalive*, he goes so far, via one of his characters, as to call poets priests. He has the character Mr Raymond Percy say: "I don't deny that there should be priests to remind men that they will one day die. I only say that at certain strange epochs it is necessary to have another kind of priests, called poets, actually to remind men that they are not dead yet." G.K. Chesterton, *Manalive* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947 (orig. pub. 1912)), 142.

⁶⁴ Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 36-37.

⁶⁵ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 237.

⁶⁶ 'Maeterlinck,' in G.K. Chesterton, *Varied Types* (New York: Dodd, Mead and company, 1905), 209-14 (214).

His sense of wonder at creation also maps out his own course of action: ‘The object of the artistic and spiritual life,’ and the centre of his own work, is ‘to dig for this submerged sunrise of wonder.’⁶⁷ Because he makes this quest his own, for him, natural theology and creative writing walk hand in hand. Looked at from this perspective, his seemingly disparate output at once comes to seem more of an integrated whole. I will consider his understanding of imagination and of the arts more fully in chapter three. Here I simply note that it grows out of his sense of the wonder of creation. Further, given this integrated approach to theology and the arts, he insists that art and literature cannot be separated from morality or theology or philosophy.

The theology of joy and its consequences for ethics

In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton claims: ‘Praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul. Pessimism is at best an emotional half-holiday; joy is the uproarious labour by which all things live ... by its [Christianity’s] creed joy becomes something gigantic ... Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian.’⁶⁸ On his convictions about joy and wonder, he goes on to build a kind of theology of joy. As Aidan Nichols and others have observed, for Chesterton the wonder of creation implies an expanded role in theology for the idea of joy: he does not see joy as caused by particular created things, for him its source is deeper, it comes from God, beginning with joy at God’s creation of existence. In his thinking, joy is not just a marginal note in Christian theology, but a major theological category. Nichols points out that Chesterton is original in using joy as an argument for God’s existence.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 95.

⁶⁸ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 364-65.

⁶⁹ Nichols, *Chesterton*, 107-18. See also Wood, ‘The Argument from Joy,’ 85-92.

In his book on Chaucer he shows how this theology of joy shapes his approach to ethics. Rather than seeing ethics in terms of duties, commandments, and responsibilities, he suggests a rather more joyful image for the ethical life. He declares that ‘up to a certain time life was conceived as a Dance ... The Virtues were like children going round the Mulberry Bush, only the Mulberry Bush was that Burning Bush which they made symbolical of the Incarnation.’⁷⁰ Here he pictures the life of virtue as like a complicated dance, in which the virtues must move in harmony, in relation to themselves and to the Incarnation, which is the central point round which the dance of the virtues revolves, the still point at the centre which anchors it. This presents virtue and morality in the most joyful and positive terms, as things of dynamic beauty. In imagining the life of virtue as a communal dance centred on the Incarnation, Chesterton links aesthetics and morality with Incarnational theology, in the context of his own theology of wonder and joy.

This has an effect on his imagery. He writes, for instance: ‘Science and art without morality are not dangerous in the sense commonly supposed. They are not dangerous like a fire, but dangerous like a fog. A fire is dangerous in its brightness; a fog in its dulness; and thought without morals is merely dull, like a fog.’⁷¹ Whatever reservations there may be about this vast generalisation, it is clear that Chesterton’s theology of wonder and joy makes him see ethics as involving energy, excitement, and beauty, and he often expresses this joyful ethics through dynamic images of goodness. Very often, in his writing (to borrow words used of another author), ‘the image of good’ is characterized by ‘energy ... evil is solemn, good is gay. ... Evil imprisons, good sets free. Evil is tired, good is full of vigour.’⁷²

⁷⁰ Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 158.

⁷¹ Preface to ‘A Child’s History of England,’ in *A&CWCD*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XV, 350-56 (356).

⁷² C.S. Lewis used these phrases of the poet Edmund Spenser, whose writing, at the end of the sixteenth century, reflected something of the worldview which Chaucer’s work so fully embodied,

He also relates his understanding of ethics to his mysticism (discussed below). In an essay on Charles II he suggests that there is even something mystical about good manners, in an allusion to

the virtue of politeness ... [which is] ignored by logical codes. Politeness has indeed about it something mystical; like religion, it is everywhere understood and nowhere defined. ... [King Charles II] could not keep the Ten Commandments, but he kept the ten thousand commandments. ... he was a gentleman, and a gentleman is a man who obeys strange statutes, not to be found in any moral text book, and practises strange virtues nameless from the beginning of the world.⁷³

In writing of G.F. Watts, Chesterton asserts that ‘ethics is like art, a mystic and intuitional affair.’⁷⁴ His claim here that ethics is ‘mystic’ and ‘intuitional’, like art, opens out onto a sense of morality as an aspect of the mystery of creation, rather than a hidebound set of rules; it asserts that morality has more in common with the artistic than with the legal. This view of morality as mysterious and intuitive, analogous to art, developed from his sense of wonder. In sum, Chesterton’s unusual view of ethics begins with joy, and is often couched in mystical terms. In chapter four I will examine how he expresses this approach to ethics in relation to his purposes in apologetics.

Chesterton’s Theological Anthropology

In the *Daily News*, on 12 December 1903, Chesterton declared:

You cannot evade the issue of God: whether you talk about pigs or the binomial theory, you are still talking about Him. ... If Christianity should happen to be true – that is to say, if its God is the real God of the universe – then defending it may mean talking about anything and everything. Things can be irrelevant to the proposition that Christianity is false, but nothing can be irrelevant to the

and which Chesterton sought to revive in the modern age. C.S. Lewis, *Spenser's images of life*, ed. Alastair Fowler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977 (orig. pub., 1967)), 94-95.

⁷³ G.K. Chesterton, *Twelve Types* (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2003 (orig. pub., 1902)), 46-48.

⁷⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *G.F. Watts* (London & New York: Duckworth & Co.; E.P. Dutton & Co., 1904), 121.

proposition that Christianity is true. Zulus, gardening, butchers' shops, lunatic asylums, housemaids and the French Revolution – all these things not only may have something to do with the Christian God, but must have something to do with Him if He lives and reigns.⁷⁵

Here, he presents the idea that 'Christianity is true' within the terms of natural theology, as a proposition to be argued for, not something to be believed on divine authority, and suggests that 'if Christianity should happen to be true' then 'anything and everything' may be relevant to that argument, working in terms of a theological anthropology based on natural theology, rather than on revelation or religious authority.

He further elaborated his approach in 1904, in his biography of the artist G.F. Watts:

Philosophy and theology are not only the only democratic things, they are democratic to the point of being vulgar ... They alone admit all matters; they alone lie open to all attacks. ... There is nothing that is not relevant to these more ancient studies. There is no detail, from buttons to kangaroos, that does not enter into the gay confusion of philosophy. There is no fact of life, from the death of a donkey to the General Post Office, which has not its place to dance and sing in, in the glorious Carnival of theology.⁷⁶

Here, as so often, his natural theology brings together theology and philosophy: he insists that they are close partners in the enterprise of understanding human life. In writing thus, Chesterton is, in effect, proposing the use of theological anthropology to critique and interpret human experience, history and culture in a remarkably wide-ranging way (see chapter four). For him, all of human existence comes within the scope of theological interpretation (with theology assisted by philosophy). His writing may cover ground claimed by historical, literary, social, and other cultural studies, but he sees it all in the

⁷⁵ Chesterton, *Daily News*, 12 December 1903, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 89-90.

⁷⁶ Chesterton, *Watts*, 167-68.

light of his theology of creation and of sin and evil. That vision makes his anthropology theological.⁷⁷

Chesterton sometimes uses the terminology of being made in God's image to express what he sees as the special status of humans in creation, but he is careful not to rest his usage of that term on any appeal to Christian revelation or authority. In 'The Secret Society of Mankind' he claims that the uniqueness of humans in creation, 'has had many names' including that 'man is the image of God.'⁷⁸ By phrasing his claim in this way he presents the Christian term as simply one convenient way of describing a universally agreed phenomenon, allowing himself to use that item of Christian language without privileging Christian doctrine in his discussions; on other occasions he uses terminology such as 'the sacredness of the ordinary man ... the sacredness of every human being'⁷⁹ rather than the phrase 'the image of God' – by such means he keeps his discourse within the boundaries of natural theology.

Yves Denis has outlined the importance of theological anthropology in Chesterton's writing, noting that his 'proper sphere' is

man in his very essence, that is, man as related in his own self to God, or ... man as ontologically dependent on the Godhead. What Chesterton tirelessly propounds in his work is above all a vision of man, either as an individual or as a collectivity, but not such a vision as may be contemplated by man left to his sole natural powers, as perceived from a mere human viewpoint ...

⁷⁷ As Fagerberg notes, Chesterton's *WWWTW* works from a spiritual idea of being human, which Fagerberg terms a 'theological anthropology'. See Fagerberg, *Chesterton*, 48-50. See also Paul Rowan, *The Scrappy Evangelist: Chesterton and a New Apologetics for Today* (Charlotte, North Carolina: ACS Books, 2017), 79, 168-70. Rowan asserts that 'anthropology and theology are intimately connected in the Christian and Chestertonian vision of things.'

⁷⁸ 'The Secret Society of Mankind,' in G.K. Chesterton, *Fancies versus Fads* (London: Methuen, 1923), 117-23.

⁷⁹ G.K. Chesterton, 'Vox Populi, Vox Dei,' *The Chesterton Review* XI, no. 3 (1985): 261-266 (266). This was originally a lecture delivered in 1905.

rather, man's 'creaturely Being unceasingly springing from his Divine Source'.⁸⁰ Denis makes an important point here, although his summary of Chesterton's vision leaves out the damage caused by sin and its effects, and is put in terms which do not reflect the wonder and sacramental mystery that were so important to Chesterton, or the importance of natural theology in Chesterton's writing. Aidan Nichols has also commented on the importance of 'the theme of man in the image of God' in Chesterton's work, noting that it is 'the foundational doctrine of Christian anthropology'.⁸¹

One vital aspect of Chesterton's theological anthropology is not, perhaps, discussed as fully as it deserves to be by Denis and Nichols: the role of the family. Chesterton calls the family 'sacred',⁸² and asserts that 'a child is the very sign and sacrament of personal freedom. He is a fresh free will added to the wills of the world,' and, for the child's parents, 'He is their own creative contribution to creation'.⁸³ In *The Everlasting Man* he identifies original sin and the family as the two facts present from the start of human history,⁸⁴ without seeming to consider the effects of the one on the other. His reluctance to discuss the effects of original sin on the family contrasts strongly with his keen awareness of sin's effects on the state and is a flaw in his analysis.

Chesterton does not ground his understanding of the family on revelation but on creation, announcing: 'the social structure of mankind, far older than all its records and more universal than any of its religions' is built on 'the idea that the commonwealth is made up of a number of small kingdoms, of which a man and a woman become the king and queen and in which they exercise a reasonable authority, subject to the common sense

⁸⁰ Denis, 'Theological Background,' 57-72 (58).

⁸¹ Nichols, *Chesterton*, 119-40 (119).

⁸² *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 275-76.

⁸³ 'Babies and Distributism,' in *The Well and the Shallows*, first published in 1935, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 439-41 (441).

⁸⁴ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 185-87.

of the commonwealth.’⁸⁵ He also declares: ‘The thing that is before all thrones and even all commonwealths. That fact is the family.’⁸⁶ For him, it is an article of faith that the family is the central institution of human society; he sees the family in theological terms, as ‘sacred’. By declaring that the family is ‘older than all ... records’ and ‘more universal’ than any religion he roots his theory of the family in creation, and thus generalises the reach of his theology of society, which can cross religious divides because it is natural, not revealed, theology. A major weakness in his treatment of the family, however, is that he assumes as his norm the traditional family structures of Victorian England, without discussion of other forms of family.

The effects of his theological anthropology on his view of the family can be discerned in a passage from *What’s Wrong with the World*, in which he treats of ‘the ideal house; the happy family’. Here, he draws the idea of property out of a discussion of home and domesticity, with a characteristically religious twist. Taking the

house or home as a test, we may very generally lay the simple spiritual foundations or the idea. God is that which can make something out of nothing. Man ... is that which can make something out of anything. In other words, while the joy of God must be unlimited creation, the special joy of man is limited creation, the combination of creation with limits.

He then relates the idea of creation with limits to that of property:

Property is merely the art of the democracy. It means that every man should have something that he can shape in his own image, as he is shaped in the image of Heaven. But because he is not God, but only a graven image of God, his self-expression must deal with limits; properly with limits that are strict and even small.⁸⁷

In just one passage, he combines the domestic, artistic, religious, political and philosophical. He equates ‘the simple spiritual foundations’ with ‘the idea,’ thus bringing

⁸⁵ ‘The Drift from Domesticity,’ in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 157-64 (161).

⁸⁶ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 185.

⁸⁷ Chesterton, *WWWTW*, 46-48.

together the spiritual and the philosophical. In addition to bringing these into a domestic discussion, he relates a political angle to both the religion and the domesticity; politics is not separate from religion, for him.⁸⁸ At the same time as asserting that human ‘self-expression must deal with limits’ as part of its created nature, he implicitly asserts that, in his view, theology can transcend conventional limits, and become a tool for analysing the domestic life of the home.

This passage demonstrates Chesterton’s habit of looking for the basic principles underlying any discussion and his ability to bring religion into almost any discussion. Here, characteristically, he demonstrates that his theological anthropology can be a tool for the analysis of all areas of life, crossing the boundaries of what might often be seen as different disciplines. He also illustrates the fundamentally communal, rather than individualistic, nature of his theology, with its emphasis on home, family, and community. His theological investigations are able to extend all the way from the fate of nations to the most humble and domestic aspects of life because his theological anthropology enables him to bring theological ideas to bear on almost any aspect of human experience.

Chesterton’s theological anthropology is rooted, not just in a dispassionate doctrine of creation, but in his sense of the wonder of creation. Therefore, in his view, the most ordinary things are extraordinary, and still more so the most ordinary people. This reverence for ordinary people comes from his view of creation: he argues that humans cannot be ordinary, or unequal in value, if all are created by God. From this starting point he builds up a whole theology of ordinary life, of the family and of society, which he feels are revealed in a new light by the Christian doctrine of creation, together with the Christian doctrine of sin.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ I will consider the social and political dimensions of Chesterton’s theology in chapter three.

⁸⁹ His respect for ordinary people as extraordinary creations of God also influenced his decision to write in populist style, in a way that ordinary people could easily read.

Chesterton's use of natural theology limits his ability to discuss the nature of God directly, and so steers him towards addressing issues concerning the divine via creation. The part of creation he particularly uses as the field of his discussions is the human world: human nature, culture, history, and experience. Whereas much natural theology has focused on the natural world, and the relationship between science and religion, Chesterton focuses on human nature, and the relationship between culture and religion. He creates what might be called a natural theology of cultural engagement, in which his theological anthropology plays a central part. In this, his precursor is John Henry Newman, who wrote, in relation to the knowledge of God, of 'three main channels which Nature furnishes for our acquiring this knowledge, viz. our own minds, the voice of mankind, and the course of the world, that is, of human life and human affairs.'⁹⁰ That emphasis on the 'voice of mankind' and on 'human life and human affairs' foreshadows the role that theological anthropology and cultural engagement play in Chesterton's theology and apologetics.

Mysticism and sacramentalism

Chesterton's sacramental mysticism can already be discerned in his early essay on 'The Fallacy of the Material' (see above).⁹¹ For him,

The mystic does not bring doubts or riddles: the doubts and riddles exist already. We all feel the riddle of the earth without anyone to point it out. The mystery of life is the plainest part of it. ... Every stone or flower is a hieroglyphic of which we have lost the key; with every step of our lives we enter into the middle of some story which we are certain to misunderstand.⁹²

⁹⁰ Newman, *GA*, 303.

⁹¹ Chesterton, 'The Fallacy of the Material,' 111-14.

⁹² G.K. Chesterton, *William Blake* (London: Duckworth & Co, 1910), 131-32.

He depicts a mystical approach as a normal aspect of life.

He sees Thomas Carlyle as a mystic and commends him:

Mysticism was with him, as with all its genuine professors, only a transcendent form of common sense. Mysticism and common sense alike consist in a sense of the dominance of certain truths and tendencies which cannot be formally demonstrated or even formally named. Mysticism and common sense are alike appeals to realities that we all know to be real, but which have no place in argument except as postulates.⁹³

Here, Chesterton marks out what, in his view, is one of the boundaries of rational argument: when he claims that mysticism appeals to ‘realities that we all know to be real’ but ‘cannot be formally demonstrated’ and ‘have no place in argument except as postulates’ he is, in effect arguing that the ‘realities’ to which the mystic ‘appeals’ can only be apprehended by imagination, and are not amenable to being argued over by reason. His description of mysticism as ‘only a transcendent form of common sense’⁹⁴ reflects his sense of mysticism as something mainstream, not an esoteric, minority way of understanding the world, but a natural and vital part of human thought, something able to use imagination to work alongside reason in the human enterprise of trying to understand existence.

Chesterton’s line of argument here may remind the reader of Newman’s assertion that the ‘religious imagination ... has a living hold on truths which are really to be found in the world, though they are not upon the surface.’⁹⁵ Like Newman, Chesterton sees the religious, or mystical, imagination as able to grasp truths and realities which are hidden

⁹³ ‘Thomas Carlyle,’ in Chesterton, *Twelve Types*, 55-61 (58).

⁹⁴ He used the same imagery of common sense in ‘The Mystery of the Mystics,’ *Daily News*, 30 August 1901: ‘Mysticism, or a sense of the mystery of things, is simply the most gigantic form of common-sense.’ Chesterton, *DN*, I, 172-75 (173).

⁹⁵ Newman, *GA*, 106.

beneath ‘the surface’ of life; unlike Newman, Chesterton does not provide systematic reasoned argument to justify such assertions.

Because he works within the terms of natural theology, Chesterton does not couch his mysticism in religious language, or ground it in explicit reference to Christian revelation. Instead, he allows it to surface within his discussions of a wide range of non-religious subjects, and in unusual contexts.⁹⁶ The readers of the *Daily News*, on 24 March 1903, may have been surprised to read:

I believe that every object is divine in a very definite and thorough sense. I believe, that is to say, that there is a great pressure of spiritual reality behind things as they seem, and of this view, as I have said continuously, the proof lies in the explanation it affords of countless human affairs.⁹⁷

Here he combines the mystical with apologetics in the context of a daily newspaper, arguing for mysticism as an ‘explanation’ of ‘countless human affairs’.

Perhaps the archetypal way in which Chesterton expresses his mysticism in terms comprehensible to the non-religious reader is his approach to fairy tales. His admiration for fairy tales is based on his mystical view of life. They allow him to discuss mystical ideas without using religious language; by using fairy tales as a framing device, he can put a mystical approach in terms that are congenial and unthreatening to secular readers. In his view: ‘Fairy tales give the truest picture of life’ and ‘the atmosphere of the fairy tale is astonishingly true to life.’ Why?

The great truth and value of the fairy-tale view of life cannot be better conveyed than by saying that it chiefly arises from the entire absence of the supernatural in fairy tales. There is no miraculous department there, nothing conceived as outrageous and exceptional ... There is no trace or hint of that modern ‘spiritual world’ which implies that this world is not spiritual. In the fairy tales, portents are

⁹⁶ See McLuhan, ‘Practical Mystic,’ 1-10.

⁹⁷ Chesterton, *Daily News*, 24 March 1903, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 177.

orderly and inevitable, they are part of the very texture of natural life.⁹⁸

Chesterton shows here that he sees the spiritual as natural, that for him a true view of life is one which does not separate the natural and the supernatural; this is the perspective of a classic Christian tradition, going back to biblical times, one which has been opposed to dominant themes in Western philosophy at least since the time of Kant. By discussing his mystical approach to the relationship of the supernatural and the natural in terms of fairy tales, Chesterton can avoid reference to Christian revelation.

This mysticism is joined to a strong, if often rather vague, sacramentalism throughout Chesterton's work. His sense of sacramental signs pervading all of life leads him to write: 'In the last resort all men talk by signs. To talk by statues is to talk by signs; to talk by cities is to talk by signs. ... The most important things at the last are always said by signs ... If men do not understand signs, they will never understand words.'⁹⁹ When arguing against birth control he writes: 'a child is the very sign and sacrament of personal freedom.'¹⁰⁰ In an article on 'The History of Christmas' he comments on 'the old human and heathen conception of the Winter Feast,' saying that 'what was then heathen was still human; that is, it was both mystical and material; it expressed itself in sacred substances and sacramental acts.'¹⁰¹ By writing thus, he stretches his idea of the sacramental to include the birth of a child and aspects of paganism; a broad sacramentalism, indeed.

⁹⁸ G.K. Chesterton, 'The Ethics of Elfland (review of *The Violet Fairy Book*, ed. Andrew Lang),' *The Chesterton Review* IX, no. 1 (1983): 1-5 (2-3). This review was first published in *The Speaker* on 12 October 1901.

⁹⁹ 'An Essay on Two Cities,' in G.K. Chesterton, *All Things Considered* (London: Methuen, 1915 (original publication, 1908)), 54-59 (57).

¹⁰⁰ G.K. Chesterton, 'Babies and Distributism,' *The Chesterton Review* X, no. 2 (1984): 5-7 (7). This article was first published in *G.K.'s Weekly* on 12 November 1932.

¹⁰¹ G.K. Chesterton, 'The History of Christmas,' *The Chesterton Review* IX, no. 4 (1983): 295-302 (298). This article was first published in two parts in the 26 December 1935 and 2 January 1936 numbers of *G.K.'s Weekly*.

Chesterton is extremely consistent in linking his mysticism very closely to a sacramental view of life. In *William Blake* he argues that ‘true mystics’ are ‘chiefly concerned to maintain the reality of objects. For the highest dogma of the spiritual is to affirm the material.’¹⁰² Even in the Father Brown stories he has Father Brown assert, ‘There is one mark of all genuine religions: materialism.’¹⁰³ At times, he overstates his case, as when stating: ‘being purely spiritual is opposed to the very essence of religion. All religions, high and low, true and false, have always had one enemy, which is the purely spiritual.’¹⁰⁴ Here, his claim about ‘all religions’ and ‘one enemy’ is one that many Protestant Christians, among numerous others, might dispute; it does show, however, how deeply sacramental was his view of life and of religion, and that his sacramental and mystical views were part of his natural theology, not dependent on Christian revelation, since he saw a broadly sacramental view as the property of ‘all religions, high and low, true and false.’

Alongside Chesterton’s sacramental interest in ‘outward signs’ there is an interiority to his mysticism, as on the occasion when he begins an introduction to the *Pickwick Papers* with an excursion into the Genesis creation accounts, and their relevance to artistic creation in general. In this excursion, he concludes: ‘Whatever be the meaning of the ... actual primeval poem, there is a very real metaphysical meaning in the idea that light existed before the sun and stars. It is not barbaric; it is rather Platonic. The idea existed before any of the machinery which made manifest the idea. ... this truth is the very key of literature.’¹⁰⁵ Compare this to his observation on George Bernard Shaw: ‘For Bernard

¹⁰² Chesterton, *Blake*, 132-35.

¹⁰³ ‘The Honour of Israel Gow,’ in G.K. Chesterton, *The Complete Father Brown Stories*, ed. David Stuart Davies (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 2006 (revised edition)), 90-101 (96). The stories were originally published between 1910 and 1936.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Faith Healing and Medicine,’ *ILN*, 5 November 1910, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXVIII, 625-28 (627).

¹⁰⁵ ‘Introduction to *The Pickwick Papers*’, in *A&CWCD*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XV, 245-53 (245-46).

Shaw, as for the mystics, Christian and heathen (and Shaw is best described as a heathen mystic), the philosophy of facts is interior to the facts themselves. In due time we come to the fact, the Incarnation; but in the beginning was the Word.’¹⁰⁶ Or consider his description of ‘the idea of ideas’ as one of ‘the great ideas in Blake’; he comments that ‘as a mystic’ Blake ‘is interested in the ideas for which ... things stand,’ declaring that ‘Blake’s philosophy, in brief, was primarily the assertion that the ideal is more actual than the real.’¹⁰⁷ This shares a certain amount of common ground with Chesterton’s own assertion: ‘True Mysticism will have nothing to do with vagueness ... Actuality is the keynote of Mysticism.’¹⁰⁸

The references above show how Chesterton’s sacramental mysticism is not defined by Christian religious authorities or by conventional ideas of the religious; it is a part of his natural theology. His positive attitude to the highly unorthodox mysticism of William Blake confirms this view: Chesterton seems sympathetic to the mystical concepts in Blake’s work, even where those concepts reflect Blake’s unorthodox beliefs.¹⁰⁹ Clearly, Chesterton’s sacramental idea of life is much more than the idea that God uses the sacraments of Christian worship as outward signs of hidden divine grace. Indeed, he writes very little about the seven sacraments. His mysticism and sacramentalism are unfortunately rather imprecise and undefined, yet they are combined powerfully and vividly in his view of life. As Yves Denis puts it, ‘He was one who perceived through what is visible that which is invisible, through what is real that which is more real than external reality.’¹¹⁰ Chesterton sees God as immediately present throughout creation and

¹⁰⁶ *George Bernard Shaw*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XI, 363.

¹⁰⁷ Chesterton, *Blake*, 155-60.

¹⁰⁸ ‘George Macdonald’, *Daily News*, 23 September 1905, collected in Daniel Gabelman, ‘Two Essays on George MacDonal by G.K. Chesterton,’ *VII: an Anglo-American literary review* XXVIII (online supplement) (2011): 8-10 (10).

¹⁰⁹ Chesterton, *Blake*, 162-83, 196-210.

¹¹⁰ Denis, ‘Theological Background,’ 57-72 (57).

sees visible appearances as able to provide signs of God's presence and nature, meaning that the whole of creation is full of outward signs of hidden spiritual realities.

In Ian Boyd's words, 'It is Chesterton's conviction that the universe is sacramental' and 'God speaks to man through creation.'¹¹¹ Creation is indeed the key; Chesterton's sacramental mysticism is grounded in his theology of creation, not in revelation. It is an integral part of his approach to all of life, including those aspects of life conventionally deemed 'non-religious' as much as those conventionally categorised as 'religious'; as his remarks on fairy tales above show, he does not make those conventional distinctions. He is certainly consistent in this area: as the examples above indicate, his sacramental mysticism pervades his writing, including his fiction and poetry as well as his non-fiction.

The influence of Newman

Although Chesterton's mysticism and sacramentalism are very personal and distinctive, developed in youth as part of his natural theology of wonder, at certain points the ways he expresses these views may owe something to the Anglo-Catholic circles into which his wife introduced him. In particular, the reader may discern something of the influence of John Henry Newman;¹¹² Chesterton's sacramental mysticism shows certain similarities with Newman's. George Westhaver has demonstrated 'the fundamental importance of mysticism and sacramentalism for the leaders of the Oxford Movement'.¹¹³ Newman, in

¹¹¹ Boyd, 'Essential Chesterton,' 28-46 (40). He writes further on the importance of Chesterton's 'sacramental mysticism' in Ian Boyd, 'Chesterton and C.S. Lewis,' *The Chesterton Review* XVII, no. 3/4 (1991). Dermot Quinn follows a similar line of argument, asserting that for both Chesterton and C.S. Lewis, 'The world is charged with spiritual life ... All of creation is a kind of sacrament.' Dermot Quinn, 'Chesterton, Lewis, and the Uses of Enchantment,' *The C.S. Lewis Chronicle* III, no. 2 (2006): 4-10.

¹¹² See: Ker, *Chesterton*, 277-8, 329-32, 334-7, 620. Gilley, 'Newman and Chesterton,' 41-55.

¹¹³ George Westhaver, 'Mysticism and Sacramentalism in the Oxford Movement,' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Oxford Movement*, ed. Peter Benedict Nockles Stewart J. Brown, and James Pereiro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 255-70 (255). See also I.T. Ker, *John Henry Newman: a biography*, New ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 121-23.

1841, went so far as to suggest that: ‘the visible world is the instrument, yet the veil, of the world invisible, – the veil ... so that all that exists or happens visibly, conceals and yet suggests, and above all subserves, a system of persons, facts, and events beyond itself.’¹¹⁴

Chesterton used the same image of the veil on a number of occasions throughout his career. Early on, a character in the short story ‘Le Jongleur de Dieu’, at a moment of religious illumination, cries out that ‘the veil is nearly rent;’¹¹⁵ one of the characters in his short story ‘A Crazy Tale’ declares, ‘suddenly ... the veil was lifted and I knew all.’¹¹⁶ In *The Illustrated London News*, in 1924, when criticizing materialist views, he writes of ‘light’ coming ‘through the veil of material things;’¹¹⁷ in 1925, in *The Everlasting Man*, he asserts that ‘Every true artist does feel, consciously or unconsciously, that he is touching transcendental truths; that his images are shadows of things seen through the veil.’¹¹⁸ There is a certain resemblance to Newman’s words above in the mystical and sacramental view suggested.

Chesterton goes even further when he has Gabriel Gale say, in *The Poet and The Lunatics*, ‘I doubt whether any of our action is really anything but an allegory. I doubt whether any truth can be told except in a parable,’¹¹⁹ and Michael Herne declare, in *The Return of Don Quixote*, ‘The world is a window.’¹²⁰ These images seem to partake of Chesterton’s characteristic vice of exaggeration: the idea of all action as allegorical takes a

¹¹⁴ John Henry Newman, ‘Milman’s view of Christianity’ (Newman’s 1841 review of Henry Hart Milman’s *History of Christianity*), in John Henry Newman, *Essays Critical and Historical (2nd edition)* (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1872), II, 186-248 (192).

¹¹⁵ ‘Le Jongleur de Dieu,’ (mid-1890s), in Chesterton, *CW*, XIV, 659-64 (663).

¹¹⁶ ‘A Crazy Tale,’ (1896), in Chesterton, *CW*, XIV, 69-75 (70).

¹¹⁷ ‘News from the Spirit World,’ *ILN*, 1 November 1924, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXXIII, 433-37 (435).

¹¹⁸ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 237.

¹¹⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *The Poet and the Lunatics, episodes in the life of Gabriel Gale* (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd, 1929), 130. Kenner, rather more precisely, describes Chesterton’s fiction as ‘parable’ and ‘allegory’. Kenner, *Paradox*, 134.

¹²⁰ *The Return of Don Quixote* (original publication, 1927), in Chesterton, *CW*, VIII, 159.

sacramental view to an extreme, while Chesterton's 'window' is a less delicate image than Newman's 'veil'. A veil, in Newman's words, 'conceals and yet suggests' the invisible world behind the visible. A window reveals rather than conceals, and is a less subtle and valuable image, yet still indicates sacramental connection between what Newman terms the 'visible world' and the 'world invisible'.

Chesterton, however, generally avoids aligning his mysticism exclusively with Christianity, perhaps for the sake of his apologetics, preferring to present a dichotomy between mysticism and materialism. He suggests that the 'defiance of materialism' is 'a work upon which all the mystics, Pagan and Christian, have been employed from the beginning,'¹²¹ with mystics such as Plato and Blake pictured as being on the same side of that divide as Christianity, as part of a western mystical tradition which is, where not Christian, compatible with Christianity, whereas, in Chesterton's view, the 'eastern and pessimist tradition'¹²² of mysticism is opposed to Christianity.

He also consistently avoids biblical or other specifically Christian language when writing of mystical ideas, preferring a more general language that is more accessible to a non-religious readership. This avoidance of specifically Christian terminology can be seen in essays such as 'The Wind and the Trees,' in which, as he puts it:

The trees stand for all visible things and the wind for the invisible. The wind is the spirit which bloweth where it listeth; the trees are the material things of the world which are blown where the spirit lists. The wind is philosophy, religion, revolution; the trees are cities and civilisations. ... There never has been in the history of the world a real revolution, brutally active and decisive, which was not preceded by unrest and new dogma in the reign of invisible things.¹²³

¹²¹ Chesterton, *Blake*, 183.

¹²² Chesterton, *Blake*, 201-07.

¹²³ G.K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (London: Methuen, 1909), 88-95 (90-91).

Even though he here refers in passing to Jesus' famous teaching regarding the Holy Spirit in John's gospel, chapter three,¹²⁴ thus suggesting a Christian frame of reference, he is careful in his explicit statements to generalise in terms of natural theology. He aligns 'the spirit' with 'philosophy, religion, revolution' as the invisible things which move 'the material things of the world ... cities and civilizations.' It is a mystical attack on materialist views of history, couched in terms accessible to the non-religious reader.

In such ways does Chesterton turn his mysticism to apologetic advantage, while remaining within the terminology of natural theology.¹²⁵ The resemblances between his ideas and those of Newman help to show that, while Chesterton's mysticism and sacramentalism were as personal and distinctive as the rest of his natural theology, they operated within broadly Catholic parameters. This is not to deny that Chesterton's mysticism shows evidence of other influences, including Walt Whitman and William Blake.

Original Sin: as fact rather than doctrine

When writing of H.G. Wells in *Heretics*, Chesterton remarks: 'In his new Utopia he says, for instance, that a chief point of the Utopia will be a disbelief in original sin. If he had begun with the human soul – that is, if he had begun on himself – he would have found

¹²⁴ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, Anglicized ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1995), John 3: 1-21 (3: 8).

¹²⁵ To take another example, he even uses mysticism to defend the idea of liberty: 'Liberty is altogether a mystical thing. All attempts to justify it rationally have always failed. Ruskin tried to attack it by pointing out that the stars had it not and the universe had it not. So good a mystic ought to have known that it is just because man has it and the universe has it not, that man is called the Image of God and the universe merely His masterpiece.' G.K. Chesterton, 'The Poetic Quality in Liberalism,' *The Chesterton Review* VIII, no. 2 (1982): 114-25 (122-23). Originally published in *The Independent Review* in February, 1905.

original sin almost the first thing to be believed in.’¹²⁶ In *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton identifies original sin and the family as the two facts present from the start of human history. He calls the whole human race as witnesses to ‘the fact that original sin is really original. Not merely in theology but in history it is a thing rooted in the origins. Whatever else men have believed, they have all believed that there is something the matter with mankind.’¹²⁷

In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton insists: ‘All humanity does agree that we are in a net of sin,’ and he asserts: ‘The ancient masters of religion ... began with the fact of sin – a fact as practical as potatoes. ... The strongest saints and the strongest sceptics alike took positive evil as the starting-point of their argument.’¹²⁸ Chesterton’s policy is to avoid any kind of reliance on revelation, and he follows this policy very consistently. Instead he treats sin and ‘positive evil’ at the level of ‘fact’ rather than doctrine. By calling sin ‘a fact as practical as potatoes’ he transfers the word from a theological to a domestic context, removing it as far as possible from its doctrinal associations. He also claims the authority of ‘all humanity’ and the support of ‘the ancient masters of religion ... the strongest saints ... the strongest sceptics’ for his view of sin.

In addition, he is innovative in how he relates the doctrine of original sin to apologetics. In *Orthodoxy*, he describes it as ‘the only part of Christian doctrine that can really be proved,’ and uses it as a stick to beat opponents with, opponents who take so high a view of human goodness as to neglect the power of sin, such as those who ‘in their almost too fastidious spirituality, admit divine sinlessness, which they cannot see even in their dreams. But they essentially deny human sin, which they can see in the street.’¹²⁹ In

¹²⁶ ‘Mr. H.G. Wells and the Giants,’ in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 77.

¹²⁷ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 185.

¹²⁸ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 335, 217.

¹²⁹ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 217.

Robert Browning Chesterton suggests that ‘the doctrine of original sin’ is ‘the one grand and logical basis of all optimism’ because it reassures the individual that he or she is not alone in having ‘frightful’ faults, but is in the company of all humanity.¹³⁰ By such manoeuvres, he turns what might seem an unappealing part of Christian theology into an asset for his apologetics, with the help of humour.

His early strong political liberalism may help to account for his rather political application of original sin. He argues that it is the most democratic of doctrines. He uses it, among other things, to refute Carlyle’s praise of aristocracy: ‘Carlyle said that men were mostly fools. Christianity, with a surer and more reverent realism, says that they are all fools. This doctrine is sometimes called the doctrine of original sin. It may also be described as the doctrine of the equality of men. ... whatever primary and far-reaching moral dangers affect any man, affect all men. ... There are no wise few. Every aristocracy that has ever existed has behaved, in all essential points, exactly like a small mob.’ In this passage, he goes so far as to rename the doctrine, in a way designed to make it more acceptable in his apologetics work with non-religious audiences: he suggests that the ‘doctrine of original sin’ could also fairly ‘be described as the doctrine of the equality of men’.¹³¹ Here, as elsewhere, he makes much of the political implications of his own theology and uses it for apologetics purposes.

In all these examples, he is relying on human experience, not religious authority, to validate the concept of sin. He is taking the term ‘sin’ out of its context in systematic theology and placing it against the background of his natural theology. Within the context of natural theology, he can still use ‘sin’ to refer to evil, human and other, as transgression against the goodness of creation, and hence transgression against the goodness of the

¹³⁰ Chesterton, *Browning*, 21.

¹³¹ ‘Paganism and Mr Lowes Dickinson,’ in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 129-31.

Creator, while leaving aside the connotations and context the word would have if used within a framework of systematic theology.

It should be noted that the power of Chesterton's sense of evil has often been underestimated. His friend Charles Masterman accused him of 'in effect ... attempting a short cut to Paradise;'¹³² A.N. Wilson has alleged that Chesterton was 'a thinker with no sense of darkness.'¹³³ Mark Knight has, however, defended Chesterton effectively against accusations that his understanding of evil is superficial or otherwise inadequate.¹³⁴ What is distinctive about his approach, as demonstrated by the evidence provided above, is that Chesterton approaches the ideas of sin and evil from the perspective of natural theology and uses the test of experience, not the test of revelation or any other kind of authority, to provide evidence to validate his theories. This enables him, in his apologetics, to treat original sin as a fact demonstrated by history and experience, like other facts, rather than as a doctrine to be defended.

The Fall as a part of natural theology

There is a very clear tension between Chesterton's understanding of the goodness of creation and his awareness of the power and reality of sin and evil. How does he resolve this tension? In *Orthodoxy*, he writes:

Legends all say that the earth was kinder in its earliest time. There is no tradition of progress; but the whole human race has a tradition of the Fall. Amusingly enough, indeed, the very dissemination of this idea is used against its authenticity. Learned men literally say

¹³² C.F.G. Masterman, 'The Blasphemy of Optimism,' in *Critical Judgments*, 40-45 (44). This article was originally published in *The Speaker*, 26 April 1902.

¹³³ Quoted in Hurley, *Chesterton*, 31.

¹³⁴ See Knight, *Chesterton and Evil*, 1-28, 125-51.

that this pre-historic calamity cannot be true because every race of mankind remembers it.¹³⁵

Here, he summons ‘legends’ and ‘the whole human race’ as witnesses for the concept of ‘the Fall’.

In *The Everlasting Man* he interprets pagan consciousness of the absence of God as evidence for the Fall:

These men were conscious of the Fall if they were conscious of nothing else; and the same is true of all heathen humanity. Those who have fallen may remember the fall, even when they forget the height. Some such tantalising blank or break in memory is at the back of all pagan sentiment. There is such a thing as the momentary power to remember that we forget. And the most ignorant of humanity know by the very look of earth that they have forgotten heaven.¹³⁶

He does not look to the Bible and the Christian part of humanity for support, instead he turns to ‘all heathen humanity’. His arguments, here and in the passage above from *Orthodoxy*, suggest to his readers that ‘the whole human race’ and ‘all heathen humanity’ support the idea of some sort of ‘Fall’.

This changes the ground on which the rest of the argument will be conducted, from the theological to the historical: the question no longer concerns the defence of the Christian doctrine of the Fall but a historical debate about ancient ‘legends’ and pagan consciousness which might bear witness to a prehistoric ‘Fall’. Chesterton can conduct such a debate without transgressing the boundaries of natural theology or appealing to Christian revelation.

¹³⁵ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 349-50. There is a verbal echo of Newman here which may indicate influence: Chesterton refers to the Fall as a ‘pre-historic calamity’; Newman refers to it as an ‘aboriginal calamity’, see John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua*, ed. William Oddie (London: Dent, 1993 (orig. pub. 1864)), 276.

¹³⁶ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 226.

The concept of ‘The Fall’ in Chesterton’s work

Chesterton asks his readers to ‘entertain’ the idea of the Fall ‘merely as a hypothesis, and without any reference to doctrinal details or applications’.¹³⁷ He expounds this concept at greater length, thus: ‘The Fall is a view of life. It is not only the only enlightening but the only encouraging view of life;’ he does not try to defend it as a Christian doctrine, but uses it to attack other philosophies: ‘It holds, as against the only real alternative philosophies, those of the Buddhist or the Pessimist or the Promethean, that we have misused a good world, and not merely been entrapped into a bad one. It refers evil back to the wrong use of the will, and thus declares that it can eventually be righted by the right use of the will. Every other creed except that one is some form of surrender to fate.’ Typically, he justifies his claims with reference to the explanatory power of this idea in human experience:

A man who holds this view of life will find it giving light on a thousand things on which mere evolutionary ethics have not a word to say. For instance, on the colossal contrast between the completeness of man’s machines and the continued corruption of his motives; on the fact that no social progress really seems to leave self behind ... on that sublime sense of loss that is in the very sound of all great poetry, and nowhere more than in the poetry of pagans and sceptics – ‘We look before and after and pine for what is not’; which cries against all prigs and progressives out of the very depths and abysses of the broken heart of man that happiness is not only a hope but also in some strange manner a memory; and that we are all kings in exile.¹³⁸

This is typical of the way he avoids biblical reference and reliance on revelation when writing about the concept of the Fall, and instead offers its explanatory power as its validation.¹³⁹ Characteristically, he expounds his ideas about the Fall in the course of his apologetics, in terms of natural rather than revealed theology; as he does so, he takes his

¹³⁷ ‘The Anatomy of the Joke,’ in *Hearst’s International* magazine (June 1922), in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 84-86 (85).

¹³⁸ ‘The Outline of the Fall,’ in *G.K.’s Weekly*, 25 September 1926, in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 309-13 (311-12).

¹³⁹ See Hollis, *Mind of Chesterton*, 270-71.

usual inter-disciplinary approach and links theology and literature, using the strategy, as so often, of calling on literature to support his natural theology,¹⁴⁰ suggesting that it is the idea of the Fall which best explains the ‘sublime sense of loss’ which is one of the most poignant sentiments to be found in pagan poetry. Rather than stay in defensive mode, he combatively contrasts his concept of the Fall with alternative philosophies, to their detriment, and suggests that it is both ‘enlightening’ and ‘encouraging,’ the best available view of life, enabling the thinker to reconcile the goodness of the world with the evil present in it, and, rather than ‘surrender to fate,’ to hope that evil ‘can eventually be righted’.

In his concern to defend the idea of the Fall, he makes it clear that he is treating it as a theological idea with considerable explanatory power, and not trying to present it as a historical event. Replying to a sceptical writer, he asks, sarcastically: ‘How could physical science find any traces of a moral fall? What traces did the writer expect to find? ... Because science has not found something which obviously it could not find, therefore something entirely different – the psychological sense of evil – is untrue.’ Instead, he argues that ‘Without the doctrine of the Fall all idea of progress is unmeaning. ... Unless there is a standard you cannot tell whether you are rising or falling.’¹⁴¹

As well as linking the idea of the Fall with ‘the psychological sense of evil,’ he also distances it from any historical associations: ‘Whatever else the worst doctrine of depravity may have been, it was a product of spiritual conviction; it had nothing to do with

¹⁴⁰ Compare, for example, his essay ‘On The New Poetry,’ in which he argues that ‘the finest passages’ of Shelley’s ‘poem about the skylark ... are those that really celebrate what is ... now often abandoned as an antiquated and benighted dogma. Those great movements of verse do not really correspond to the Rise of the Skylark, but rather to the Fall of Man. I dare say Shelley would have been very much surprised if he had been told that he was subscribing to the doctrine of the Fall of Man. But he certainly was.’ G.K. Chesterton, ‘On The New Poetry,’ in G.K. Chesterton, *Come to think of it ... A book of essays*, ed. J. P. De Fonseka (London: Methuen & Co., 1930), 34-45 (43-44).

¹⁴¹ ‘Why I believe in Christianity,’ in *Blatchford*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 381-85 (385).

remote physical origins. ... By its nature the evidence of Eden is something that one cannot find. By its nature the evidence of sin is something that one cannot help finding.' He avoids any questions about 'the evidence of Eden' and insists that the 'doctrine of depravity' had, and has, 'nothing to do with remote physical origins.'¹⁴² He takes the discussion back to the present and to the 'the psychological sense of evil' and 'the evidence for sin' which he deems so clear as to be unavoidable.

Elsewhere, he writes, of the Fall in a variety of terms: in terms of symbol and story, for instance: 'I do not insist on the symbol of Eden, or the parable of the apple-tree, but it is odd to notice that even that accidental image pursues us at every stage of this strange story.'¹⁴³ Or he describes it in terms of weariness: 'This forgetfulness of what we have is the real Fall of Man and the Fall of All Things. The evil which infects the immense goodness of existence does not embody itself in the fact that men are weary of woes and oppressions. It embodies itself in the shameful fact that they are often weary of joys and weary of generosities.'¹⁴⁴ In *Orthodoxy*, he refers to the Fall as a 'practical philosophy' and adds: the idea that the 'normal itself is an abnormality... is the inmost philosophy of the Fall.'¹⁴⁵

On another occasion, he takes the downfall of civilizations, which he sees as their 'mortal destiny', as evidence of the Fall:

It is men entangled in the forest of their own mythology; it is men drowned in the sea of their own metaphysics. Polytheists have grown weary of the wildest of fictions. Monotheists have grown weary of the most wonderful of truths. Diabolists here and there have such a hatred of heaven and earth that they have tried to take refuge in hell. It is the Fall of Man; and it is exactly that fall that was

¹⁴² 'Science and Religion,' in Chesterton, *ATC*, 142-47 (144-46).

¹⁴³ 'Reflections on a Rotten Apple,' in *W&S*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 493-500 (497).

¹⁴⁴ Chesterton, 'The Poetic Quality in Liberalism,' 114-25 (114-15).

¹⁴⁵ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 346, 363.

being felt by our own fathers at the first moment of the Roman decline.¹⁴⁶

Elsewhere, he argues in terms of popular language, which he takes to be a sign that the idea of the Fall is embedded in the minds of ordinary people: ‘the Fall like every other large path of Christianity is embodied in the common language talked on the top of an omnibus’ because to say, for example, ‘Be a man’ is to recognise that ordinary men have fallen away from the fullness of what a man is meant to be.¹⁴⁷ In all these cases, he presents the Fall as a view of life rather than a theological dogma, and treats it as he treats other ideas in his natural theology, as a hypothesis to be tested, and proved or disproved, by experience, while contrasting its explanatory power favourably with secular alternatives.

The tension between Chesterton’s strong sense of the power of evil and his sense of wonder at the goodness of creation means that he needs a concept such as that of the Fall to enable him to relate the two; together with the idea of paradox, the idea of the Fall gives him a conceptual apparatus sufficient to allow him to complete a natural theology which can explain how a world created so good can be so strongly influenced by evil. There is nothing unusual about the tension Chesterton feels here. What is unusual is the way he treats the Fall as a philosophy of life, or a view of life, with potential for apologetics.

He sees it as a way of reconciling two parts of his natural theology, creation and sin, without appealing to Christian revelation. As he does with the term ‘sin’, he transposes the term ‘the Fall’, taking it out of its context in systematic theology and making it a part of his natural theology, treating it as a philosophical approach to life in light of creation and sin, not a dogma to be believed on any kind of religious authority. Rather than appeal to

¹⁴⁶ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 368-69.

¹⁴⁷ ‘Why I believe in Christianity,’ in *Blatchford*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 381-85 (385).

revelation, when he does look for some kind of evidence to support the idea of the Fall, he appeals to non-Christian sources. Having looked to non-Christian sources to justify the idea of the Fall, he then does with it what he does with other ideas: he tests it by the test of experience, and he values it for its explanatory power, for the sense it makes of human experience.

Paradox as a condition of existence

In 1903, Chesterton wrote: ‘Everybody takes it for granted that universal and ordinary arrangements, historic institutions, daily habits are reasonable. They are good, they are sensible, they are holy and splendid often enough, but they are not reasonable. They are themselves paradoxes; paradox is built into the very foundations of human affairs.’¹⁴⁸ As this statement indicates, the tension between the strength of Chesterton’s sense of wonder and the depth of his convictions about original sin not only made the idea of the Fall necessary for him, it also led him to a very individual view of paradox.¹⁴⁹

In *The Ball and the Cross* he links paradox and religion, asserting: ‘Paradox is a thing which especially belongs to all religions.’¹⁵⁰ He goes further and makes paradox actually a cause of religions when he argues that ‘Religion arose because there are incurable contradictions, impossible paradoxes in existence itself ... those awful questions out of which religion arose, those terrible contradictions in mere existence.’¹⁵¹ He also

¹⁴⁸ *Black and White*, 14 February 1903, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 166.

¹⁴⁹ See Nichols, *Chesterton*, 87-106.

¹⁵⁰ *The Ball and the Cross*, in Chesterton, *CW*, VII, 45.

¹⁵¹ G.K. Chesterton, ‘Mr Blatchford and my Neighbour,’ *Daily News*, 14 November 1903, in Chesterton, *DN*, II, 150-55 (152-154).

argues for the link between paradox and religion in a defence of his paradoxes in *The Speaker*, where he writes

The reason that paradox is continuous and ancient ... is quite clear and sufficient. The reason is that there really is a strand of contradiction running through the universe. In proportion as men perceive it, they admit a contradiction; in proportion as men become honest they become paradoxical. ... it was this ingrained paradox in the cosmos which led so many religions, wisely enough, to boast not that they had an explanation of the Universe, but that they had a pure, defiant paradox, like the Athanasian Creed.¹⁵²

He does not trace this understanding of paradox to Christian revelation: he says that it is a reality that can be observed to run ‘through the universe’;¹⁵³ that it is simply ‘honest’ to acknowledge this, and that ‘many religions’ take the same view. In linking paradox and ‘all religions’ or ‘many religions’ he rests his case on natural theology and the nature of the universe, not on revelation. He is suggesting that it is simply realism to acknowledge the importance of paradox.

Rather than refer to revelation, he situates his doctrine of paradox within his own natural theology of creation and sin, at the points of tension between those two. For him, paradox results from the depth of the contradictions created by the opposition between the wonder and goodness of creation on the one hand, and the power of sin and evil on the other, which between them make ‘the normal itself ... an abnormality’¹⁵⁴ in a profoundly paradoxical way.

This theological basis for paradox means that, while some of his paradoxical utterances are simply wordplays, others go much deeper and express his sense of the constant contradictions in life created by the collision of the goodness and wonder of

¹⁵² ‘Bacon and Beastliness,’ *The Speaker*, 8 February 1902, quoted in Oddie, *Chesterton*, 189-90.

¹⁵³ Kenner concurs, arguing that ‘the principle of metaphysical paradox is something inherently intractable in being itself,’ Kenner, *Paradox*, 17.

¹⁵⁴ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 363.

creation with the power of sin and evil.¹⁵⁵ He even goes so far as to suggest that Christianity's capacity for paradox goes with a capacity for practicality, arguing that Christianity is 'very mystical' yet 'has been the religion of the most practical section of mankind' with both 'more paradoxes' and 'better roads' than 'the Eastern philosophies.'¹⁵⁶ To couple paradox and practicality might itself seem paradoxical, although it fits very well with Chesterton's contention that paradox is a natural and normal part of life.

This contention is seen at its strongest in his writing on the Book of Job. He was sufficiently fascinated by that book to write on it several times, treating it as a 'philosophical riddle and a historical riddle'¹⁵⁷ rather than a work of prescriptive revelation. His discussions of Job centre on mystery and paradox. He writes, of the words attributed to God in that book:

The mechanical optimist endeavours to justify the universe avowedly upon the ground that it is a rational and consecutive pattern. He points out that the fine thing about the world is that it can all be explained. ... God says, in effect, that if there is one fine thing about the world, as far as men are concerned, it is that it cannot be explained. He insists on the inexplicableness of everything. ... It is the lesson of the whole work that man is most comforted by paradoxes.¹⁵⁸

Others may find many paradoxes discomfoting, and dispute the central role given them by Chesterton, yet religion and mysticism have always found a place for paradox and Chesterton is less unconventional here than he might appear. It is the depth of his dependence on paradox and the frequency of his use of paradox that make him unusual, rather than his willingness in principle to accept a place for it. His dependence on paradox is, in part, the result of the dramatic nature of his natural theology, not just its content but

¹⁵⁵ Kenner distinguishes between 'verbal', 'metaphysical', and 'aesthetic' paradox in Chesterton. Kenner, *Paradox*, 12-23.

¹⁵⁶ 'Why I believe in Christianity,' in *Blatchford*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 381-85.

¹⁵⁷ Chesterton, *M.C.*, 34-52 (34).

¹⁵⁸ 'The Book of Job,' in Chesterton, *M.C.*, 34-52 (47, 51).

its composition; that is to say, his theology works in antitheses, not in shades of grey, so is intensely dramatic,¹⁵⁹ and this creates a larger role for paradox.

The road and the destination

In this chapter I have considered the basic structure of Chesterton's natural theology. I have surveyed the early influences on his thought and suggested that the effects of these influences endured and can be observed in the shape of his natural theology throughout his career, and consequently as major influences on his apologetics. I have outlined the main elements of Chesterton's theology and argued that they are located within the boundaries of the central doctrines of natural theology – creation, sin and evil – and that where these central doctrines meet, he focuses, in a very personal way, on a number of themes and emphases which combine to give his natural theology its distinctive character.

I have endeavoured to illustrate how very idiosyncratic certain aspects of Chesterton's natural theology were, and how remarkably questionable his methods. Because he is creating his own natural theology, he can simply announce his theological ideas as though they were self-evident truths. Frustratingly for his readers, he often does so without producing supporting argument or authority. For instance, he claims that both the 'artistic and spiritual life' have the same 'object', which is 'to dig for' a 'submerged sunrise of wonder,'¹⁶⁰ without defending his assertion or even clearly defining what he means.

¹⁵⁹ See chapter four.

¹⁶⁰ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 95. See Hurley, *Chesterton*, 15.

One might compare Newman here. In *A Grammar of Assent*, Newman decides to treat the doctrine that God is one, ‘not as a revealed truth, but as, what it is also, a natural truth, the foundation of all religion’. He then justifies his treatment of this doctrine with careful argument.¹⁶¹ Chesterton sees this doctrine in similar terms, as foundational and as part of natural religion, but, typically, simply declares that there is a ‘normal and universal Deism which really is natural to most men’,¹⁶² and then seems to rest his case on the widespread occurrence of such vague monotheism. There is a significant contrast here: although Chesterton’s positive attitude towards natural religion parallels Newman’s, Newman also argues in depth for the defence of his concept of natural religion, while Chesterton, unusually for an apologist, does not seem to feel it necessary to present substantial arguments for the existence of God.

Another debatable, and rather equivocal, aspect of Chesterton’s methodology is his use of his versions of Christian doctrines as parts of his own natural theology, and also as being for practical purposes equivalent to orthodox Christian doctrines. This begs several questions with regard to definition, while leaving him considerable latitude in how he uses these terms, which fits in very well with the flexibility of his apologetics strategies (see chapter four), but much less well with the rigorous conventions of academic debate.

In chapter three, I will consider how he developed the theological ideas discussed in this chapter into a rich and complex natural theology. My contention is that this natural theology shapes his apologetics (see chapter one). I will consider the relationship between the two in chapter four, arguing that there is a reciprocal element to it, in that Chesterton’s work as an apologist necessarily had an influence on how he deployed the resources of his natural theology. I will suggest, however, that the greater influence went the other way: I

¹⁶¹ Newman, *GA*, 94-109 (94).

¹⁶² G.K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXI, 595.

have demonstrated in this chapter that the building blocks of Chesterton's natural theology were in place before he was clearly a Christian, let alone a Christian apologist, so that his apologetics, as it developed, had those building blocks to work with. Thereafter, in chapter four, I will analyse how he deployed his natural theology in his direct and indirect apologetics and test my thesis by using it to analyse aspects of Chesterton's style, modes of argument, and use of language. In chapter five I will seek to show how an understanding of his natural theology clarifies his approach to the Incarnation.

Emile Cammaerts made a particularly insightful comment on Chesterton's thinking when he noted that 'Chesterton never starts his argument from Revelation, he leads to it,' although Cammaerts did not develop that observation.¹⁶³ For Chesterton, natural theology is the road, but not always the destination. In many essays and some books he restricts himself entirely to natural theology. In others, his arguments travel along that path almost all the way, before reaching an end-point in incarnational theology (see chapter five). Broadly speaking, what I have termed Chesterton's 'indirect apologetics' stays almost entirely within the boundaries of natural theology, with one or two exceptions.¹⁶⁴ Certain texts in his 'direct apologetics' build to a climax in incarnational theology – *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man*, for instance. They all, however, remain on the path of natural theology for the vast majority of their length; it is only briefly and at the climax of some of his arguments that he strays onto incarnational territory (as I will endeavour to show in chapter five).

¹⁶³ Cammaerts, *Laughing Prophet*, 54.

¹⁶⁴ *Robert Browning* is a part-exception, rising to a climactic peroration that is theistic but not incarnational (referencing God but not Christ). See Chesterton, *Browning*, 201-02.

Chapter III:

The Scope of Chesterton's Natural Theology

Introduction: Chesterton, hypothesis, and worldview

In chapter one I described the characteristic method Chesterton uses to bring his theology into contact with areas of life beyond the boundaries of theology *per se*. He calls it ‘the method of the hypothesis’:¹ he takes theological ideas out of a theological context and presents them as ideas that stand or fall on the basis of their own explanatory power, that is, their ability to explain human history, experience, and culture, without support from any religious authority. In this chapter I will argue that he uses this method in the areas that are most important in his writing: his theology of humour and play; his theology of society, the family, and politics; his theology of history; and his theology of the arts. Then I will consider the implications of his approach for epistemological questions, and I will discuss the place narrative theology plays in his work. Finally, I will make some general observations about his natural theology.

An important consideration should be kept in view if the following discussion is to be understood correctly. These different aspects of Chesterton's theology should be considered in light of the argument advanced in chapter one that Chesterton's work can be

¹ See chapter one.

seen as a precursor of what is today called worldview apologetics. As noted in that chapter, Chesterton sees himself as not just arguing for individual theological ideas, but for the ‘theory’ of Christianity as a whole, ‘not because of this argument or that argument, but because the theory, when it is adopted, works out everywhere’ and provides ‘an intelligible picture of the world’.² In today’s terminology, he might be said to be trying to demonstrate that a Christian worldview (as it might now be called), ‘works out everywhere’.

In brief, I will be arguing that Chesterton’s approach uses natural theology to defend Christianity as a worldview, rather than to debate theological points as such. I will seek to substantiate this contention below, framing my discussion in relation to a definition of religion provided by the philosopher Keith Yandell, who has written: ‘a religion is a conceptual system that provides an interpretation of the world and the place of human beings in it, bases an account of how life should be lived given that interpretation, and expresses this interpretation and lifestyle in a set of rituals, institutions, and practices.’³

Chesterton’s worldview approach leads him to focus particularly (though not exclusively) on the first part of that definition. I am suggesting that he argues, in effect, that a Christian worldview provides the best available ‘conceptual system’, and seeks to prove that contention by translating Christian ideas into terms of natural theology and using them to explain history, experience, and culture, in ways that build up a picture of a Christian worldview in terms accessible to non-religious readers and listeners. (I will discuss this further in chapter four.) Therefore, I will endeavour to show that the different areas of his theology I will now survey should be considered, not just as separate entities, but as aspects of an implied unity, that is, aspects of his attempt to demonstrate the

² ‘The Return of the Angels,’ *Daily News*, 14 March 1903, in Chesterton, *DN*, II, 22-26 (24-26). See Alister E. McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics: sharing the relevance, joy, and wonder of the Christian faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2019), 28-29.

³ Keith E. Yandell, *Philosophy of religion: a contemporary introduction* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 16.

efficacy of the Christian ‘theory’ as the most complete and convincing ‘conceptual system’ available, giving the most ‘intelligible picture’ of the world.

Chesterton’s Theology of Humour and Play

I will begin by examining Chesterton’s theology of humour and play; he is famous for his playfulness and humour. The link between these things and his theology may be made clearer by some resonant words of Romano Guardini about Catholic liturgy. Guardini suggests that worship ‘unites art and reality in a supernatural childhood before God... [Worship] has one thing in common with the play of the child and the life of art – it has no purpose, but is full of profound meaning. It is not work, but play.’⁴ Guardini links ‘profound meaning’, worship, ‘the play of the child and the life of art’. To see how this relates to Chesterton’s work, I will examine key passages in which he discusses humour.

Chesterton asks: ‘Why is it funny that a man should sit down suddenly in the street? There is only one possible or intelligent reason: that man is the image of God. It is not funny that anything else should fall down ... Only man can be absurd: for only man can be dignified.’⁵ Here he provides a directly theological explanation for the existence of humour, with regard to humour about human beings at least. Elsewhere, he combines reference to the Fall with reference to creation in the image of God, writing:

If you really ask yourself why we laugh at a man sitting down suddenly in the street you will discover that the reason is not only recondite, but ultimately religious. All the jokes about men sitting down on their hats are really theological jokes; they are concerned

⁴ Romano Guardini, *The spirit of the liturgy* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1930), 102.

⁵ ‘Spiritualism’ in Chesterton, *ATC*, 151-56 (153-54).

with the Dual Nature of Man. They refer to the primary paradox that man is superior to all the things around him and yet is at their mercy.⁶

Chesterton here asserts that humour can highlight the incongruities and inconsistencies caused by the 'Dual Nature' of man, made in the divine image yet fallen.⁷

He is consistent in seeing humour in theological terms, writing that it is a 'sublime spiritual certainty, that all men are comic,'⁸ and taking issue with those who would provide alternative explanations:

This humorous human quality can, as a matter of fact, be much more easily connected with this old idea of a fall of man than with the current and conventional ideas about the evolution of man. ... the process which ends in a joke necessarily begins with a certain idea of dignity ... [with things incongruous with] the station or stature of humanity ... this human standard. ... All depends on this dim or fantastic tracing everywhere of the image of man; and I believe the key is somewhere in that mysterious oracle which identified it with the image of God.⁹

He takes care to keep within the bounds of natural theology by striking a note of delicate suggestion and explanation, not dogmatic insistence on doctrines which must be believed; it is a technique he often uses.

Chesterton adds another dimension to his rationale for humour when he writes that 'Joy is ... our reason for existing' and therefore the 'notion that comic literature is in some sort of way superficial' is completely false. Instead: 'The literature of joy is infinitely more difficult, more rare, and more triumphant than the black and white literature of pain' and 'the joy of' the works of comic literature 'is older than sorrow, their extravagance is saner than wisdom, their love is stronger than death.'¹⁰ This shows that another part of

⁶ 'Cockneys and their Jokes', in Chesterton, *ATC*, 13-21 (17).

⁷ See Kenner, *Paradox*, 93.

⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London: Methuen, 1946 (original publication: 1906)), 175-177.

⁹ 'The Anatomy of the Joke', in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 84-86.

¹⁰ 'A Defence of Farce', in Chesterton, *Defendant*, 119-127 (124-27).

Chesterton's theological basis for humour is his theology of joy (see chapter two); as he puts it in *Heretics*:

If we are to be truly gay, we must believe that there is some eternal gaiety in the nature of things. We cannot enjoy thoroughly even a pas-de-quatre at a subscription dance unless we believe that the stars are dancing to the same tune. No one can be really hilarious but the serious man. ... The thing called high spirits is possible only to the spiritual. Ultimately a man cannot rejoice in anything except the nature of things. Ultimately a man can enjoy nothing except religion.¹¹

Because he sees joy as a fundamental part of the purpose of human existence, that means humour provides sign-posts to this fundamental purpose.

In his essay 'Rostand', he goes so far as to suggest that there is 'nothing to which a man must give himself up with more faith and self-abandonment than to genuine laughter ... comedy is built upon everlasting foundations in the nature of things ... it is not a thing too light to capture, but too deep to plumb.' Here he depicts humour as something with 'cosmic and philosophic' dimensions and the 'function of comedy' as 'at once common and sublime.'¹²

Chesterton also writes of what he calls 'that darkest problem of metaphysics, the borderland between reason and unreason, and the nature of the most erratic of spiritual forces, humour, which eternally dances between the two.'¹³ Here, he gives humour a role in helping humans to navigate the relationship between reason on the one hand and imagination and mystery on the other. This relates humour to his theology of knowledge, to the relationship between reason and mystery; it may partly explain why he claims, 'It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it,'¹⁴ suggesting that humour can

¹¹ 'Omar and the Sacred Vine,' in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 91-96 (96).

¹² 'Rostand,' in Chesterton, *Twelve Types*, 40-44.

¹³ 'The Library of the Nursery,' in G.K. Chesterton, *Lunacy and letters* (London ; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 24-28 (26).

¹⁴ 'Spiritualism,' in Chesterton, *ATC*, 151-56 (153).

even provide useful tests for religious and philosophical claims. He tests both religions and philosophies with humour, using its ability to ‘dance’ between ‘reason and unreason’ to critique his opponents’ ideas, and his own exuberant humour to present his own ideas in distinctively original and thought-provoking ways.

The discussion above demonstrates that Chesterton’s theology of humour and play includes his recognition that there is a theological nexus between the four things mentioned in Guardini’s observation, quoted above: ‘profound meaning’, worship, ‘the play of the child and the life of art’. In addition, Chesterton sees humour and paradox as bound together with them, so that play, art, worship, humour, paradox, and profound meaning form aspects of a composite whole in his theology. He enthusiastically insists on the deep importance of these things, and indeed of nonsense.

This nexus is formed around his theology of joy and wonder, and expresses that theology. In his thinking, play, art, laughter, and worship should all be part of a natural response to creation, but the Fall and sin have radically damaged and distorted the relationship between humans and their Creator, which means that paradox and the kinds of humour that spring from paradox are central to the current state of human existence. For Chesterton, none of these things are trivial, all express profound meaning, because they demonstrate understanding of either our created nature, or the fallen and sinful current state of human life.

Chesterton’s idea of humour is based on his theology of creation, his theology of sin and the Fall, his understanding of paradox, and his theology of joy, with this theology carefully presented in terms of hypothesis and explanation, not dogma. Humour has, for him, a cognitive and theological role: it can, for example, expose errors by lifting them up to laughter; it can signpost joy as something humans were created for. Moreover, creating and receiving humour involves both imagination and reason, and it is usually a communal

activity. If humour is ultimately theological, this implies a cognitive role for imagination and communal knowledge, as well as reason, in, at least, those aspects of theological discussion which relate to the theology of humour. Certainly, Chesterton made humour a vital instrument of his own apologetics. I will discuss this further below, in relation to his theological epistemology, and in chapter four.

Chesterton's theology of family and society

I have argued in chapter two that the family is central to Chesterton's theological anthropology. He contends that: 'The family is the test of freedom; because the family is the only thing that the free man makes for himself and by himself. Other institutions must be largely made for him by strangers, whether the institutions be despotic or democratic. There is no other way of organizing mankind which can give this power and dignity, not only to mankind but to men.'¹⁵ This suggests that, in his view, the family is not just at the heart of society but is also an agent of liberation.

In *The Everlasting Man* he declares: 'The truth is that only men to whom the family is sacred will ever have a standard or a status by which to criticise the state. They alone can appeal to something more holy than the gods of the city; the gods of the hearth.'¹⁶ This gives the family a key political role, as the only institution which can restrain the power of the state. The phrase 'the family is sacred' reminds the reader that, in Chesterton's view, only a theologically-grounded understanding of the family will be sufficient to preserve political freedom; the phrase 'the gods of the hearth' indicates that Chesterton is speaking

¹⁵ 'A Defence of Dramatic Unities,' in Chesterton, *FVF*, 93-98 (97).

¹⁶ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 275-76.

in terms of natural theology, not limiting himself to a purely Christian faith in the family. In 'St. Thomas More' he argues that 'the real habitation of Liberty is the home. ... If individuals have any hope of protecting their freedom, they must protect their family life.'¹⁷ Where modern debates about liberty are often framed in terms of individual autonomy, or in terms of the relationship between the individual and the state, Chesterton consistently makes the family the guardian and index of freedom.

He repeats and develops this view often, declaring, for example: 'the world outside the home is now under a rigid discipline and routine and it is only inside the home that there is really a place for individuality and liberty.'¹⁸ Elsewhere he posits a similar view in more picturesque fashion: 'For a plain, hard-working man the home is not the one tame place in the world of adventure. It is the one wild place in the world of rules and set tasks. The home is the one place where he can put the carpet on the ceiling or the slates on the floor if he wants to.'¹⁹ Both these quotes emphasise his oft-stated belief that the family provides protection for freedom, which is elsewhere under threat.

As Richard Gill has pointed out, Chesterton's understanding of creation leads to his love of limits, shapes, boundaries, and distinctions, which he sees as God-given. This shapes his social thinking and is expressed in his fierce defence of the family against the rich and against social reformers who would transgress the (as he sees it, divinely created) boundaries of the traditional rights and role of the family. Hence his fiery opposition to schemes such as eugenics and other kinds of state interference with the family's sphere of influence.²⁰

¹⁷ 'St. Thomas More,' in *W&S*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 505-09.

¹⁸ 'The Drift from Domesticity,' in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 157-64 (162).

¹⁹ Chesterton, *WWWTW*, 58.

²⁰ See Richard Gill, 'G.K. Chesterton: Social Criticism and the Sense of Wonder,' *VII: an Anglo-American literary review* XXIII (2006): 11-30 (16-17, 21).

Political theology, democracy, and tradition

Chesterton's engagement with politics sees him apply his social theology (discussed above) to political issues, for instance, his understanding that family freedom is at the heart of democratic freedom. He writes that 'locality is almost another name for liberty' and favourably contrasts the medieval 'citizenship of the city,' with its 'more direct democratic life,' against 'the much more unreal and unrepresentative modern citizenship of the state.'²¹ In writing this, he demonstrates that his theology of the family leads him to see democracy and freedom as being built from the local level, not dominated by central government.

In his dramatic turn of phrase, he suggests that what is called 'liberty' in 'the world of ethics' is called 'property' in 'the world of economics';²² this is his rather sensational way of demanding that families be given sufficient independence, property, and power to maintain their own freedom. He even writes: 'Property is merely the art of the democracy,'²³ because he sees property as vital for the protection of the freedom of families, and the freedom of families as vital for the preservation of democracy. In 'The Sentimentalism of Divorce'²⁴ he argues against the companionate theory of marriage, suggesting that part of the value of marriage is precisely that it is an institution: he insists that, as an institution, marriage supports distributed property and a free society because, in his view, the strength and independence of families upholds both these things. He predicts that the decline of marriage is liable to lead to the destruction of family, freedom and property, particularly for the less well off.

²¹ 'Friends, Romans, Countrymen,' in Chesterton, *M.C.*, 184-88 (188).

²² 'A Defence of Dramatic Unities,' in Chesterton, *FVF*, 93-98 (97).

²³ Chesterton, *WWWTW*, 47-48.

²⁴ 'The Sentimentalism of Divorce,' in Chesterton, *FVF*, 124-29.

As these quotes show, his theology of the family leads him to bracket democracy and property together, arguing that only if families have unfettered freedom to possess their own property can they be independent of the state and the powerful, and thus free, able to participate fully in politics and so make democracy a reality. Hence, he writes, ‘The idea of private property universal but private, the idea of families free but still families, of domesticity democratic but still domestic, of one man one house – this remains the real vision and magnet of mankind. ... Socialism may be the world’s deliverance, but it is not the world’s desire.’²⁵ Here, he expresses his political Distributism and rejection of Socialism; his desire to protect the freedom of families leads him to promote the wide distribution of property as a social ideal, as a means of enabling each family to have economic independence, and therefore greater political independence.²⁶ His attitude to Socialism reflects his view that the family is beloved of ordinary people but under attack from the powerful and from would-be social reformers, often acting through the agencies of the state, who wish to reshape humanity and know that they need to weaken the family to do so. Because the family is at the heart of his social theology it is also at the heart of his political theology: his defence of the family relates very closely to his defence of freedom and democracy.

Chesterton also argues that ‘the religious conception of life’ gives a better emotional basis for social reform than secular materialism:

The reason ... involves a kind of mystical contradiction. If we are to save the oppressed, we must have two apparently antagonistic emotions in us at the same time. We must think the oppressed man intensely miserable, and at the same time intensely attractive and important. ... The optimists will say that reform is needless. The pessimists will say that reform is hopeless. We must apply both

²⁵ Chesterton, *WWWTW*, 78.

²⁶ Michael Black has discussed the way that Distributism expresses ‘social theology’. See Michael Black, ‘The Sources and Uses of Distributism: A Roman Catholic’s View of Anglo-Catholic Genius,’ *Journal of Inklings Studies* III, no. 1 (2013): 55-74 (65-66).

simultaneously to the same oppressed man; we must say that he is a worm and a god. ... This is, indeed, the strongest argument for the religious conception of life. If the dignity of man is an earthly dignity we shall be tempted to deny his earthly degradation. If it is a heavenly dignity we can admit the earthly degradation ... If we are idealists about the other world we can be realists about this world.²⁷

Here he puts a case for Christianity as something well adapted for social reform. He goes on to suggest, in connection with Dickens, that the 'happy' reformer's 'triumph is a religious triumph; it rests upon his perpetual assertion of the value of the human soul and of human daily life.'²⁸ By making such arguments in relation to Dickens' novels, he inculcates his natural theology: he sets his theological assertions in the non-religious context of literary criticism, a cultural context whose conventions make those assertions more acceptable and more accessible to the non-religious reader than if they had been made in a religious forum.

Chesterton makes very definite claims about the relationship between theology and democracy. He affirms: 'There is no basis for democracy except in a dogma about the divine origin of man,'²⁹ and 'democracy is founded on reverence for the common man;'³⁰ in writing thus, he restricts himself to the terminology of his natural theology, without mentioning specifically Christian doctrine, claiming that the basis for this 'reverence,' like the basis for democracy, can only be a doctrine of creation such as his own. Moreover, he suggests that 'The thing which is really required for the proper working of democracy is not merely the democratic system, or even the democratic philosophy, but the democratic emotion.'³¹ In the light of the passages cited above, it is clear that he is making the case that the thing best resourced to bring about this 'democratic emotion' is the kind of

²⁷ Chesterton, *Dickens*, 193-94.

²⁸ Chesterton, *Dickens*, 195-97.

²⁹ *What I Saw in America*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXI, 261.

³⁰ 'Slum Novelists and the Slums,' in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 186-95 (186).

³¹ 'Slum Novelists and the Slums,' in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 186-95 (188-91).

Christian thinking represented by his own natural theology, because it treats the poor as fellow, equal divinely-created human beings rather than objects of pity.

Chesterton's theological anthropology leads him to a distinctive approach to the relationship between tradition and democracy. As he puts it:

Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death.

He adds: 'I, at any rate, cannot separate the two ideas of democracy and tradition; it seems evident to me that they are the same idea.'³² Putting these ideas together, he advocates a path for democracy that is in harmony with 'tradition', which he usually seems to conceive of in terms of the traditions loved by ordinary people, including popular religious traditions.³³ Where some social reformers have pitted democracy against tradition, Chesterton's theology of creation means that, in his view, Christian theology is on the side of both, in fact that it unites the two.

My examination of Chesterton's theology of society leads me to conclude that his theology of creation, his theological anthropology, and his understanding of original sin (all outlined in chapter two) collectively form the basis for his social theology. Creation and original sin are hardly unusual starting points for Christian theology, but he develops the social implications of those ideas in unusual ways, as outlined above. His understanding of creation and original sin, both of which entail radical equality between human beings, leads him to defend democracy and reject the dominant role of elites in

³² *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 251.

³³ See, for example, his respect for the traditions of the poor in Chesterton, 'Why I am not a Socialist,' 189-95 (193).

discussing the major questions of the day. He sees ordinary people as having a right to an important role in such debates and tries to bring the views of the working classes to bear on important public issues.³⁴

The analysis above demonstrates that Chesterton sees Christian theology as a democratic and egalitarian force, not a reactionary one. In his view, it can give the strongest possible support for social reform and democracy. It provides this support in both rational and emotional terms. At the same time, his theology gives his politics another original twist: whereas some social critics might see tradition as on the side of the privileges of social elites, Chesterton aligns tradition with democracy and declares that both are on the side of the common man and woman, against elites. Thus his theology and his political liberalism combine to create a social theology which stresses the democratic and egalitarian credentials of Christian ideas. It includes a strong ‘bias to the poor’, expressed in respect for ordinary working people and distrust of elites. It also emphasises the traditional family as the central institution of society and measures social and political policies largely in terms of their effect on the family and on ordinary working people.

Furthermore, the examination of Chesterton’s political theology above suggests that it largely consists of the application of his social theology to contemporary political issues, in the context of his ongoing apologetics. The importance of these social and political dimensions of his apologetics may be seen more clearly in the light of Oliver O’Donovan’s argument: ‘Different trains of theological thought may acquire greater or lesser apologetic weight circumstantially, as the crises or doubts of the culture may dictate at any moment. One train of Christian thought that carries apologetic weight in our times is the capacity of faith to display the intelligibility of political institutions and traditions.’³⁵ Chesterton uses

³⁴ See chapter four.

³⁵ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, Bampton lectures 2003, (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), xiii.

his social theology to address ‘the crises or doubts of the culture’, to ‘display the intelligibility’ of the neglected political institutions of medieval Christendom, and to critique other ‘political institutions and traditions’.

The influence of his theology on his politics is not entirely one-way. Chesterton’s politics may be said to have flavoured his social theology in certain respects. One particular weakness is this: given his understanding of original sin as a universal human reality, he might have been expected to be equally distrustful of elites and of ordinary people; in fact, he is very uncritical of ordinary people and extremely critical of elites.³⁶ This partly reflects his own political, rather than theological, bias. It suits his apologetics strategies (see chapter four) but sits less well with his religious ideas.

Chesterton’s theology of history

Chesterton declares that ‘Materialist history is the most madly incredible of all histories;’³⁷ his historical writing is clearly not attempting to fulfil the usual criteria of secular history. So, what criteria is it attempting to fulfil? I will endeavour to answer this question and to discern how history and theology are related in Chesterton’s work.³⁸

He is clear that this is a very strong relationship: referring to the Victorian era, he declares that ‘religion’ was ‘the key of this age as of every other.’³⁹ John Henry Newman had gone before him; in Ker’s words, Newman saw ‘theological enquiry ... as inseparable from the study of history.’⁴⁰ Christopher Dawson took a similar view: ‘It is the religious

³⁶ See Margaret Canovan, ‘Chesterton and the People,’ *Chesterton Review* X, no. 1 (1984): 49-57.

³⁷ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 272-73.

³⁸ See Schwartz, ‘Theologies of History,’ 65-83.

³⁹ Chesterton, *Victorian Age*, 62.

⁴⁰ I.T. Ker, *The Achievement of John Henry Newman* (London: Collins, 1990), 117.

impulse which supplies the cohesive force which unifies a society and a culture. The great civilizations of the world do not produce the great religions as a kind of cultural by-product; in a very real sense the great religions are the foundations on which the great civilizations rest.⁴¹ Chesterton largely agrees with this, writing: ‘It is sometimes said that Christianity has been weak and ineffectual. The truth is that it has been so powerful and effective that it coloured even the things it had not hoped to influence; and changed its enemies as well as its friends.’⁴² He views Christianity as the most transformational of religions. His views are like Dawson’s and Newman’s in that he sees religion as the most important of the driving forces of history.⁴³

Unlike Dawson, Chesterton feels free to write statements that would startle most historians, such as: ‘medieval history is useless unless it is modern history.’⁴⁴ In an article on ‘The Teaching of History’ he claims: ‘The whole object of history is to enlarge experience by imagination. ... The whole object of history is to make us realize that humanity could be great and glorious, under conditions quite different and even contrary to our own.’ In that article, he attacks understandings of history which do not show ‘Man’ as ‘divine and democratic, under the disguises of all the centuries’.⁴⁵ Such statements imply a strongly theological understanding of history; the idea that medieval history ‘is useless’

⁴¹ Christopher Dawson, *Progress and religion, an historical enquiry* (London: Longmans, Green, 1929), 232-33.

⁴² Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 150-151. See also 179-81, 246-75.

⁴³ Julia Stapleton notes that, in his *Short History of England*, Chesterton sees religion as the main driver of English history. Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism*, 169-182.

⁴⁴ Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 46.

⁴⁵ Not every Christian apologist would have paired ‘divine’ with ‘democratic’ – Chesterton here reminds us how social and political his theology was. ‘The Teaching of History,’ *ILN*, 4 February 1922, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXXII, 316-19 (318-19). In Chesterton’s view, as I argued in chapter two, that ‘great and glorious’ nature of humanity was a result of creation, of being made in the image of God, but he carefully does not state this explicitly here – as so often, he veils his theology.

unless it is modern history suggests a timeless framework for historical study, although history is usually concerned with time.

His *Short History of England* is structured to provide lessons for the present, lessons which validate Chesterton's social theology and his views on the historical consequences of different schools of Christian thought. At the end of that book, the lesson he draws from English history is that the only 'escape' from 'slavery' and from 'German regimentation of the poor' is 'to restore the personal property of the poor and the personal freedom of the family,'⁴⁶ the very lesson he was teaching in his social theology (above).

Chesterton spends most of that book trying to show that a Catholic analysis of English history makes more sense than the Whig view of history. At the end of the book he gives his argument a highly effective twist: first he suggests that the 'aristocracy' had 'captured and called itself the Parliament'; then he suggests that, as a result, 'The House of Commons' had supported Protestantism and had been led by its support for Protestantism to come under the influence of Germany:

It took the side of the Protestants, and then, (partly as a consequence) it took the side of the Germans. Until very lately, most intelligent Englishmen were quite honestly convinced that in both it was taking the side of progress against decay. The question which many of them are now inevitably asking themselves ... is whether it did not rather take the side of barbarism against civilization.⁴⁷

Chesterton here neatly aligns Protestantism with 'barbarism', and Catholic Christianity with 'civilization'. In 1917, the year *A Short History of England* was published, as battle raged on the Western Front, the charge that Protestantism and the Whig view of history idealized Germany, and were under heavy German influence, was a charge that held great force.

⁴⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (Sevenoaks: Fisher Press, 1994), 176. First published in 1917.

⁴⁷ Chesterton, *SHOE*, 175.

Philip Irving Mitchell has pointed out that Chesterton was writing in opposition to the innovations of Modernist historiography. Mitchell observes that the essays in *Varied Types* embody ‘a theistic and romantic claim about verisimilitude’ that ‘rejected the relatively new conventions of English monographic historiography’. Historians Freeman, Stubbs, and others proposed ‘a professionalization of history based on scientific, objective, and nonpartisan standards’. Chesterton was sure ‘such claims to scientific rationality were ideological falsehoods’ and that ‘modernist’ historians ‘made ideological assumptions that left out key aspects of reality.’ In Mitchell’s words, Chesterton felt history needs ‘a sense of a person and era’s emotional tone’ and that ‘the romantic, the comic, and the heroic better reveal the psychological and spiritual center’ of human existence.⁴⁸

Mitchell has captured part of the spirit which animates Chesterton’s historical writing, but only a part. In *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton talks of ‘psychological history’, or the ‘subjective side of history, which may more simply be called the inside of history’:

We need a new thing; which may be called psychological history. I mean the consideration of what things meant in the mind of a man, especially an ordinary man; as distinct from what is defined or deduced merely from official forms or political pronouncements. ... We want to know the real sentiment that was the social bond of many common men, as sane and as selfish as we are.⁴⁹

The context of this statement is important. In *The Everlasting Man*, his study of ‘psychological history’ is part of his argument for the Incarnation. In that book, and elsewhere, when Chesterton refers to what he calls ‘the inside of history,’ the examples he gives include aspects of both the spiritual and the intellectual. In *A Short History of England*, he writes: of nationalism and marriage, that ‘there was something in the great

⁴⁸ Philip Irving Mitchell, ‘Adventurous Types: G.K. Chesterton’s *Varied Types* and the Wisdom in Historical Verisimilitude,’ *VII: an Anglo-American literary review* XXXI (2014): 63-78.

⁴⁹ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 271.

moral change which turned the Roman Empire into Christendom’ which ‘baptised ... its ideas’ so that they were ‘mixed with immortality’;⁵⁰ of the Puritans that ‘the soul of the movement was in two conceptions’;⁵¹ of the English during World War I, that ‘for even the most secular types ... their relation to their native land has become not contractual but sacramental.’⁵²

In ‘The Age of Reason’ he argues that ‘The only way to understand an age ... is to find some common spirit’ in it, and that ‘The true historian does not want to be told the realities of the eighteenth century ... The true historian wants to be told the ideal of the eighteenth century.’⁵³ He justifies such an approach to history by arguing that ‘facts are ... solid while they last; but the fatal thing about them is that they do not last. It is only ... ideas that last. ... facts, which seem so solid, are of all things the most fluid.’⁵⁴ Again and again, he prefers the ‘soul’ or the ‘ideal’ to the surface ‘realities’ of history, implying that there is an inner, intellectual and spiritual reality beneath those surfaces which is more important than the mere facts at the surface; this suggests that he is taking a sacramental view of history. There is also, as Aidan Nichols has pointed out, a Christological centre to Chesterton’s theology of history; its sacramental nature ultimately stems from his engagement with the Incarnation, which I will discuss in chapter five; that discussion complements and completes this one.⁵⁵

Chesterton’s readers may well detect, in this sacramental understanding of history, echoes of Newman. Newman wrote, in 1841: ‘All that is seen, – the world, the Bible, the

⁵⁰ Chesterton, *SHOE*, 83.

⁵¹ Chesterton, *SHOE*, 120.

⁵² Chesterton, *SHOE*, 83.

⁵³ ‘The Age of Reason,’ in G.K. Chesterton, *The Glass Walking-stick, and other essays, from The Illustrated London News, 1905-1936* (London: Methuen, 1955), 116-23 (117-18). See also three other essays in the same volume: ‘Tom Jones and the Escorial’ (30-34), ‘The Court of Camelot’ (50-54), and ‘Wolfe and the Midshipman’ (55-59).

⁵⁴ ‘The Revolt against Ideas,’ in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 230-35 (233-34).

⁵⁵ See Nichols, *Chesterton*, 149-59 (149).

Church, the civil polity, and man himself, – are types, and, in their degree and place, representatives and organs of an unseen world, truer and higher than themselves.’⁵⁶

Chesterton consistently takes a similarly mystical and sacramental view (see chapter two), but he is not so overt in the way he does it as Newman is. His own ‘creedal theology’ may have followed Newman’s, but, for the sake of apologetics, in his ‘creative theology’ he veils this sacramental understanding to a degree.

Chesterton’s approach to the interaction of religion and history is very much in tune with Newman’s argument that ‘The Christian history is “an outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace:” ... Christianity has an external aspect and an internal; it is human without, divine within. To attempt to touch the human element without handling also the divine, we may fairly deem unreal, extravagant, and sophisticated; we may feel the two to be one integral whole, differing merely in aspect, not in fact.’⁵⁷ Whereas Newman feels free to declare such things openly, Chesterton, as an apologist, feels the need to veil his sacramental views somewhat.

Apologetics, history, and sacramental identity

The examples above show that Chesterton sees history in a theological framework, so much so that his historical writing is best understood as a branch of his theological anthropology, the past seen through a sacramental prism with a view to understanding the human situation in the present.⁵⁸ They also demonstrate that Chesterton uses historical study to bolster his apologetics by providing support for theological conclusions he has already reached.

⁵⁶ ‘Milman’s view of Christianity,’ in Newman, *Essays*, II, 186-248 (193).

⁵⁷ ‘Milman’s view of Christianity,’ in Newman, *Essays*, II, 186-248 (188).

⁵⁸ Hence Michael Hurley’s comment on Chesterton’s view of history: ‘History for him occurs in the now.’ See Hurley, *Chesterton*, 76-77.

He is particularly concerned to find what the past can reveal about the present identities of his subjects, and he sees those identities in theological and sacramental terms. Thus, his brief history of the world in the first half of *The Everlasting Man*⁵⁹ is concerned to prove a theological point about humanity; his *History of England* sets a Catholic understanding of the course of English history against the Whig theory of history;⁶⁰ his historical poetry, notably *Lepanto* and *The Ballad of the White Horse*,⁶¹ draws lessons from Christendom's past conflicts for its present situation. In these narratives, he expresses his theology of creation, particularly his sacramental mysticism⁶² and his theological anthropology, through a historical lens, to show how a Christian worldview makes sense of history, as part of his purpose in apologetics of transforming his readers' understanding.

In order to keep his historical writing within a register accessible to his largely secular readership, he has to employ a number of stratagems. Thus, for example, in *A Short History of England*, he goes into detail about the social, political, and economic effects of different kinds of Christianity, and different philosophies: rather than directly arguing the case for and against those systems of thought he invites his readers to judge them by their effects in history, as Chesterton portrays those effects.⁶³ While Newman feels he can speak Christian doctrine clearly and precisely, Chesterton hints, alludes, and suggests, taking care to stay just within the boundaries of natural theology. He largely avoids religious language, and certainly anything bringing revelation into his discussions, and he structures books and articles such as those cited above so as to cover historical

⁵⁹ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 141-297.

⁶⁰ Chesterton, *SHOE*, 1-176.

⁶¹ Chesterton, *Collected Poems*, 100-05, 201-88.

⁶² John Coates, a perceptive critic of Chesterton, recognises that 'the inner subjective meaning of a past experience is what is really significant' for Chesterton, but misses the sacramentality of Chesterton's approach. See John Coates, 'The Restoration of the Past and the War of Values: The Image of Don Quixote in Chesterton's Work,' *The Chesterton Review* VI, no. 2 (1980): 280-304 (283).

⁶³ Chesterton, *SHOE*, 1-176.

topics in a way that allows him to bring theological ideas to bear on historical study while remaining on the terrain of natural theology.

In brief, historical study gives him another avenue for apologetics, in which he can use the lessons of history to demonstrate the truth of his theology. He very largely restricts himself to natural theology in his historical analysis so that it remains accessible for those whose view of history is somewhat more secular. This is a delicate operation and does much to explain the rather unusual shape and style of his historical writing: he is trying to bring a thoroughly theological and sacramental understanding of history into dialogue with a non-religious audience, as a part of his overall apologetics strategy (of which more in chapter four). While this is an intellectually stimulating approach, Chesterton partly vitiates the potential of his historical and biographical writing by his cavalier disregard for many of the canons of historiography. Several of the rudiments of the historian's trade are notable for their frequent absence from his work – facts, for example, or dates; had he been willing to observe the disciplines of historiography, he would have given his unusual sacramental and theological approach to history a much better chance of reaching a wide audience.

Tradition, legend, myth, and the historian

As noted above, Chesterton, as part of his apologetics, writes historical narratives with a powerful imaginative appeal which embody a case for particular sets of ideas. His historical writing, both the prose and the poetry, may also be said to have a mythic dimension, if we accept this limited definition of the word 'myth': 'a story with deep imaginative appeal, conveying a set of ideas.'⁶⁴ This aspect of Chesterton's historical

⁶⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Richard Dawkins, C.S. Lewis and the meaning of life* (London: SPCK, 2019), 14. McGrath is summarising C.S. Lewis's view of myth.

writing relates closely to his distrust of professional historians and his great loyalty to popular tradition and even legend.⁶⁵ He writes that ‘the vulgar rumour is nearly always much nearer the historical truth than the “educated” opinion of today; for tradition is truer than fashion.’⁶⁶ The anti-elitist populism which is a part of his theological anthropology influences his view of history here, as does his distrust of the Whig view of English history; he would far rather trust ordinary people *en masse* than individual members of an elite.

He is prepared to justify his views with reference to specific historical examples: in ‘The Conflict of Romance and Realism’⁶⁷ he outlines several ‘solid historical cases’ in which ‘popular sentiment’ has preserved ‘a tradition of truth’ while ‘the critics and historians were paid to tell lies’ so that the ‘truth, or half-truth, was a truth of tradition’ while the ‘complete lie, was a lie of scholarship’.⁶⁸ He associates honesty with popular tradition and makes the extremely wide-ranging accusation that ‘the critics and historians were paid to tell lies’; this very much overstates his case, suggesting that historians as a class are duplicitous, and the common people, in contrast, remarkable for their verisimilitude and reliability.

Chesterton makes a different point when he writes of ‘those legends that are more important than history’.⁶⁹ He can regard legends as ‘more important than’ history, history

⁶⁵ As Julia Stapleton puts it, Chesterton’s disregard for facts is partly because he thought that ‘myth and legend ... were more reliable than accounts of events that purported to be “objective” such as Whig and Modernist views of English history.’ Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism*, 3.

⁶⁶ Chesterton, *SHOE*, 48.

⁶⁷ The title reminds the reader that Chesterton’s conception of ‘Romance’, outlined below in relation to his theology of the Arts, also influenced his theology of history.

⁶⁸ The examples he quotes here form part of his attack on some of the Protestant interpretations of English history which were prominent in scholarly circles in his time. Another, similar accusation is that ‘my schoolmasters did not tell me that the Puritan stood for religious loyalty, which is true. They told me that he stood for religious liberty, which is a lie.’ See ‘The Conflict of Romance and Realism’, *ILN*, 14 February 1931, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXXV, 467-71.

⁶⁹ Chesterton, *SHOE*, 80.

as conceived by conventional historiography, that is, because, in his view, what is important in history is its inner, sacramental core. He suggests that legends and popular traditions may be more likely to reveal this inner truth than secular historians, because they embody popular beliefs, which reveal truths about human nature. Writing of Alfred the Great, he claims:

Fable is, generally speaking, far more accurate than fact, for fable describes a man as he was to his own age, fact describes him as he is to a handful of inconsiderable antiquarians many centuries after. ... Fable is more historical than fact, because fact tells us about one man and fable tells us about a million men. ... whether it comes through reliable facts or more reliable falsehoods the personality of Alfred has its own unmistakable colour and stature.⁷⁰

Chesterton is more subtle than he may seem here: he does not claim that fable tells us about the ‘one man’ whom the history is ostensibly about; instead, rather than give us facts about that one man, fable tells us about the beliefs of ordinary people, of ‘a million men’, which he regards as more important. Similarly, he insists that, while ‘the Henry V of Shakespeare is not indeed the Henry V of history; yet he is more historic ... a more important person.’ Why? Because ‘the tradition of the whole adventure was not that of Henry, but of the populace who turned Henry into Harry.’⁷¹ Chesterton is more interested in that ‘tradition’ which sheds light on the inner life and beliefs of the common man and woman than in the records of the powerful, more interested in ‘popular life’ than in ‘the politics which are conventionally the whole of history’.⁷²

He is not suggesting that myths and legends are literally true, but that they lead us to deeper truths, beneath the surface, about what he calls the ‘subjective side of history’, or ‘the inside of history’, or ‘psychological history ... what things meant in the mind of a

⁷⁰ Chesterton, *Varied Types*, 199-206 (200-03).

⁷¹ Chesterton, *SHOE*, 82.

⁷² Chesterton, *SHOE*, 74.

man'.⁷³ With reference to Alfred the Great, Chesterton writes that, in myths and legends, it is not the 'particular details' that matter. However incredible these details may be, from the legend 'we learn something infinitely more important than such trivialities, the fact that men could ... believe' the legend to be 'possible':

Men may have told lies when they said that he first entrapped the Danes with his song and then overcame them with his armies, but we know very well that it is not of us that such lies are told. ... A story grows easily, but a heroic story is not a very easy thing to evoke. Wherever that exists we may be pretty certain that we are in the presence of ... a thousand lies all pointing with their fantastic fingers to one undiscovered truth.⁷⁴

He suggests that, although not literally true, myths and legends reveal several sets of important truths: about the people who tell them, the people who believe them, and the people of whom they are told. These are the truths he is interested in.

While his disregard for the canons of historical study damages his historical writing, as historiography, it does not invalidate it as a form of theological anthropology, through which he approaches history as a branch of natural theology which the apologist can use to explore the sacramental identity of humanity in relation to God; he treats the study of the past as a part of his apologetics, not as a separate genre of writing.

Chesterton's theology of the Arts

Chesterton starts with a conviction that religion and art are inextricably linked (see chapter two). In his understanding, 'All art is religious ... Religion is the sense of ultimate reality, of whatever meaning a man finds in his own existence, or the existence of anything else.'⁷⁵

⁷³ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 271.

⁷⁴ Chesterton, *Varied Types*, 199-206 (201-02).

⁷⁵ G.K. Chesterton, 'On Mr Epstein', in Chesterton, *Come to think of it*, 62-71 (64).

This very broad view of religion allows free play to his natural theology to explore any aspect of ‘ultimate reality’, including art, without the restrictions that narrower definitions might impose.

Where this leads Chesterton with respect to the arts can be quite idiosyncratic. One of the curious things about his criticism of the arts is his placement of the boundaries of his approval and disapproval. As ever, he holds strong opinions and makes sweeping judgements. The authors he praises most include Dickens, Browning, Stevenson, Whitman, and Blake.⁷⁶ None of those could be called adherents to any kind of conventional Christianity,⁷⁷ yet Chesterton writes of all of them with enormous empathy. Why the variance between the authors he praises and the faith he professes?

One clue comes in Chesterton’s harshness regarding the effects of certain kinds of Christianity on the arts. For instance, when writing of Scotland, he insists: ‘The passionate and poetical Scots ought obviously, like the passionate and poetical Italians, to have had a religion which competed with the beauty and vividness of the passions, which did not let the devil have all the bright colours, which fought glory with glory and flame with flame.’ Instead, because of the nature of Scottish Calvinist religion, Scottish literature was damaged: ‘The consequence was that this power in Scottish letters, especially in the day (or night) of complete Calvinistic orthodoxy, was weakened and wasted in a hundred ways.’⁷⁸

⁷⁶ See chapter two, and see below for discussion of Dickens.

⁷⁷ Nor was G.F. Watts, an artist Chesterton greatly admired and wrote a book about: Chesterton, *Watts*.

⁷⁸ ‘George MacDonald,’ in Chesterton, *M.C.*, 163-72 (170).

This attack should be set in the context of his very consistent, enormously negative attitude to Calvinism: he calls it ‘devil-worship’.⁷⁹ Unfair though this might be to Calvinism – and the unfairness of judgements like this one has tended to vitiate parts of Chesterton’s theological and cultural criticism – it does demonstrate how it is Chesterton’s creative theology, his natural theology, which directs his literary criticism. Calvinist Christians might have assented to the same creeds as he did, showing that they shared the essential parts of his creedal theology, but they did not share his creative theology, his natural theology of creation and paradox. For Chesterton, this theological difference matters greatly in cultural terms: because he sees no disconnect between theology and the arts, it means that what he saw as Calvinism’s theological deficiencies had, in his view, deleterious cultural effects.

The discussion above indicates the way his natural theology makes his judgements regarding the arts which are inclusive in certain respects and exclusive in others. He empathises with authors whose work reflects his own sense of wonder and joy and enthusiasm for life, even if they do not share the theology which underpins his own sense of wonder. He also responds to authors who have a strong moral sense, like his own, with a deep feeling of the reality of evil and a consequent picture of life as a battle between good and evil, together with a sense of spiritual and moral depths beneath the surfaces of life, and an awareness of paradox and contradiction. In general, he engages most positively with authors whose thought is somewhat like his own natural theology, and whose style reflects something of the wonder, joy, and contradiction embodied in his own style, even if they do not share the Christian orthodoxy to which he pledged his allegiance.

⁷⁹ ‘That unique dispensation which theologians call Calvinism and Christians devil-worship.’ Chesterton, *Dickens*, 122. See also: ‘Calvin ... tried to create a simplified Christianity, and created a world of pessimism and devil-worship.’ Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 288.

Overall, Chesterton's sacramental mysticism, his theological anthropology, and his theology of creation and of evil, between them, shape his literary criticism to the point where it is clearly a theological criticism, one which sees literary forms and ideas in the light of his natural theology. That is why, although his criteria for judgements with regard to the arts most definitely include the moral, spiritual, and theological, he does not align the boundaries of his praise with Christian and non-Christian categories.

Creation and defamiliarization

Chesterton wrote, in 1905:

The whole meaning of the strange thing called Art is merely this, that by copying a thing, by making it over again, and above all by making it over again with a slight difference, we can see something of the primary wonder of it, a spasm, as it were, of the enduring astonishment of God. ... Art, as I have said, has exactly the opposite aim to the aim of science. Science connects a thing with everything, that it may be natural and expected. Art isolates a thing from everything, that it may be unexpected, that it may be supernatural.⁸⁰

Art and literature give him an opportunity to connect his readers and listeners with the wonder of creation. What he is talking about here is a version of what came subsequently to be referred to as 'defamiliarization'. This term was coined by the Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky⁸¹, and has been discussed by both Alison Milbank⁸² and Michael Hurley⁸³ in connection with Chesterton's work.

⁸⁰ Chesterton, 'The Poetic Quality in Liberalism,' 114-25 (116-17).

⁸¹ Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique,' in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 8-15. This essay was first published in 1916.

⁸² Milbank, *Chesterton*, 31-39.

⁸³ Hurley points out that 'While Chesterton exploits this same literary technique ... the "vision" he creates is not merely literary: it is continuous with the way in which he viewed life,' Hurley, *Chesterton*, 5-6. Hurley goes on to point out that Innocent Smith, the hero of Chesterton's novel *Manalive*, spends his whole life 'strenuously defamiliarizing his existence,' Hurley, *Chesterton*, 6.

It should be noted, however, that Shklovsky's idea of the purpose of defamiliarization is 'not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object – it creates a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it.'⁸⁴ Chestertonian defamiliarization, however, is very much concerned with making the reader 'perceive meaning' and seeks to serve 'as a means for knowing' by unveiling the true nature of what is perceived, through Chesterton's stratagems for defamiliarization. In other words, the way the word is used in this thesis in connection with Chesterton's work is significantly different from Shklovsky's original definition: it refers to a defamiliarization that changes the reader's perception, from a perception in which the secular seems normal to a perception which sees it as abnormal; in addition, this defamiliarization begins a process whose aim is to make Chesterton's view of the world, starting with the sense of wonder, become the new norm. I will discuss this more fully in chapter four, in connection with Chesterton's apologetics strategies.

In connection with art and literature, Chesterton's purposes of defamiliarization and normalisation reveal how profoundly theological his artistic and literary criticism are. That is why he could write:

It is the function, then, of literature to liberate a subject, or a spirit, or an incident, or a personality, from those irrelevancies which prevent it, first from being itself, and, secondly, from becoming perfectly allegorical of the essence of things. ... Literature at its best, then, is essentially a liberation of types, persons, and things; a permission to them to be themselves in safety and to the glory of God.⁸⁵

Where he links 'to be themselves' with 'to the glory of God' he shows that he is referring to a theological understanding of reality. Where he says that literary liberation makes something become 'perfectly allegorical of the essence of things', he shows the mysticism

⁸⁴ Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique,' 8-15 (12).

⁸⁵ Chesterton, 'The Poetic Quality in Liberalism,' 114-25 (116-18).

of his approach. Where he talks of ‘liberation’ in the context of ‘the glory of God’ he illustrates the twofold purpose he has for literature and the other arts: first, to ‘liberate a subject, or a spirit, or an incident, or a personality’ from the prison (as Chesterton sees it) of a secular view of life, then to take these former prisoners out into an awareness of the wonder of creation, ‘to be themselves in safety and to the glory of God’.

Art as createdness and mystery

In Chesterton’s review of G.F. Watts’ work, in *The Speaker*, 9 July 1904, he asserted: ‘The technique of art is so far from being immoral that a moral transition can quite easily be deduced from it; moral changes can be seen physically in chalk and oil.’⁸⁶ This comment shows how closely the arts and theology are intertwined in Chesterton’s thought. In his biography of Watts, he praises Watts for his ‘didactic art,’ and supports both ‘the idea that a note in moral feeling might have affinity with a note in art,’ and a ‘general theory of the existence of genuine correspondences between art and moral beauty.’⁸⁷ This reflects Chesterton’s consistent view that art, morality, and theology are inextricably linked.

When writing of Dickens’ novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*, he asserts: ‘Nothing is important except the fate of the soul; and literature is only redeemed from an utter triviality... by the fact that it describes not the world around us or the things on the retina of the eye or the enormous irrelevancy of encyclopaedias, but some condition to which the human spirit can come. All good writers express the state of their souls.’⁸⁸ This puts art firmly in a spiritual perspective and denies it a realm separate from morality or spirituality. As he puts it succinctly: ‘Art for art’s sake ... is found in fact to be too shallow, and to be

⁸⁶ *The Speaker*, 9 July 1904, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 111.

⁸⁷ Chesterton, *Watts*, 120-22.

⁸⁸ ‘The Old Curiosity Shop,’ in *A&CWCD*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XV, 271-81 (271).

unable to live without drawing upon things deeper than itself.’⁸⁹ Instead, he believes that art is intrinsically linked to the spiritual and the moral. Chesterton’s sense of the integration of the arts with the rest of life makes any idea of art for art’s sake anathema to him.

More generally, the first two chapters of *The Everlasting Man* argue that art and religion together provide historic proof that prehistoric men were qualitatively different from anything before them, because animals ‘never do pass the line that separates them from creative expression like art and religion.’⁹⁰ As so often, Chesterton brackets ‘art and religion’ together. His theology also leads him to find links not visible to everyone between art and morality. When he writes, ‘I do not think that art is unmoral. Art, like morality, consists of drawing the line somewhere,’⁹¹ he is referring back to his own theological anthropology, in particular to the idea that being created gives human beings a definite identity, around which they need to ‘draw the line’, in loyalty to their own createdness,⁹² and arguing that this morality should be reflected in the artistic creations of human beings.

Chesterton puts the idea of created limits most forcefully through the words of one of his fictional creations, the poet Gabriel Gale, who asserts that ‘Man is a creature; all his happiness consists in being a creature ...’ and the limits of his creatureliness ‘are the lines of the very plan of human pleasure’.⁹³ Not only that, Gale argues that liberty and limitation go together: ‘What exactly is liberty? First and foremost, surely, it is the power of a thing

⁸⁹ G.K. Chesterton, ‘Magic and Fantasy in Fiction,’ *The Chesterton Review* VIII, no. 3 (1982): 202-07 (207). This article was first published in *The Bookman*, December 1929.

⁹⁰ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 181.

⁹¹ ‘Drawing the line somewhere,’ *ILN*, 5 May 1928, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXXIV, 517-20 (518).

⁹² Aidan Nichols notes that Chesterton’s love of definite boundaries reflects his idea of human creation with definite limits, in Nichols, *Chesterton*, 161-182.

⁹³ Chesterton, *Poet and Lunatics*, 129. Gale even declares that madness results from the refusal to learn ‘human limitations’, Chesterton, *Poet and Lunatics*, 124-25.

to be itself. ... being oneself, which is liberty, is itself limitation. We are limited by our brains and bodies; and if we break out, we cease to be ourselves, and, perhaps, to be anything.’⁹⁴ The idea of createdness as key to both human and artistic self-understanding could hardly be put more forcefully.

In *William Blake*, Chesterton asserts that art cannot be separate from morality and ‘unless art is moral, art is not only immoral, but immoral in the most commonplace, slangy, and prosaic way.’⁹⁵ He felt that history supported this view: in 1904 he declared: ‘The school which held that literature could be great, independent of convictions, has been free and running about for some thirty years in England and forty in France. ... Where are the fruits of its freedom? They are little indeed.’⁹⁶ These comments embody his belief that art should reflect the limitations and createdness of being human, including morality, which he sees as part of that createdness – his own version of Natural Law theory.

In his own case, he points out that whatever he writes ‘will probably be full of the implications of my own religion; because that is what is meant by having a religion,’ that ‘a Catholic putting Catholicism into a novel, or a song, or a sonnet, or anything else, is not being a propagandist; he is simply being a Catholic,’⁹⁷ and the same holds true for all other creative artists, whatever religion or philosophy they subscribe to; their art cannot be separate from their beliefs. At a personal level, he is sure that any artist’s beliefs about all areas of life influence their creative work, so that their own art cannot be sealed off from their rest of their lives ‘for art’s sake’; one of the reasons he judges the proponents of ‘art for art’s sake’ so harshly is that he feels it is an unreal pose, not a genuine artistic position.

⁹⁴ Chesterton, *Poet and Lunatics*, 63-64.

⁹⁵ Chesterton, *Blake*, 63.

⁹⁶ *Daily News*, 25 June 1904, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 113. See also Chesterton, *MWWO*, 110-12, 114-18.

⁹⁷ G.K. Chesterton, ‘On the Novel with a Purpose,’ in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 225-29.

That means that his judgements on art involve judgement of religious and philosophical beliefs.⁹⁸ Thus, in *The Man Who Was Thursday*, he writes that Gabriel Syme ‘found the thing which the modern people call Impressionism, which is another name for that final scepticism which can find no floor to the universe’.⁹⁹ In *William Blake*, he simply asserts ‘Impressionism is scepticism.’¹⁰⁰ These comments reveal the root of his hatred of Impressionism: he feels it expresses a deep philosophical scepticism which does not respect the nature of creation.¹⁰¹ This may be both inaccurate and unfair to Impressionists, nevertheless it demonstrates the theologically-driven nature of Chesterton’s approach to art and literature.

In relation to the role of the artist, Chesterton writes: ‘The artist does ultimately exhibit himself as being intelligent by being intelligible. ... It is not his business only to deliver himself; it is, I say very solemnly, his business to deliver the goods. ... The moment of creation is the moment of communication. It is when the work has passed from mind to mind that it becomes a work of art.’¹⁰² This focuses the critic’s attention away from the artist to the art: rather than viewing the artist as elevated and more precious than other people, it is the quality of the craftsmanship by which the artist communicates that is important. He claims that ‘every great artist in his heart scorns art, as compared with the greatness of God and man.’¹⁰³ This may not be the attitude of every great artist but it certainly illustrates Chesterton’s sense of the place of art in relation to God and humanity:

⁹⁸ Aidan Nichols observes that Chesterton thought Modernism didn’t recognise the definiteness of the created nature of humanity, and therefore also the definite nature of the good for which we are designed. See Nichols, *Chesterton*, 162.

⁹⁹ Chesterton, *Thursday*, 127.

¹⁰⁰ Chesterton, *Blake*, 137-39.

¹⁰¹ See Wills, *Chesterton*, 20-21.

¹⁰² ‘On the True Artist,’ in Chesterton, *Glass Walking-stick*, 182-85.

¹⁰³ G.K. Chesterton, ‘Shakespeare and the Germans,’ *The Chesterton Review* VII, no. 2 (1981): 154-56. This article first appeared in *The Blinded Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Gift Book* (London: Jarrold & Sons, The Empire Press, Norwich and London, 1915).

he accords no special status to artists, instead he locates what is special about artists in their ability to communicate the wonder of creation better than others.

His theology shapes this view of the artist. His belief that the most ordinary person is a source of wonder means that he cannot view artists as in any sense set apart from the rest of the population; if everyone is wonderful, artists as a breed cannot be more wonderful than the rest. Ultimately, it is Chesterton's theology which causes him to see the arts, spirituality, philosophy, and morality as part of an integrated whole (see chapter two), and causes him to reject any idea of art or artists as separate from ordinary humanity and not subject to the same morality as ordinary people.

The role of the grotesque in Chesterton's work

Chesterton's enthusiasm for the grotesque has been much commented on.¹⁰⁴ Several different themes in Chesterton's theology run together in his love of the grotesque. Two of these themes I have outlined above: the first is his sense of art as createdness and mystery; if it be true that creation is a source of wonder and paradox, that is true of the most unlikely and grotesque parts of it as much as the most beautiful, paradoxical though that might seem. For Chesterton, because both the ugly and the beautiful are equally created by God and so equally valuable and equally a source of wonder: 'one branch of the beautiful is the ugly' because 'the grotesque' has a 'legitimate liberty'¹⁰⁵ to be ugly while remaining, to his eyes, beautiful and interesting because of its createdness.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example: Coates, *Chesterton, Edwardian crisis*, 169-90. Milbank, *Chesterton*, 56-86. Knight, *Chesterton and Evil*, 59-87. Knight detects an implicit distinction in Chesterton's writing between 'the strange grotesque' (which references the glory of Creation) and 'the deformed grotesque' (which references evil and the loss of glory of Creation). Predominantly, however, the grotesque has positive associations in Chesterton's work.

¹⁰⁵ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 234.

He expounds this view in 'A Defence of Ugly Things', where he complains that a Greek ideal of beauty has created 'a worship of one aesthetic type alone' whereas the Jews had a strong moral code but did not inflict limiting aesthetic ideas: 'Scripture says that one star differeth from another in glory, and the same conception applies to noses. To insist that one type of face is ugly because it differs from that of the Venus of Milo is to look at it entirely in a misleading light,' which is a 'frigid theory of the beautiful'. He goes on to assert that the Medievals, Chinese art, and Rembrandt all broke away from the limiting Greek idea of beauty, and to insist that the 'extravagance' of the grotesque is in fact 'the extravagance of vitality; and here lies the whole key of the place of ugliness in aesthetics. ... The moment we have snapped the spell of conventional beauty, there are a million beautiful faces waiting for us everywhere, just as there are a million beautiful spirits.'¹⁰⁶ I will argue below that the association of 'vitality' and energy with the grotesque is important for Chesterton, in relation to his theology of joy.

A second theme, discussed above, is his idea of art as a means of defamiliarization, using imagination to help his readers to see the world in a new way. The grotesque lends itself very strongly to this: as Lynette Hunter points out, 'The grotesque creates a new perspective on detail that wakes the observer up to its potential.'¹⁰⁷ Because what is beautiful is usually more celebrated than what is ugly and grotesque, Chesterton realises that the grotesque presents an opportunity for defamiliarization: to challenge his readers' perceptions and educate their imaginations by celebrating the grotesque. This partly explains his preference for the Gothic over the Classical. The Classical seems to him to impose artificial and arbitrary standards of beauty. The Gothic, on the other hand, with its gargoyles and wild energy, lends itself to his project of startling his readers out of their

¹⁰⁶ 'A Defence of Ugly Things,' in Chesterton, *Defendant*, 111-18 (116-18).

¹⁰⁷ Hunter, *Allegory*, 17.

secular poverty of perception and into a new vision of the world. As Michael Hurley puts it, with reference to Chesterton, Gothicism's 'atmosphere ... may startle us into noticing a redeeming underlying order.'¹⁰⁸

As Chesterton sees it, 'The grotesque is the natural expression of joy ... In beauty, perhaps, there is something allied to sadness; certainly there is something akin to joy in the grotesque ... A thing of beauty is an inspiration for ever – a matter of meditation for ever. It is rather a thing of ugliness that is strictly a joy for ever.'¹⁰⁹ This is one reason why he feels that what is grotesque can be classed as beautiful in spite of being ugly. For Chesterton, joy is often associated with, and expressed by, energy (see chapter two) and, as Lynette Hunter points out, in his writing the grotesque is also associated with energy;¹¹⁰ he finds it a useful way of expressing his theology of joy. Partly because of this energy, Chesterton thinks that 'grotesque things' can be used 'in order to express sublime emotions' and 'to express novel and profound ideas', as Browning uses them.¹¹¹ This makes them particularly useful in his own attempts to express 'novel and profound ideas' and 'sublime emotions'. His sense of the value of the grotesque goes to the extreme of declaring: 'It is obvious that Punch is the most Christian of all possible figures. Punch is Christian because Punch is grotesque.'¹¹² Here his extreme exaggeration is designed to shock his readers into seeing the association he himself sees between Christianity and the grotesque, rather than to be taken literally.

Ultimately, Chesterton's love of the grotesque stems from themes at the heart of both his natural theology and his apologetics. When writing of Browning, he argues that 'It is

¹⁰⁸ Hurley, *Chesterton*, 27.

¹⁰⁹ 'Christmas Books,' in *A&CWCD*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XV, 309-16 (312-15).

¹¹⁰ Hunter, *Allegory*, 17.

¹¹¹ Chesterton, *Browning*, 48, 139-40.

¹¹² *Daily News*, 26 October 1907, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 86.

the supreme function of the philosopher of the grotesque to make the world stand on its head that people may look at it,' and suggests that 'this sense of wonder provoked by the grotesque' draws 'attention to the intrinsically miraculous character of the object itself.'¹¹³ Consider, in relation to these remarks, two of Chesterton's own dictums: 'All the real argument about religion turns on the question of whether a man who was born upside down can tell when he comes right way up;'¹¹⁴ and 'the whole meaning of ... Art is' to enable the viewer to 'see something of the primary wonder of [a thing] ... that it may be unexpected, that it may be supernatural.'¹¹⁵ These dictums show that what Chesterton wrote of Browning's work is true of his own; he uses the grotesque in ways that express his natural theology of wonder and paradox, and suit his purposes in apologetics.

As Alison Milbank has noted, Chesterton has 'a view of art as revealing the createdness of the world, and the creative vocation of the artist in remaking it. ... [He] sees art itself as mediatory: a theological tool for opening human eyes to see the reality of God and the reality, albeit contingent, of the world beyond the self.'¹¹⁶ The strangeness of the grotesque makes it a useful tool for Chesterton in his attempts to open 'human eyes to see the reality of God and ... of the world,' that is, to shock his readers into seeing the world in a radically different way.

With regard to Chesterton's treatment of literature and art in general, it is his natural theology which leads him to prefer the Gothic to the classical, to embrace the grotesque, to loathe Impressionism, and to love limits; his theology influences his preferences with regard to individual writers, such as Dickens, and makes it inevitable that 'art for art's

¹¹³ Chesterton, *Browning*, 151.

¹¹⁴ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, 363.

¹¹⁵ Chesterton, 'The Poetic Quality in Liberalism,' 114-25 (116-17).

¹¹⁶ Milbank, *Chesterton*, xiv.

sake' and any other conceptions of art which divorce it from the moral and spiritual are anathema to him. His writing on literature and art is shaped by his theology at every turn.

Chesterton, Newman, and theological epistemology

Chesterton's work raises a number of epistemological questions. In his writing, reason, imagination, mystery, emotional knowledge, communal knowledge, and experience are all involved in his quest for knowledge, and he works through both logical argument and narrative. The ways in which these resources are related in his thinking are often unclear. I will first attempt to relate Chesterton's ideas on imagination, reason, and mystery to Newman's ideas on imagination, reason, and the Illative sense, to see if this brings greater clarity. I will then, in the light of the results of that investigation, discuss the place of emotional knowledge, communal knowledge, experience, and narrative in Chesterton's theological epistemology.¹¹⁷

The role of the imagination

For Chesterton, the role of the imagination begins with the sense of wonder, the 'submerged sunrise of wonder' with which his own 'artistic and spiritual' quest begins.¹¹⁸ His sense of the vital role of the imagination is illustrated by a column he wrote for *G.K.'s Weekly* in 1929, where he refers to 'that extreme and almost extravagant form of

¹¹⁷ Newman makes an important distinction between religious and theological epistemology. Unfortunately, space does not allow for investigation of this point. For the purposes of this thesis, I will discuss both Newman's ideas and Chesterton's under the heading of 'Theological epistemology.' See Nicholas Lash, Introduction to Newman, *GA*, 1-21 (4). Also personal communication from Ian Ker.

¹¹⁸ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 95.

imagination that can really imagine reality. The true aim of art is to awaken wonder ... men must be made to realize ... how utterly unreal is the real state of things.'¹¹⁹ He sees the power of imagination as necessary to break through the barriers of perception which separate human beings from understanding reality. His sense of these barriers manifests his belief in the Fall and original sin, while his faith in imagination comes from his theological understanding that human beings are made in the image of God.

He expresses his ideas about artistic forms of knowledge in somewhat indirect ways. For instance, in *Chaucer* he writes about imaginative knowledge thus: 'poets have never grown used to stars; and it is their business to prevent anyone else ever growing used to them. ... Theories soon grow stale; but things continue to be fresh. And, according to the ancient conception of his function, the poet was concerned with things ...'¹²⁰ Chesterton's words here show his belief that poetry gives a kind of knowledge that the abstractions of philosophy cannot, giving a reader a sense of 'fresh', refreshing understanding of the wonder of creation.

Chesterton makes similar points again and again, suggesting that 'poets, pagan or not, returned perpetually to the idea of happiness as a place for humanity as a person. ... the world is always seeking for absolutes that are not abstractions ... fairyland was always a land.'¹²¹ He argues that theology needs the particular and concrete truths expressed in poetry and other creative arts, as well as the abstract truths in which philosophy and systematic theology specialise; his own natural theology encompasses both.

¹¹⁹ G.K. Chesterton, 'The place of nonsense in sense,' *G.K.'s Weekly* VIII no. 201, Week ending 19 January 1929, 299.

¹²⁰ Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 31. Chesterton contrasts poets and philosophers at the end of *The Man who was Thursday*, in these words: 'The philosopher may sometimes love the infinite; the poet always loves the finite.' Chesterton, *Thursday*, 176.

¹²¹ 'A Defence of Dramatic Unities,' in Chesterton, *FVF*, 93-98 (98).

Chesterton persistently suggests that the concrete has a kind of priority over the abstract, writing: ‘Thinkers of [a certain] school have a tendency to believe that the concrete is the symbol of the abstract. The truth, the truth at the root of all mysticism, is quite the other way. The abstract is the symbol of the concrete. ... God made the concrete, but man made the abstract.’¹²² Here, Chesterton explicitly grounds this priority of the concrete over the abstract in the doctrine of creation.

Here his thinking relates closely to Newman’s. In *An Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent*, Newman writes, ‘What is concrete exerts a force and makes an impression on the mind which nothing abstract can rival. ... An image derived from experience or information is stronger than an abstraction, conception, or conclusion ... It is in human nature to be more affected by the concrete than by the abstract.’¹²³ As Ian Ker points out, in this book Newman argues that ‘the abstract cannot reach the concrete. Logical inference cannot produce proof in concrete matters because its premisses are assumed and ultimately depend upon first principles ... logic cannot prove the first principles which it assumes.’¹²⁴ This points to a major role for imagination. Chesterton is, nonetheless, very much aware that the concrete and particular have their limitations, and abstract and rational thought has its strengths; he defends reason strongly (see below).

While Chesterton never defines what he means by imagination, his treatment of imagination in his writing points towards a twofold definition. In ‘Some Fallacies and Santa Claus,’ he decrees, ‘in things of the imagination ... form is everything’.¹²⁵ Since

¹²² *The Speaker*, 31 May 1902, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 179-180. Chesterton’s preference for the concrete runs counter to a cultural trend which, in Iain McGilchrist’s words, sees ‘the triumph of theory and abstraction over experience and incarnation.’ Iain McGilchrist, *The master and his emissary: the divided brain and the making of the Western world* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2012), 389-462 (418).

¹²³ Newman, *GA*, 49-50.

¹²⁴ Ker, *Newman*, 645.

¹²⁵ G.K. Chesterton, ‘Some Fallacies and Santa Claus,’ *The Chesterton Review* VII, no. 4 (1981): 288-91.

reason must have forms to operate upon, formlessness being inimical to ratiocination, this implies a priority for the imagination in the first stages of the acquisition of knowledge. In an essay on Carlyle in *Twelve Types*, he suggests: the ‘man building up an intellectual system has to build like Nehemiah, with the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other. The imagination, the constructive quality, is the trowel, and argument is the sword.’¹²⁶ Since construction must come before conflict, or else there is nothing for the sword to cut into, this again implies a primary role for the imagination in acquiring and developing knowledge; the image of the sword also suggests a primary role for reason in analysis, and in particular in the testing and dissecting of opposing arguments and truth claims. These statements seem to imply for imagination the initial role in turning the raw data of sense perception, memory, and so on, into knowledge.

He also outlines a second role for the imagination. He writes, as noted above, that it is imagination which has the power to discover, or ‘really imagine’, ‘reality’, and reveal ‘how utterly unreal is the real state of things’,¹²⁷ showing that his understanding of knowledge is informed by his theology of sin and the Fall. His assertion that the ‘human soul ... has brought forth poetry and religion in order to explain matters’¹²⁸ seems to imply a central role for imagination in the construction of the mind’s ‘big picture’ understanding of reality.

This twofold description of the imagination seems very largely to parallel Newman’s distinction between the ‘prehending’ and the ‘realizing’ imagination. According to this distinction, in Terrence Merrigan’s summary, the prehending imagination first ‘represents “things” to the mind’ from the raw material of memory, sense perception, and other

¹²⁶ Chesterton, *Twelve Types*, 55-61 (56).

¹²⁷ Chesterton, ‘The place of nonsense in sense,’ 299.

¹²⁸ ‘Maeterlinck’, in Chesterton, *Varied Types*, 209-14 (214).

sources, in the form of ‘images’, ‘ideas’ or ‘impressions’; the realizing imagination then ‘brings the imaginary to life’, engages the emotions, and prompts the human spirit to action.¹²⁹

Before attempting to derive a working definition from Chesterton’s treatment of imagination, however, two further points should be considered. First, Chesterton sees imagination and reason as designed to work together: in *The Everlasting Man*, he suggests that one of the great achievements of the Christian Church was to integrate reason and imagination.¹³⁰ Newman also sees imagination and reason as working in partnership, writing of imagination and intellect as ‘concurring and coincident courses of thought’ which can have no ‘line of demarcation’ between them, so that a ‘dogma of faith’ is ‘discerned, rested in, and appropriated as a reality, by the religious imagination; it is held as a truth, by the theological intellect.’¹³¹ Newman’s alignment of imagination with the appropriation of reality and reason with the appropriation of truth is paralleled, in some degree, by Chesterton’s insistence that the ‘particularism’ of literary writing and of art can capture reality in a way that reason cannot (see below), and his advocacy and use of reason in the testing of truth claims (see sword and trowel image, above, and discussion of reason below).

Secondly, there is a particularly important area in which Chesterton develops Newman’s ideas. Newman sees imagination as crucial with regard to the tasks of apologetics, writing ‘It is not reason that is against us, but imagination;’¹³² he sees the force of the secularized cultural imagination as inimical to Christianity. Chesterton goes

¹²⁹ Terrence Merrigan, ‘The Imagination in the Life and Thought of John Henry Newman,’ *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, no. 70 (2009): 187-217 (191-201).

¹³⁰ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 242-43.

¹³¹ Newman, *GA*, 93-94.

¹³² J.H. Newman, letter to W.S. Lilly, 7 December 1882, in John Henry Newman, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman (Ebook)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), XXX, 159-60. See also Ker, *Newman*, 729-30.

further, attempting in his apologetics to provoke a transformation of vision by a reformation of the imagination; he attempts to create in his readers a literal re-formation of the imagination, to make the spiritual seem natural and the secular unnatural (see chapter four). This involves an implicit idea of the latent potential and the malleability of the imagination; in this idea, perhaps, lies a significant innovation in theological epistemology.

In view of Chesterton's own notoriously loose use of terminology (see chapter one), attempting to define 'imagination' (even if only with respect to his treatment of imagination), is a perilous task, nevertheless, for the purposes of this thesis, and in light of the influence of Newman, Chesterton's idea of imagination may be defined as follows:

'Imagination is a faculty which first presents the raw materials of knowledge to the mind, then works, together with reason, to construct the mind's understanding of knowledge.

Imagination focuses particularly on the real and the concrete, reason on the abstract, imagination particularly on reality, reason on truth.'¹³³

Reason versus rationalism

Chesterton sees Christianity as the great supporter of reason, organized for 'the difficult defence of reason'¹³⁴ against scepticism. He argues this in various places, including the chapter of *Orthodoxy* called 'The Suicide of Thought',¹³⁵ where he demonstrates the theological basis for his argument by referring to reason as 'the Divine Reason'¹³⁶ in each person. He asserts, with reference to Roman Catholicism:

Ours is at this moment the most rational of all religions. ... Those who talk about it as merely or mainly emotional simply do not know what they are talking about. It is all the other religions, all the modern religions, that are merely emotional. ... We alone are left

¹³³ See Ker, *Achievement of Newman*, 69-70.

¹³⁴ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 237.

¹³⁵ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 233-48.

¹³⁶ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 235.

accepting the action of the reason and the will without any necessary assistance from the emotions. A convinced Catholic is easily the most hard-headed and logical person walking about the world today.¹³⁷

He even has Father Brown assert: 'I know that people charge the Church with lowering reason, but it is just the other way. Alone on earth, the Church makes reason really supreme. Alone on earth, the Church affirms that God himself is bound by reason.'¹³⁸ In his apologetics, he attempts to present reason as on the side of Christian theology, and on the opposite side to rationalism and scepticism.¹³⁹

He was innovative in the ways he used reason to deconstruct others' arguments,¹⁴⁰ announcing in 1903, with reference to 'the spiritual theory' of Christianity, that he and others 'have returned to it because, by the rejection of rationalism, the world becomes suddenly rational.'¹⁴¹ Chesterton condemns all forms of rationalism, because he sees rationalism as against true rationality; he declares that 'Rationalism ... was not the opening of the house of reason, but the impatient closing of it.'¹⁴² He is clearly not anti-rational, but opposing a particular, secular concept of reason.

A typical example of his criticisms of secular rationalism is his 1907 attack on the idea that secular education is neutral education, arguing: 'Education does not exist. ... There is no education apart from some particular kind of education. There is no education that is not sectarian education.' He went on to satirise the vacuousness of the attempt to present secular education as neutral by writing: 'It is typical of our time that the more doubtful we are about the value of philosophy, the more certain we are about the value of

¹³⁷ 'Some of our Errors,' in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 282-88 (286).

¹³⁸ 'The Blue Cross,' in Chesterton, *CFB*, 17-32 (28).

¹³⁹ See Lauer, *Chesterton: Philosopher*, 25-51.

¹⁴⁰ See 'The Usual Article,' in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 179-83. See also 'The Scripture Reader,' in *W&S*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 517-19. See further 'The Maid of Orleans,' in Chesterton, *ATC*, 199-204.

¹⁴¹ *Daily News*, 14 March 1903, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 150-53 (152-53).

¹⁴² *The New Witness*, 20 March 1913, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 131-32.

education. That is to say, the more doubtful we are about whether we have any truth, the more certain we are (apparently) that we can teach it to children.’¹⁴³ Such comments anticipate the more recent understanding that all rationality is situated rationality, that there is no ‘view from nowhere’.

In his detective stories he has Basil Grant, the eccentric detective at the centre of *The Club of Queer Trades*, assert that, in the detection of crime, ‘Logic ... is not what’s really wanted. It’s a question of spiritual atmosphere.’¹⁴⁴ This sharp contrast with the methods of Sherlock Holmes is all part of Chesterton’s insistence that imagination and spiritual insight are needed, alongside reason, in all forms of the discovery of truth, including such very practical fields of discovery as detective work.

He is insistent that reason must find its place alongside imagination, emotion, mystery, and communal knowledge in a complicated overall picture of human knowledge (see below), but frustratingly inexplicit and unclear with regard to how he defines reason and relates it to the other resources of the human mind. In this complex picture, is it possible to discover the outlines of the implicit definition of reason by which Chesterton operates? Most of the clues he gives for a definition are negative, especially the regular attacks on rationalism, outlined above.

These attacks echo those made by Newman, who described rationalism as ‘a certain abuse of Reason’¹⁴⁵ and a ‘great evil’.¹⁴⁶ As Ian Ker and others have argued, Newman is opposing what he sees as an inadequate conception of reason, associated with the Enlightenment. Newman proposes instead a more complex, subtle, and personalist idea of

¹⁴³ *Daily News*, 12 January 1907, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 94-96.

¹⁴⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *The Club of Queer Trades* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1946), 21-22. This book was originally published in 1905.

¹⁴⁵ John Henry Newman, *Tract 73*, in John Henry Newman, *Newman the Theologian: A Reader*, ed. Ian Ker (London: Collins, 1990), 75-80 (75).

¹⁴⁶ Newman, *Apologia*, 190.

rational thought,¹⁴⁷ one which recognises that, as he puts it, ratiocination is ‘far higher, more subtle, wider, more certain than logical Inference – and its principle of action is the “Illative Sense.”’¹⁴⁸

Chesterton’s extensive use of his own version of the Illative Sense (see chapter four) suggests that he follows Newman’s ideas with regard to reason; his ideas regarding the concrete and the abstract (see above) also echo Newman’s ideas regarding the concrete and real as opposed to the notional. Therefore, and given, in addition, the evidence outlined elsewhere in this thesis for the plausibility of influence from Newman on Chesterton’s thinking, it may be helpful to see Chesterton’s idea of reason against the background of Newman’s thought. Indeed, the implicit definition of reason with which Chesterton appears to be working might be stated as follows: ‘Reason is a faculty which analyses the information presented to it by the imagination and works, together with imagination, to construct the mind’s understanding of knowledge. Reason focuses particularly on the abstract, imagination on the real and the concrete, reason particularly on truth, imagination on reality.’

Reason, mysticism, and mystery

Chesterton’s definition of reason, combined with his understanding of imagination and his sacramental mysticism, leads him consistently to challenge the assumptions of rationalism.

For instance, in the Blatchford Controversies of 1903-04, he writes:

¹⁴⁷ See Ker, *Achievement of Newman*, 42-49. See also Martin X. Moleski, *Personal Catholicism: the theological epistemologies of John Henry Newman and Michael Polanyi* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 1-48 (38-48).

¹⁴⁸ J.H. Newman, letter to Charles Meynell, 17 August 1869, in Newman, *Letters and Diaries (Ebook)*, XXIV, 308-09.

The Christian ... puts the mystery into his philosophy. That mystery by its darkness enlightens all things. ... It is not a question between mysticism and rationality. It is a question between mysticism and madness. For mysticism, and mysticism alone, has kept men sane from the beginning of the world. All the straight roads of logic lead to some Bedlam, to Anarchism or to passive obedience, to treating the universe as a clockwork of matter or else as a delusion of mind. It is only the Mystic, the man who accepts the contradictions, who can laugh and walk easily through the world.¹⁴⁹

Chesterton here depicts ‘mysticism’ and ‘rationality’ as in harmony rather than in conflict; he is asserting a necessary and complementary place for mysticism alongside reason. He insists that reason alone is unable to fathom the deepest mysteries of life: when writing on the Book of Job, he declares ‘the truth that to draw out the soul of things with a syllogism is as impossible as to draw out Leviathan with a hook’.¹⁵⁰ The later ‘return to mystery’ by the theologians of the *nouvelle théologie* might be seen as vindicating his line of argument here.¹⁵¹

Moreover, his attitude to mystery is decidedly original: he sets a different course from many previous apologists. Where apologists such as Paley¹⁵² had stressed the order and reasonableness of creation, Chesterton’s more subversive apologetics points to the unfathomable and incomprehensible wonder of it. When writing of the Book of Job, he argues that God does not convince Job by ‘a picture of the ordered beneficence of the

¹⁴⁹ *Blatchford*, in Chesterton, *CW*, 367-95 (383-84).

¹⁵⁰ ‘A Defence of Nonsense’, in Chesterton, *Defendant*, 61-70 (69-70).

¹⁵¹ See, for example, Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle théologie and sacramental ontology: a return to mystery* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5-6.

¹⁵² Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 187-90, 205-08.

Creation; but, on the contrary, a picture of the huge and undecipherable unreason of it ... This simple sense of wonder at the shapes of things, and at their exuberant independence of our intellectual standards and our trivial definitions, is the basis of spirituality.¹⁵³ He unfortunately displays one of his major flaws here, that of overstating his case, nevertheless his theology of creation takes his apologetics in a novel direction, directing attention to the fecund, 'exuberant' mystery of creation, rather than its orderly laws, embracing mystery as the ally of reason rather than its enemy. In so doing he sidesteps a number of the arguments that have undermined the traditional arguments from design made by Paley and others.¹⁵⁴

Chesterton, characteristically, makes the test of experience the test of his position with respect to reason and mysticism:

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.¹⁵⁵

In all of this, Chesterton, following in Newman's footsteps, is working to redefine the boundaries of the right use of reason, so that his secular, rationalist and sceptical opponents are portrayed as misusing reason, while his own natural theology, and Christian theology generally, are depicted as working in harmony with reason.

¹⁵³ 'A Defence of Nonsense', in Chesterton, *Defendant*, 61-70 (69-70).

¹⁵⁴ See Dulles, *History of Apologetics*, 190, 268. See also Swinburne, 'Natural Theology,' 533-46 (536-37).

¹⁵⁵ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 231.

Experience, history, and knowledge

It is important to consider the relationship between theology and experience in Chesterton's work. In the Blatchford Controversies of 1904, for instance, he not only uses natural theology to contest Blatchford's points, but appeals again and again to communal human experience to vindicate Christianity, making assertions such as 'Nowhere in history has there been any popular brightness and gaiety without religion,' a claim which reflects the importance of joy in his apologetics. Unfortunately, it is overstated, as a way of stressing what Chesterton sees as the positive impact of Christianity; examples such as this illustrate how his habit of exaggeration can reduce the persuasiveness of his arguments. He is more effective in countering 'the Secularist' argument that 'Christianity has been a gloomy and ascetic thing' by pointing out that the Secularist's own argument demonstrates the power of religious experience: 'The Secularist ... tries to prove that there is no such thing as supernatural experience by pointing at the people who have given up everything for it.'¹⁵⁶

In *The Everlasting Man*, his interpretation of comparative religion works on the basis of the analysis of human experience: rather than divide religions geographically, he divides religion 'psychologically ... into the strata of spiritual elements and influences that could sometimes exist in the same country, or even in the same man. ... I believe some such classification will help us to sort out the spiritual experiences of men much more successfully than the conventional business of comparing religions.'¹⁵⁷ Note that, rather than dealing with the Incarnation purely at the level of ideas, he seeks to analyse history to see if this particular theological theory enables a better understanding of 'the spiritual experiences of men' – once again he makes human experience the test of his theology, and

¹⁵⁶ *Blatchford*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 367-95 (374-76).

¹⁵⁷ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 219.

analyses experience at both the individual and the communal level. Such examples remind the reader that Chesterton's theology stresses God's immediate involvement with the Creation, and his reliance on human experience and human culture as a way of testing theological hypotheses applies both in the present and also via that accumulation of past human experience which we call history.

Chesterton is unusual in coupling an appeal to experience with a defence of a very traditional Christian theology. At least since Schleiermacher,¹⁵⁸ the appeal to experience has been linked with Liberal theology; Chesterton turns it around and makes it a key part of his defence of orthodox and Catholic ideas. He does have at least one precursor in this. As Terrence Merrigan has pointed out, Newman advocates 'a way of knowing that is based on observation, discovery and experimentation', one that, in short, relies heavily on experience.¹⁵⁹ Once again, Chesterton's approach closely parallels Newman's.

Communal knowledge and emotional knowledge

Chesterton's view on the relationship between the individual and the community with regard to questions of knowledge comes through clearly in remarks such as: 'A tradition is generally a truth; so long as the tradition is sufficiently popular,'¹⁶⁰ or, 'The general existence of a world of spirits and of strange mental powers is a part of the common sense of all mankind.'¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999 (originally published 1830)), 131-41.

¹⁵⁹ See Merrigan, 'Imagination in Newman,' 187-89. Merrigan here reports, discusses, and endorses Bernard Lonergan's views. See Bernard Lonergan, 'Revolution in Catholic Theology', in Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. William F.J. Ryan, S.J. and Bernard J. Tyrrell, S.J. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 231-38.

¹⁶⁰ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 204.

¹⁶¹ *Blatchford*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 367-95 (389).

He regularly pits the ‘the common sense of all mankind,’ that is, the communal knowledge of ordinary people, against the individual knowledge of members of secular elites. For instance, in replying to George Bernard Shaw’s attacks on ‘belief in the supernatural,’ he asserts: ‘The first and most important fact is that the experience of mankind is on the side of miracles, and men like Shaw can only get out of it by despising mankind and saying that men are filthy and superstitious.’¹⁶² This is typical of the way his appeals to communal knowledge often set the spiritual and religious (but not exclusively Christian) ‘experience of mankind’ against the scepticism of individual secular thinkers, suggesting that their scepticism is a way of ‘despising mankind’ and demonstrating their own arrogance.

Chesterton takes seriously the forms of discourse used by the uneducated. He points out that, although the discussions of ‘simple people’ do not include ‘theoretic dogmas in their very theoretic form’, that does not mean they are ‘any the less dogmatic. ... Instead of defining the dogma,’ they ‘simply assume the dogma,’ and an uneducated person can be ‘quite as dogmatic as a college of theologians’, even if that person’s dogmas are left undefined. He continues:

It does often happen that the more good or innocent a man is, the more he imagines that he is undogmatic. The truth is that, so far from being undogmatic, he believes his dogmas so implicitly that he thinks that they are truisms ... But if there is one thing psychologically certain, it is that men cannot live wholly by instincts, even wholesome instincts. Men must have theories ... And the truth is that a man’s philosophy of the cosmos is directly concerned in every act of his life.¹⁶³

¹⁶² G.K Chesterton, ‘The Last of the Rationalists,’ in *G.K. Chesterton, a Criticism [by C.E. Chesterton]*, ed. Michael W. Perry (Seattle: Inkling Books, 2007), 161-66. This article was first published in *The New Age*, 29 February 1908.

¹⁶³ *Daily News*, 13 February 1906, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 90-91.

Here, he acknowledges that the uneducated do not use the same articulate forms of discourse as the intellectual elite but insists that there is, nevertheless, philosophical and theological substance underlying their views. Where he writes, ‘if there is one thing psychologically certain, it is that men cannot live wholly by instincts, even wholesome instincts. Men must have theories,’ he is asserting that the views of uneducated people embody an unarticulated ‘philosophy of the cosmos’. This ‘philosophy’ may be experienced in terms of ‘instincts’ and feelings, but is in fact grounded in theoretical ideas, even if the individuals concerned cannot express those ideas clearly, or even discern them clearly.

Here we see Chesterton combining his sense of the cognitive value of emotion and instinct, at both the individual and the social level, with a sophisticated view of reason, to argue that ‘simple people’ can express ‘dogmas’ and ‘theories’ which are valid, but not necessarily fully articulated, or even fully understood. Chesterton’s discussion of ratiocination here may be reminiscent of Newman’s argument that, in Ker’s words, ‘somebody may reason ... perfectly well but without being able to provide a rationale for his or her thinking.’ For Newman, as for Chesterton, this line of argument becomes part of a ‘defense of the ordinary person’s ability to reason correctly,’ and of a very democratic ‘conviction of the essential equality (at least in principle) of people as reasoners.’¹⁶⁴ Here, Chesterton combines an awareness of the role of intuition and emotion in cognition with a sophisticated understanding of reason very similar to Newman’s.

Chesterton also writes, for instance, that ‘fairy tales contain the deepest truth of the earth, the real record of men’s feeling for things,’¹⁶⁵ or: ‘So much of what is best in our

¹⁶⁴ Ker, *Achievement of Newman*, 47-48.

¹⁶⁵ Chesterton, *Varied Types*, 22.

race is bound up with its religious emotions and traditions ...'¹⁶⁶ He declares that, in the discovery of truth, the final stage is to 'use our reason until we understand our instincts.'¹⁶⁷ In writing thus, he is making important observations about emotional forms of knowledge. Once again he is sure that these 'instincts' embody deep truths, even though we may not 'understand' those truths unless we 'use our reason' very thoroughly.

He understands that the feelings with which we regard people are linked to our beliefs about them. For instance, he argues that ordinary people 'are sacred beings of equal value in the sight of God with the souls of Hildebrand and Shakespeare; but a man needs to be a little of a mystic to think so; or even to feel anything like it.' He suggests that 'absolute agnosticism', 'detached objectivity' and 'positive knowledge' will not make anyone feel a sense of reverence for other human beings, and if a man 'feels' this sense of reverence even a little:

It is really because he feels the remains of the old religious sentiment occasionally and vaguely. In the right mood he can still see a halo round humanity, because he still half-believes that humanity is half-divine. ... this vague charity or sense of sacred human values really points to a higher standard of sacredness. We have to look at men in a certain light in order to love them all; and the most agnostic of us know that it is not exactly identical with the light of common day.¹⁶⁸

This is a case study of the value Chesterton places in the emotional knowledge he sees reflected in others' feelings about ordinary people. He consistently pays close attention to the cognitive value of emotions and is very much aware that both communal and individual knowledge are often expressed in emotional forms.

In recent times, the cognitive role of emotion has been widely studied, so that a philosopher like Martha Nussbaum can confidently write: 'the major human emotions ...

¹⁶⁶ 'Utopias,' in Chesterton, *M.C.*, 156-62 (157).

¹⁶⁷ 'Robert Bruce and His Age,' in Chesterton, *Glass Walking-stick*, 107-111.

¹⁶⁸ 'Utopias,' in Chesterton, *M.C.*, 156-62 (160-61).

have a cognitive content; they are intimately related to beliefs or judgements about the world in such a way that the removal of the relevant belief will remove not only the reason for the emotion but also the emotion itself. The belief is the necessary basis and “ground” of the emotion.’¹⁶⁹ A century ago, Chesterton was ahead of his time in recognising this cognitive value of emotions and in integrating emotional and communal knowledge, alongside the roles of reason and imagination, into his theological understanding.

Chesterton’s theological anthropology, his sense of the importance of communal and emotional knowledge, and his sacramental view of life all come together in his attitude to ritual. He argues, in *Heretics*: ‘ritual is really much older than thought; it is much simpler and much wilder than thought. A feeling touching the nature of things does not only make men feel that there are certain proper things to say; it makes them feel that there are certain proper things to do.’¹⁷⁰ He claims that ‘Our whole industrial society is cursed with sterility ... because it cannot create a custom. It can only create a fashion. ... people who retain this popular instinct can actually act a poem.’ They have ‘the power to create ... a complete and concrete drama perfectly plain and unfathomably profound.’¹⁷¹ Here he depicts ritual in artistic terms, as ‘poem’ and ‘drama’ both ‘plain’ and ‘profound’. In his view, the persistence of ritual in an unsympathetic modern world is evidence suggesting that it meets a human need, one which goes very deep in human nature.

He does not suggest that only Christian societies can have such living traditions and rituals. Rather, in keeping with the inclusive nature of his natural theology, he suggests that paganism can also do this: ‘Christmas remains to remind us of those ages, whether

¹⁶⁹ Martha Nussbaum, ‘Narrative emotions: Beckett’s Genealogy of Love,’ in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 216-50 (223).

¹⁷⁰ ‘Christmas and the Aesthetes,’ in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 84-90 (87).

¹⁷¹ ‘Poetry in Action,’ in Chesterton, *Glass Walking-stick*, 35-38.

pagan or Christian, when the many acted poetry instead of the few writing it.’¹⁷² His regard for ritual comes from his sense of the value of the communal aspects of human life, which are partly expressed through ritual: ritual is a matter for communities, not individuals, and makes visible something of a community’s collective thought and self-understanding.

He points out the importance of the action of ritual in contexts such as those provided by funerals:

To find expression in emblem and established ritual for feelings that are most difficult to express in words is ... a liberating gesture for the living. It is even especially an expression of the life of the living ... Not one man in a thousand ever says anything worthy of the dead, or even at all adequate to his own emotions about the dead. It is a far fuller release for his feelings to do something. ... Ritualism is more natural than rationalism.¹⁷³

Chesterton depicts ritual as expressing, not individual knowledge, but the communal knowledge of a society, in a way that satisfies at an emotional level. He presents ritual as having the capacity to express the theological knowledge of a community in ways that are both intellectual and emotional, and as relating closely to the sacramental because it involves actions as well as words, the material as well as the spiritual; the Christian sacraments themselves, of course, are clothed in ritual.

Thus, Chesterton’s affirmation that ‘Ritualism is more natural than rationalism’ is, in part, an attack on individualism, and also a statement about knowledge. He acknowledges that the cognitive role of ritual and emotion is elusive and hard to analyse with precision, writing that ‘feelings that are most difficult to express in words’ can be expressed through ritual in ways that are ‘unfathomably profound’. By implication, these assertions about

¹⁷² ‘Christmas and the Aesthetes,’ in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 84-90 (88).

¹⁷³ ‘The Rights of Ritual,’ in Chesterton, *Glass Walking-stick*, 133-37 (133-34).

feelings also relate to ideas, to the expression of the ‘unfathomably profound’ ideas held by the communities that create such rituals.

Overall, Chesterton’s theological anthropology leads him to value highly both the emotional and the social or communal aspects of epistemology. His view of emotional knowledge is reminiscent of Newman’s awareness of the importance of the emotions in stimulating action. Newman writes, for example, that ‘it is ... hope and fear, likes and dislikes, appetite, passion, affection, the stirrings of selfishness and self-love’ which are stimulated by the imagination to cause action;¹⁷⁴ Chesterton goes further in developing a recognition of the actual cognitive value of emotions, while also, like Newman, understanding the close relationship between imagination and emotion. In his view of the importance of communal knowledge, Chesterton may be seen to have developed Newman’s rather individualistic epistemology somewhat: Aquino and O’Regan point out that Newman did not greatly develop the social dimension of his ideas about the Illative sense;¹⁷⁵ Chesterton’s approach to knowledge has a considerably stronger social dimension.

Chesterton’s Narrative Theology

In light of the discussion of his theological epistemology above, there are epistemological questions which should be considered about the significance of Chesterton’s work with regard to the relationship between narrative and logical argument in a theological

¹⁷⁴ Newman, *GA*, 81-82.

¹⁷⁵ See Frederick Aquino, ‘Epistemology,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of John Henry Newman (Ebook)*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 375-94 (386, 390-91). See also Cyril O’Regan, ‘John Henry Newman,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology (Ebook)*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 510-22 (520).

context.¹⁷⁶ One of the key statements which raises such questions comes in *The Everlasting Man*. He argues here that a religion that could answer humanity's religious needs would have to be 'the realisation both of mythology and philosophy', containing both 'story' and 'philosophy'.¹⁷⁷ He proposes that Catholic Christianity unites both sides of the story/philosophy dichotomy in 'the philosophy of stories',¹⁷⁸ although what he is in fact describing is a theology of stories (as noted in chapter one, it suits his apologetics to present his work in terms of philosophy rather than theology).

Chesterton suggests that 'The life of man is a story, an adventure story: and in our vision the same is true even of the story of God,'¹⁷⁹ thus implying that narrative is an integral part of Christian theology, not an optional extra. In an article in *The New Witness*, he suggests: 'if the soul could be satisfied with the truth, it would find it a tale ...'¹⁸⁰ Not a logical argument, but a tale, a narrative: a long time before the term 'narrative theology' came into use, Chesterton saw narrative as a crucial form of theology. He links narrative to personal knowledge when he writes: 'the only two things that can satisfy a soul are a person and a story; and even a story must be about a person,' contrasting 'story' and 'person' with 'mere abstractions.'¹⁸¹ He relates narrative to his theology of creation in recalling: 'I had always felt life first as a story: and if there is a story there is a story-

¹⁷⁶ For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the term 'theological narrative' to refer to narrative bearing theological meaning, and the term 'narrative theology' to refer to reflection on the relationship between narrative and theology. Theological narrative, by its nature, embodies implicit narrative theology.

¹⁷⁷ Aidan Nichols compares Chesterton's ideas on myth and philosophy with those of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Nichols, *Chesterton*, 141-59.

¹⁷⁸ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 375-81.

¹⁷⁹ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 378. Compare Alister McGrath's statement: 'Christianity is fundamentally a historically rooted interpretative and transforming narrative.' McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*, 124. While McGrath's language is rather more formal, his view of the primacy of narrative is not unrelated to Chesterton's.

¹⁸⁰ *The New Witness*, 15 July 1921, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 179.

¹⁸¹ G.K. Chesterton, 'The Priest of Spring,' in G.K. Chesterton, *A Miscellany of Men* (London: Methuen, 1920 (orig. pub. 1912)), 90-98 (90).

teller.¹⁸² He is clear, here and elsewhere, that narrative is has unique properties as a vehicle for the transmission of spiritual knowledge.

He links his understanding of the necessity of narrative to what he calls ‘particularism,’ that is, his conviction that the concrete and the real cannot be reduced to abstractions, as that conviction relates to particular places, people, and things.¹⁸³ He insists that ‘if this particularism always stubbornly recurs even in poetry’ it should not be left out of philosophy; he asks, ‘What is the meaning of this incurable itch to give to airy nothing, or still more airy everything, a local habitation and a name? ... Why are all the mysteries concerned with the notion of finding a particular thing in a particular place?’ He concludes:

I can see only one possible answer ... that there really is something to which all these fancies are what forgeries are to a signature; that if the soul could be satisfied with the truth, it would find it a tale as particular, as positive and as personal; that the light which we follow first as a wide white star actually narrows as we draw near to it, till we find that the trailing meteor is something like a light in a window or a candle in a room.¹⁸⁴

Here he is suggesting that only narrative can lead human beings to certain kinds of truth; the abstractions of rational argument cannot duplicate such ‘particularism’.

Elsewhere, he takes particularism so far as to claim that ‘every landscape or scrap of scenery has a soul: and that soul is a story,’¹⁸⁵ or that ‘the soul of a landscape is a story and the soul of a story is a personality,’¹⁸⁶ suggesting, again, that only narrative can penetrate

¹⁸² *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 264.

¹⁸³ In *Manalive*, he has his protagonist Innocent Smith express a strongly particularist view: ‘I think God has given us the love of special places, of a hearth and of a native land, for a good reason. ... I mean that God bade me love one spot and serve it, and do all things however wild in praise of it, so that this one spot might be a witness against all the infinities and the sophistries, that Paradise is somewhere and not anywhere, is something and not anything.’ Chesterton, *Manalive*, 165-66.

¹⁸⁴ *The New Witness*, 15 July 1921, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 178-79.

¹⁸⁵ ‘Stevenson’, in Chesterton, *Twelve Types*, 50-54 (53).

¹⁸⁶ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 306.

to certain of the inner realities of spiritual truth. He also suggests that it is the very ‘particularism’ of Christmas that makes it universal: ‘The truth is that it is only because the Nativity is a narrative of one lonely and literal mother and child that it is universal at all. If Bethlehem were not particular it would not be popular.’¹⁸⁷ Julia Stapleton has noted that one of his objections to both Protestantism and Islam is what he sees as their ‘contempt for particularism’, which was so important to him.¹⁸⁸

Chesterton’s conviction that there is a close relationship between literary art and theology gives a very specific context to the following assertion:

People wonder why the novel is the most popular form of literature; people wonder why it is read more than books of science or books of metaphysics. The reason is very simple; it is merely that the novel is more true than they are. ... Life is always a novel. Our existence may cease to be a song; it may cease even to be a beautiful lament. ... But our existence is still a story.¹⁸⁹

This depicts narrative as a vital part of the human quest for truth. In light of his sense of a close relationship between theology and literature, such a remark has implications for his theological epistemology, and is an example of the breadth of his understanding of the theological enterprise.

His use of narrative to explore theological ideas ties in with his understanding of emotional and communal knowledge: when ideas are developed by means of narrative, the results may be experienced in emotional forms, but those emotions have cognitive value. To understand the value of Chesterton’s use of narrative, it may help to reflect on

¹⁸⁷ G.K. Chesterton, ‘The Theology of Christmas Presents,’ *The Chesterton Review* VII, no. 4 (1981): 283-87 (286-87). This article was first published in *The Contemporary Review* in January, 1910. Chesterton’s ‘particularism’ might be seen, in part, as the expression in narrative of his sense of the primacy of the concrete over the abstract.

¹⁸⁸ Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism*, 174.

¹⁸⁹ ‘On Certain Modern Writers and the Institution of the Family,’ in *Heretics*, collected in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 136-145 (143).

something Martha Nussbaum's says about Samuel Beckett's writing. She argues that Beckett's narratives indicate that:

emotions are ... social constructs. ... We learn emotions in the same way that we learn our beliefs – from our society. But emotions, unlike many of our beliefs, are not taught to us directly through propositional claims about the world, either abstract or concrete. They are taught, above all, through stories. Stories express their structure and teach us their dynamics. These stories are constructed by others, and then taught and learned. But once internalized, they shape the way life feels and looks.¹⁹⁰

Chesterton's narratives also work to shape how 'life feels and looks' for his readers. Their effects are broader than Nussbaum's words might suggest: he teaches his readers his theological views via stories which shape their emotions and their ideas, at the same time.

Chesterton's use of narrative theology counters what he himself saw as 'the chief defect' of 'the old orthodoxy ... that it is obviously only an abstract assertion. ... Its chief disadvantage is simply that it is a theology.'¹⁹¹ To remedy that defect he casts his own most substantial theological efforts into narrative form, turning his own story into material for theology in *Orthodoxy* (in 1908), doing the same with the history of the world in *The Everlasting Man* (in 1925), and making narrative a form of theological exploration in his novels and other works.¹⁹² I have argued earlier in this chapter that Chesterton's historical narratives function in an essentially theological manner; the examples cited above indicate that his fictional and his other non-fictional narratives operate similarly.

It might be said that Chesterton was doing pioneering work in the realm of narrative theology before the academic world was aware that such a thing existed. The academy often dates narrative theology from the publication of H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Meaning*

¹⁹⁰ Nussbaum, 'Narrative emotions,' 216-50 (217, see also 220-29).

¹⁹¹ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 343.

¹⁹² See, for example, Chesterton, *Thursday*; Chesterton, *Manalive*.

of *Revelation* in 1941.¹⁹³ I will argue in chapter five that Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*, written in 1925, is clearly a work of narrative theology. More debatably, his *Orthodoxy*, written in 1908, and others of his writings, might be seen in terms of narrative theology too.¹⁹⁴ The histories of narrative theology may need to be rewritten if justice is to be done to Chesterton's work, and histories of narrative apologetics likewise, as his narrative theology was written in the form of narrative apologetics.¹⁹⁵ I will discuss his use of narrative further in chapter five, where I discuss *The Everlasting Man*; for now, I will just outline one particularly important aspect of his narrative theology.

Romance: more real than realism

Where his fictional writing is concerned, I will argue that the hidden heart of Chesterton's narrative theology is his idea of 'romance'. In literary contexts he uses the term 'romance' in a very distinctive and personal way. He defined this idea in *The Illustrated London News*, on 18 April 1931, where he wrote:

My use of the word has a philosophical meaning, and I will even claim that it has a philological justification. Briefly, I have always meant by Romance something that may be stated thus. The belief that the simplified and symbolic version of life, which depicts it, under the image of love and war, as a quest with a prize ... is nevertheless a true version of life; that is an enlightening symbol and a legitimate simplification. St. George must kill the Dragon, or the Dragon must kill the princess; that seems to me a truer picture of the aim of life and the lot of man than any realistic novel. That may fairly be called Romanticism; but it is almost the exact opposite of

¹⁹³ See Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, *Why narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997), 5-6. See also McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*, 36-39.

¹⁹⁴ Garry Wills points out that Chesterton's narrative theology goes back, in embryo at least, to the notebooks of his youth: 'The highest truth, wrote Chesterton in the Notebook, is always told in stories.' Wills, *Chesterton*, 47.

¹⁹⁵ If questions about the relationship between those two things are raised, they may be helpfully clarified by Oliver O'Donovan's observation: 'Apologetics is not a distinct genre of religious thinking. There are no apologetic reasons and arguments that do not belong in the ordered exposition of Christian belief traditionally known as "doctrine." ... Apologetics is, on the other hand, a distinct genre of exposition.' O'Donovan, *Judgment*, xiii.

what the Humanists and the New Classicists mean by Romanticism. ... And yet I think I could make a case for my own use of the word being the correct one.¹⁹⁶

His idea of romance brings together his mysticism and his sense of life as a battle between good and evil. At the heart of this idea of romance is the idea that life is a 'quest' with a purpose, which involves both 'love and war' – not necessarily literal war but certainly battle against the evils of the world. These things make romance a 'symbol' and 'legitimate simplification' of his theological view of life, in which life is a quest towards God, a quest that involves loving God and God's creation, and fighting against the evil and sin encountered in the world. This symbolic value is what makes romance 'a truer picture of the aim of life and the lot of man' than secular literary realism, and it also makes narrative an integral part of theology. In Chesterton's view, the best forms of literature embody this idea of romance.

He declares that 'Romance is the deepest thing in life.'¹⁹⁷ He writes of *David Copperfield*: it 'is not only both realistic and romantic; it is realistic because it is romantic.'¹⁹⁸ He consistently equates his version of romanticism with true realism: 'What the critics would call romanticism is in fact the only form of realism ... it is exactly in so far as a man can clear his head, so as to see actual things as they are, that he will see these things as permanently important as they are ... Exactly in so far as he is thinking about real people, he will see that they are really romantic.'¹⁹⁹ He can make such statements because, in his understanding, romance exercises several theological functions: for one, it

¹⁹⁶ 'The Attack on Romanticism', *ILN*, 18 April 1931, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXXV, 503-07 (506). In this article, he goes on to give that 'philological justification' for his use of the term 'Romance' by pointing out that his usage is based on reference to medieval romance literature, rather than to the Romantic movement.

¹⁹⁷ 'On Certain Modern Writers and the Institution of the Family', in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 136-45 (143).

¹⁹⁸ Chesterton, *Dickens*, 140.

¹⁹⁹ 'Obstinate Orthodoxy', in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 169-78 (175-76).

reveals the true importance of human beings, which (in Chesterton's view) can only be explained by the Christian doctrine of creation. In effect, here and elsewhere, Chesterton is arguing that romance is realistic because it embodies theological insights; the idea of romance is a way of expressing aspects of his natural theology in narrative form.

One such aspect is that permanent importance of 'real people'; this is rooted, for Chesterton, in the wonder of creation. His assertions here about the realism of romance might be compared with C.S. Lewis's claim about Edmund Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene*: 'The things we read about in it are not like life, but the experience of reading it is like living.'²⁰⁰ Both Chesterton and Lewis find an underlying reality in narratives which are, on the surface, non-realistic; for both, their theology shapes their literary criticism.

Romance relates to other themes of Chesterton's theology also. When writing of Stevenson, he asserts: 'The conception which unites the whole varied work of Stevenson was that romance, or the vision of the possibilities of things, was far more important than mere occurrences: that one was the soul of our life, the other the body, and that the soul was the precious thing.' Here, he attributes to Stevenson his own sacramental idea of 'romance', stressing the importance of this idea of 'romance' in relation to the 'possibilities' which are inherent in the created potential of 'our life', yet hidden beneath the 'mere occurrences' at the surface of that life. He goes on to develop this sacramental approach to Stevenson's work:

The germ of all his stories lies in the idea that every landscape or scrap of scenery has a soul: and that soul is a story Stevenson stands for the conception that ideas are the real incidents: that our fancies are our adventures.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The allegory of love: a study in medieval tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 358.

²⁰¹ 'Stevenson', in Chesterton, *Twelve Types*, 50-54 (53).

That may not be what Stevenson stood for; it was very much what Chesterton stood for. This remarkably wide-ranging passage links the intellectual, the spiritual, the narrative, and the sacramental. Chesterton asserts that in Stevenson's view (and, implicitly, his own), the internal idea or conception or vision of life is more important than 'mere' external 'occurrences' or 'adventures'. He returns often to this theme, writing elsewhere that romance is not a 'merely materialistic' thing but 'like tragedy or farce, a state of the soul', which is 'evoked in us by the sight of certain places or the contemplation of certain human crises.'²⁰²

The view he perceives in Stevenson's work resonates with his own claim, cited above, that the most important thing about literature is what it reveals about the soul, how it 'describes ... some condition to which the human spirit can come'.²⁰³ In addition, in reference to Stevenson, Chesterton exposes his own conviction about the sacramental identity of nature, which means that 'that every landscape or scrap of scenery has a soul: and that soul is a story.'

Chesterton's version of romance embodies something analogous to his sacramental mysticism, in that it depicts an underlying inner substance beneath the surfaces of reality, and that underlying substance is, in his view, composed of spiritual and intellectual elements which together form the 'soul' of a person, a community, of even landscapes and the natural world, indeed (as outlined earlier) of history as a whole; it is a weakness in his work that the relationships between these spiritual and intellectual elements remain very imprecisely defined.

In relation to Dickens, he writes:

Romance is perhaps the highest point of human expression, except indeed religion, to which it is closely allied. ... In every romance

²⁰² 'The Position of Sir Walter Scott,' in Chesterton, *Twelve Types*, 76-83 (77-78).

²⁰³ 'The Old Curiosity Shop,' in *A&CWCD*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XV, 271-81 (271).

there must be the twin elements of loving and fighting. ... The two things imply each other; they implied each other in the old romance and in the old religion, which were the two permanent things of humanity. You cannot love a thing without wanting to fight for it. You cannot fight without something to fight for.²⁰⁴

Here, he demonstrates the centrality of romance in his imaginative universe by bracketing it with religion as ‘the two permanent things of humanity’. He can claim that religion and romance are ‘closely allied’ because he sees his natural theology as central to both of them.

The above quote illustrates how the concept of romance is particularly valuable for Chesterton’s apologetics purposes because it embodies aspect of his theology while being clearly separate from any kind of institutional religion, let alone any claims about religious revelation. That means he can use it to discuss religious ideas while keeping the discussion at a literary level. The significance of romance in Chesterton’s theology is hidden because he masks the theological content of this concept for the purposes of apologetics. He writes on romance in non-theological and non-religious language, but it is central to his ideas about narrative theology.

The integrating function of theology

In this chapter, I have noted that Chesterton’s theology emerges in passing, and in fragments, as a by-product of his apologetics. As a result, its substance and coherence have been obscured, to a great extent. I have tried to demonstrate that, throughout his writing, he uses the theological ideas outlined in chapter two as a framework for his thinking, and that he applies and develops those ideas as part of his programme of cultural apologetics,

²⁰⁴ ‘Nicholas Nickleby,’ in *A&CWCD*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XV, 254-61 (254-55).

but this development is not laid out neatly, as theology expounded on its own terms. Rather it occurs in relation to the subjects he engages in his apologetics, in the context of books and countless occasional pieces addressing cultural, social and political issues. Perhaps at least partly because of this, Chesterton scholars seem to have neglected the role of his natural theology as the integrating centre of all his thought.

I have also suggested that narrative theology gives Chesterton another way to present the explanatory power of his theological ideas, one which complements his use of logical argument, and that the different aspects of his theology, if viewed together, imply a distinctive development of Newman's theological epistemology, while Newman's theological epistemology appears to provide a conceptual definition which brings Chesterton's implied and implicit epistemology into sharper focus.

In the introduction to this chapter, I suggested that the different aspects of Chesterton's theology should be considered, not just as separate entities, but as aspects of his attempt to demonstrate the efficacy of the Christian 'theory' as a convincing and 'intelligible picture' of the world, as he translates and transposes Christian ideas into terms of natural theology and uses them to explain history, experience, and culture, in ways that build up a picture of a Christian worldview (before that terminology had come into use) in terms accessible to a non-religious audience.

Chesterton's description of religion in *What's Wrong with the World* illustrates how he sees different aspects of religion and theology combining to provide what might now be called a worldview, or an 'architecture of meaning'.²⁰⁵ It is couched in terms of natural theology. He suggests that 'Religion, the immortal maiden, has been a maid-of-all-work as

²⁰⁵ Neil MacGregor uses this phrase in his article, 'Belief is back: why the world is putting its faith in religion,' where he notes that 'religion offers an architecture of meaning' in certain circumstances. See <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/05/belief-is-back-societies-worldwide-faith-religion>> [accessed 5th October 2018].

well as a servant of mankind’, providing the ‘all-round balance’ that is ‘spiritually’ needed by humanity. He expands on this idea of balance: religion ‘provided men at once with the theoretical laws of an unalterable cosmos; and also with the practical rules of the rapid and thrilling game of morality. She taught logic to the student and told fairy tales to the children.’ He concludes that religion also provided humanity with protection from deep-seated fears, and with a structure that gave public expression to the important events of life, from festivals to funerals:

It was her business to confront the nameless gods whose fear is on all flesh, and also to see the streets were spotted with silver and scarlet, that there was a day for wearing ribbons or an hour for ringing bells. ... This book must avoid religion, but there must (I say) be many, religious and irreligious, who will concede that this power of answering many purposes was a sort of strength which should not wholly die out of our lives.²⁰⁶

Here he suggests that theology, as part of religion, is capable of giving an overall structure to human thinking and living. In writing of ‘religion’ in general, not Christianity in particular, and in arguing that both ‘religious and irreligious’ can recognise this power, he demonstrates that he is speaking in terms of natural theology, not about aspects of theology and religion which depend on revelation.

In effect, he is arguing that theology provides the best reference points, or sign-posts, to enable the religious and the non-religious alike to interpret and integrate their knowledge. By transplanting Christian ideas into the very extensive framework of natural theology outlined in the last two chapters he makes this claim accessible to non-religious readers in both his direct and his indirect apologetics; collectively, the theological ideas discussed in these chapters form the architecture of meaning within which his apologetics operates, in all the different genres in which he works. In using his natural theology to

²⁰⁶ Chesterton, *WWWTW*, 121-22.

analyse other subjects and disciplines, Chesterton demonstrates a way in which theology can be brought to bear beyond the limits often placed upon it in the academy. As Alister McGrath has noted, natural theology leads its practitioners ‘far beyond the traditional boundaries of systematic theology,’ to explore ‘the borderlands of theology with the arts and sciences’ in ‘principled engagement with ... wider territory.’²⁰⁷ Chesterton’s natural theology certainly does this.

He declares: ‘There was a time when art and morals together were part of a great general view of life called philosophy or religion. ... The historic advantage of religion was that it made every part of a man’s life, art and ethics and the rest, dependent upon a general view of life itself.’²⁰⁸ He can suggest that the ‘great general view of life’ he is describing may be called ‘philosophy or religion’ because he is thinking in terms of natural theology, where philosophy and religion meet, which allows him to use those terms interchangeably at this point. He continues in this vein consistently, insisting that only in a theological understanding can the different forms of knowledge be united in a single structure.

In *The Everlasting Man* he declares that ‘the rivers of mythology and philosophy run parallel and do not mingle till they meet in the sea of Christendom. Simple secularists still talk as if the Church had introduced a sort of schism between reason and religion. The truth is that the Church was actually the first thing that ever tried to combine reason and religion. There had never before been any such union of the priests and the philosophers.’²⁰⁹ Having aligned philosophy with reason and mythology with imagination (in the same passage he argues that paganism represents ‘an attempt to reach the divine

²⁰⁷ McGrath, *Re-imagining Nature*, 154.

²⁰⁸ *Daily News*, 1 August 1903, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 117.

²⁰⁹ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 242-43.

reality through the imagination alone’), he is asserting that only ‘the Church’ and theology, working through both logical argument and narrative, can bring together these different ‘rivers’ of knowledge, the rivers of imagination and of reason.

In brief, Chesterton is proposing a role for theology and religion that goes beyond the salvific, and gives them a central, integrating function in relation to all forms of knowledge, providing a kind of architecture of meaning, or worldview. The imagery with which he proposes this idea is that of a union of priests and philosophers. This means, in the context of his own thinking, a central place for natural theology, where theology and philosophy meet. Debatable though his assertions are, they give an idea of the scope he sees as possible for natural theology, in relation to questions of knowledge as well as questions of salvation.

In addition, the epistemological resources discussed above create a partial sketch of a genuinely theological epistemology. In Chesterton’s view, the knowledge humans need to understand life, while it centres on theology, encompasses not just many different fields of knowledge, but also many different forms of knowledge. His attitudes to different forms of knowledge embody both his theology of creation – for him the pursuit of knowledge begins with the imaginative sense of wonder – and his sacramental mysticism. He suggests that the critical analysis of reason needs to be coupled with the resources of imagination, of emotional knowledge, of communal knowledge, and recognition of the place of mystery; all these resources need to employ both logical argument and narrative to achieve a fully rounded understanding of human existence, and of what we can know of the divine.

In effect, Chesterton’s work issues a series of challenges to forms of discourse which have over-emphasized reason at the expense of imagination, emotion, and tradition. Such a line of argument is, of course, highly contentious; the similarities between Chesterton’s epistemology and Newman’s mean that, in broad outline, his theological epistemology

may be criticised as Newman's has been criticised, and defended as Newman's has been defended.²¹⁰ In detail, of course, Chesterton has weaknesses all his own. He does not, for one thing, address carefully the theological issues around the limitations to human knowledge caused by sin in a fallen world; instead he takes a very optimistic view of the capacity of the fallen human mind for spiritual and other kinds of knowledge.

Chesterton's complex understanding of knowledge, which seems to relate closely to Newman's, forms a potentially valuable contribution to debates around theology and epistemology. Because it was forged in the context of cultural engagement, during the course of his work of apologetics, it remains largely implicit and implied. Nevertheless, its closeness to Newman's ideas suggests that Chesterton adapted and developed elements of Newman's theological epistemology, in creative ways and unusual contexts; questions of knowledge have often been considered in the context of philosophy, but Chesterton considers these questions in relation to contexts of cultural, political and social discourse. Moreover, while he approaches them within the framework of his natural theology, that framework is sufficiently expansive to allow for multiple perspectives within it: the perspectives of poet, novelist, debater, social and political thinker, critic of art and literature and culture in general, as well as philosopher and theologian. The combination of his distinctive theological framework with these multiple contexts and perspectives makes his theological epistemology a significant contribution, even though his epistemological thinking is fragmentary and unsystematic, sketched in part rather than fully realised.

In the next chapter, I will consider the relationship between Chesterton's natural theology and his apologetics strategies.

²¹⁰ See Merrigan, 'Imagination in Newman,' 187-89.

Chapter IV:

Strategy, Natural Theology, and the Apologist

Introduction

I have outlined the shape and scope of Chesterton's natural theology. In the next two chapters I will attempt to show how an understanding of his natural theology and its central place in his thought clarifies analysis of: his apologetics (in this chapter); and his approach to the Incarnation (in chapter five). He hints at something of the importance of natural theology in his strategies when he writes:

The modern world will accept no dogmas upon any authority; but it will accept any dogmas on no authority. Say that a thing is so, according to the Pope or the Bible, and it will be dismissed as a superstition without examination. But preface your remark merely with "they say" or "don't you know that?" or try (and fail) to remember the name of some professor mentioned in some newspaper; and the keen rationalism of the modern mind will accept every word you say.¹

Allowing for humorous exaggeration, this passage shows that, in his view, remaining within the boundaries of his idiosyncratic natural theology and avoiding reliance on 'any authority,' such as 'the Pope or the Bible,' enables him to avoid at least some of the suspicious reactions he refers to here and makes it easier for him to open up debates with the widest possible variety of dialogue partners.

¹ *The Superstition of Divorce*, in Chesterton, *CW*, IV, 257-58.

In this chapter I will outline the overall strategies he uses in this apologetics, in relation to his natural theology. First, I will consider his positioning of himself as an apologist, the contexts in which he does apologetics, and the associations and alliances he makes as part of his apologetics strategies. Then I will discuss the influence of his natural theology on three important conceptual models of apologetics he uses, and three characteristic forms his apologetics takes. I will also discuss the relationship between his natural theology and: his use of language, including aspects of his style; his modes of argument; his use of humour in apologetics. I will then suggest that this set of strategies, taken together, indicates a distinctive overall aim for his apologetics as a whole. Before considering Chesterton's apologetics strategies, however, it is important to have a clear working understanding, for the purposes of this thesis, of the term 'apologetics'.

Apologetics in history and in theory

In outlining a working understanding of apologetics I will refer to the work of Avery Dulles, John Milbank, and Oliver O'Donovan. Dulles views apologetics in historical context. Rather than argue for 'any particular theory about what apologetics ought to be' he notes that the history of apologetics is 'the story of the various ways in which thoughtful Christians, in different ages and cultures, have striven to "give a reason for the hope that was in them" (cf. 1 Peter 3:15).' Across two thousand years, those apologists have 'viewed the relationship between faith and reason in different ways.'²

He notes substantial variations in the 'goals and methods' of apologetics. The methods have varied as different apologists have 'probed the dynamism of the human

² Dulles, *History of Apologetics*, xix-xxii.

spirit in its quest for God and the dynamism of God's Word as it encounters the spirit of man.' Those goals have included: 'obtaining civil toleration for the Christian community'; seeking to 'win converts'; creating a 'dialogue' with the apologist's own 'unregenerate self' in the hope that this dialogue would help others.³

Dulles' historical approach leads him to emphasise the variety in apologetics. John Milbank takes a linguistic approach which points to the underlying commonalities beneath the varied strategies of apologists. He first surveys the tensions between different elements of apologetics: between 'defence of the faith' and 'exposition of faith'; between 'confessional element', 'imaginative presentation', and 'reasoned claim'.⁴

He looks to language to resolve those tensions, first noting that "'argument" denotes both the plot of a narrative and the sequential unfolding of a logical case,' and then considering the implications of the definition of the Greek term from which the English word 'apologetics' is derived:

Apologein in Greek means "to tell fully" and therefore simply to narrate, with a fullness that is acquired from a slightly detached perspective, as indicated by the prefix "*apo*" meaning "away from", "off", or "standing apart". Therefore the very word would suggest that an *apologia* is the primary narrative testament of faith ... If an *apologia* is indeed an argument, then it is also a narrative.

Milbank then discusses four aspects of apologetics, in particular: its relation to the state; the place of the apophatic and the cataphatic; the need to 'always remain Christological'; and the relationship between reason and imagination. He observes that apologetics can include 'narrative, argument, confession and imaginative witness' and can be at 'the very heart of Christian theology'.⁵

³ Dulles, *History of Apologetics*, xix-xx.

⁴ John Milbank, Foreword, in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Andrew Davison (London: SCM, 2011), xiii-xiv.

⁵ John Milbank, Foreword, in *Imaginative Apologetics*, xiii-xxiii.

Dulles' and Milbank's observations demonstrate that apologetics is a broad and richly varied field. They also refer to the close relationship between apologetics and other kinds of theology, reminding theologians that apologetics is not limited to reasoned defences of faith, but can include imaginative narratives, historical narratives, confessional discourses which involve the witness of experience, and all sorts of combinations of narrative, imaginative, rational and confessional elements. Here, their ideas are complemented by an observation of Oliver O'Donovan, who draws attention to the nature of the boundary between theology and apologetics, suggesting that: 'Apologetics is not a distinct genre of religious thinking. There are no apologetic reasons and arguments that do not belong in the ordered exposition of Christian belief traditionally known as "doctrine". ... Apologetics is, on the other hand, a distinct genre of exposition.'⁶ This remark is particularly relevant to Chesterton's work, as his theology is usually expounded in the form of apologetics. If O'Donovan's observation is correct, then Chesterton's apologetics is a 'genre of exposition' of theology, not a 'distinct genre of religious thinking'; in other words, a branch of theology rather than a separate tree.

The arguments of Dulles, Milbank, and O'Donovan remind the reader of the depth and breadth of the concept of apologetics, and of its close relationship with other branches of theology. Chesterton's oeuvre includes all of the narrative, imaginative, rational and confessional elements of apologetics mentioned above, which he combines in unusual and creative ways. All of them play a part in his apologetics strategies.

⁶ O'Donovan, *Judgment*, xiii.

Positioning and Chesterton's apologetics

In the course of his career, Chesterton appeared before his readers as an increasingly well-known apologist. This created a problem: the Christian apologist is likely to be seen by non-religious readers as a religious figure, and hence as distant from them. I will argue that Chesterton skilfully diminishes this sense of distance in two contrasting, perhaps contradictory, ways at once. The first way concerns the intellectual approach he promises to adopt, that of a neutral enquirer. The second concerns the emotional connectedness he establishes with his readers to create a sense of empathy, positioning himself as a friendly figure who can relate to their thoughts and feelings.

The Apologist as neutral enquirer

Consider Chesterton's reply to a Congregational minister who had expressed sceptical views about the gospels: 'I will speak ... of the actual Jesus as He appears in the New Testament; not as He appears to a believer, but as He appears to anybody; as He appeared to me when I was an agnostic: as He appeared and still appears to pagans when they first read about Him. ... Let it be understood that I am speaking for the sake of argument of a hypothetical human Jesus in the Syrian documents, and not of that divine personality in whom I believe.'⁷ In *St. Francis of Assisi*, he declares that he will 'put himself in the position of the ordinary modern outsider and enquirer' in his approach to St. Francis, declaring that 'the present writer is still largely and was once entirely in that position.'⁸ These are typical examples of his pose of unbiased enquiry.

⁷ G.K. Chesterton, 'Jesus or Christ? A Reply to Mr Roberts,' *The Chesterton Review* VII, no. 2 (1981): 95-107 (96). This article was first published in the *Hibbert Journal* (July, 1909) in reply to an article entitled 'Jesus or Christ?' written by a Mr Roberts and printed in an earlier issue of the same journal.

⁸ *Francis*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 25-27.

In *Orthodoxy*, he makes considerable play with the way he started his enquiry far from any kind of Christian theology.⁹ In *What's Wrong with the World*, he avers that 'this is not a religious work, and I must submit to those very narrow intellectual limits which the absence of theology always imposes.'¹⁰ In *Heretics*, he proclaims his own even-handedness in claiming to assess Christianity in the same way he would assess any other historical phenomenon: 'I take historic Christianity ... as I would take Jacobinism, or Mormonism, or any other mixed or unpleasing human product.'¹¹ He positions himself similarly again and again, throughout his oeuvre.

In *The Everlasting Man*, when he comes to discuss the figure of Christ in the context of the gospels, he declares: 'I shall bring in nothing of the spirit of my own creed; I shall exclude the very style of diction, and even of lettering, which I should think fitting in speaking in my own person. I am speaking as an imaginary heathen human being, honestly, staring at the Gospel story for the first time.'¹² Here, he suggests: first, that he has distanced himself from 'the spirit of my own creed' to reduce the distance between himself and his readers: secondly, that he is speaking from a position that is neither his nor theirs, that of 'an imaginary heathen human being' studying the Christian narrative 'for the first time'. This 'double-vision' positioning enables him to make himself seem close to his readers while simultaneously suggesting that, to see the world from an impartial point of view, they will have to see it in a new way.

He further seeks to bring himself close to the reader by explaining that, for the purposes of his argument in that book, 'it is necessary to treat Christ merely as a man. I

⁹ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 214, 216-68.

¹⁰ Chesterton, *WWWTW*, 185-86.

¹¹ 'Paganism and Mr Lowes Dickinson,' in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 122-31 (123).

¹² *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 318.

have to suspend my own beliefs.’¹³ At the same time as making the reader feel at home, he also prepares the reader to receive radically new ideas by saying that he is presenting the viewpoint of ‘the imaginary man from the moon to whom the New Testament is new.’¹⁴ This image of ‘the man from the moon’ is a clear image of the neutral enquirer, an image that implies entirely disinterested enquiry and suggests the ability to bring new insights to the subject, while carefully avoiding any suggestion of religious bias; the ‘man from the moon’ may be assumed to bring new insights and an unusual perspective, but not a religious one.

In other words, Chesterton’s strategy is to position himself as writing from the point of view of an unbiased enquirer, distancing his creative work from his own personal beliefs. By presenting himself as leaving behind his own beliefs when he writes, he seeks to remove any distancing between himself and his secular readers that his own religious views might otherwise create, and signals that he is seeking common ground. At the same time, he links his neutral positioning with an ability to bring unexpected insights, warning his readers that ‘it is necessary to touch the nerve of novelty’ if he is to strike ‘the note of impartiality’;¹⁵ in other words, he avers that his unbiased approach will bring his readers new insights and comes from a position which is free of both his own and their own belief commitments.

Such assertions that his apologetics is written from the point of view of an honest, unbiased enquirer are complicated, throughout his career, by the development of his own beliefs. He has to signal clearly and repeatedly that he is keeping a distance between his own ‘creedal theology’ and the ‘creative theology’ he employs in his work.¹⁶ One might

¹³ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, 318. See also 346.

¹⁴ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 321.

¹⁵ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, 147-48.

¹⁶ See chapter one.

contrast him here with his friend and fellow Catholic apologist, Hilaire Belloc: Belloc positions himself as a proud Catholic and passionate defender of the Church of Rome;¹⁷ Chesterton detaches the perspective from which his apologetics is written from his own views and his ecclesial loyalties.

His use of natural theology makes this complex positioning possible because it restricts itself to methods and resources available to anyone. Chesterton avoids any reliance on divine revelation or religious authority, avoiding religious language, and using language in ways with which an ordinary, non-religious reader or listener is likely to be comfortable (see below). Thus natural theology enables him to create an apologetics in which he is able to find common ground with his audience, while also preparing them for new insights, without using religious language, referencing systematic theology, or otherwise presenting himself as a religious figure.¹⁸

Perhaps this strategy may shed light on Chesterton's treatment of truth claims. Consider *Orthodoxy*, where he writes as follows: in the second chapter, 'I am not now discussing the relation of these creeds to truth; but, for the present, solely their relation to health. Later in the argument I hope to attack the question of objective verity,' and 'Of necessary dogmas and a special creed I shall speak later;' in the fifth chapter, 'I will discuss the truth of this theorem later;' in the eighth chapter, 'Of the fact and evidence of the supernatural I will speak afterwards,' and, writing of the divinity of Christ, 'The thing may be true or not; that I shall deal with before I end.' In the last chapter, he finally takes up the issue of truth claims, writing, 'I will here very briefly summarise my own arguments and conclusions on the purely objective or scientific truth of the matter' (the

¹⁷ See, for example, Hilaire Belloc, *Survivals and New Arrivals* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1929), 9-51.

¹⁸ With occasional exceptions, mostly at the climactic moments when he moves into Incarnational theology. I will discuss this in chapter five, and will consider other exceptions later in this chapter.

‘matter’ he is referring to being Christianity). The significance of all these delays is that they divide truth claims into two categories. Throughout, he is happy to address issues of truth which can be debated on historical or other non-theological grounds, that is, issues which he and his readers can approach from a common perspective; but he delays discussing truth claims which relate to divine revelation, where his own perspective and his readers’ perspectives might be radically different, until he reaches the climax of his argument at the end of the book.¹⁹

These examples from *Orthodoxy* indicate that Chesterton’s strategy requires him to handle truth claims very delicately. There are exceptions, at the critical moments when he moves beyond natural theology, but most of the time, although he is very clear that he is arguing for the value of Christianity and Christian ideas, he largely does so on the basis of their effects in human history, experience, and culture. These effects are measurable and debatable within a context of natural theology, so stay within the limits his strategy demands.

Where he touches on truth claims which might go beyond the bounds of natural theology, he uses a number of techniques to enable him to discuss these matters while staying within the boundaries he has set for himself. For instance, in a preface to the Book of Job, when considering the ‘quite perceptible unity’ of the Hebrew Bible he suggests, modestly, that this ‘result’ may have been ‘achieved by some supernal spiritual truth, or by a steady national tradition, or merely by an ingenious selection in after times,’²⁰ leaving his readers to choose between those possibilities and not committing himself to any of them. Similarly, in *Orthodoxy*, he makes the tentative claim that ‘there is in historic Christendom

¹⁹ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 226, 232, 282, 332, 342-43, 347-48.

²⁰ ‘The Book of Job,’ in Chesterton, *M.C.*, 34-52 (37).

a sort of unnatural life; it could be explained as a supernatural life.²¹ He does not insist that the explanation must be supernatural; here, as elsewhere, he offers his readers several possible options, one of which involves dependence on revelation, without committing himself to that option.

He is also careful to use the kind of language a non-religious reader can feel at home with. Thus, for instance, he tends to discuss the doctrine of creation in terms of the sense of wonder. Very occasionally he reminds the reader that this sense of wonder might be seen in more religious terms (without insisting that they should see it that way), as when he says: ‘The Arts exist, as we should put it in our primeval fashion, to show forth the glory of God; or, to translate the same thing in terms of our psychology, to awaken and keep alive the sense of wonder in man.’²² Here, he proposes an equivalence between ‘the glory of God’ and ‘the sense of wonder in man’ which is rather more tenuous than his persuasive prose would suggest. Usually, however, he keeps to a linguistic register which will make his non-religious readers comfortable. Even in the last chapter of *Orthodoxy*, he is still referring to Christian doctrine as ‘explanation’ and as ‘theory,’ and to the energy of Christianity as ‘psychic, or at least one of the results of a real psychical disturbance’, rather than using theological terminology.²³

Another technique is to discuss a clearly supernatural idea while being clear that he is avoiding the supernatural dimensions of the issue. So, when considering ‘the doctrine of the Dual Nature of Christ’ in his article ‘What We Think About,’ he firmly states: ‘The question of objective historical truth is another question, which I am not arguing here, though I am ready to argue it anywhere. I am talking about intellectual stimulation and the

²¹ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 354.

²² ‘Obstinate Orthodoxy,’ in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 169-78 (173).

²³ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 350, 353.

starting point of thought and imagination.’²⁴ By keeping his investigation to the level of ‘intellectual stimulation’ and ‘the starting point of thought and imagination’ he can give this doctrine much consideration while avoiding the issues which come with ‘the question of objective historical truth.’

Although he announces himself ‘ready to argue’ such questions of truth ‘anywhere’, he in fact uses considerable ingenuity to avoid them on many occasions, such as this one. In the same article he challenges critics of Catholicism to keep the discussion to the level of ‘ideas as ideas’, because it is ‘certain ideas about the cosmos’ that make a Catholic a Catholic. He suggests that critics should ‘get hold of the ideas as ideas’ and they will then discover that dogmas are ‘the most interesting of all the ideas’, limiting the scope of his argument so as to avoid questions of truth and the supernatural.²⁵ By such means as these Chesterton keeps his arguments within the bounds of natural theology, for the vast majority of the time.

The Apologist as friend

How does Chesterton attempt to create a sense of friendship and empathy in his readers’ minds? The tone of his lament about an Anglo-Catholic critic gives one clue: ‘I rather wish I knew what it is that makes the most distant prospect of me (of me, a mere dot on the crowded horizon) throw an honest gentleman at the Faith House, Tufton Street, into such astonishing convulsions.’ These humble and plaintive words are characteristic of the self-deprecating way he works to bring his readers onto his side. Another stratagem is illustrated by his remark, in the same article, that, even though he is writing in defence of

²⁴ ‘What We Think About,’ in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 297-304 (300-01).

²⁵ Chesterton himself wrote at many levels, not just the level of ‘ideas as ideas’, but here it suits him to keep the conversation on that level, to avoid issues concerning theological truth claims.

Catholic Christianity: 'I would very much prefer to talk to my countrymen about ... Dickens or the great comic culture of the English tradition.'²⁶

Such examples demonstrate his ability to suggest that his feelings are in tune with the feelings of his non-religious readers, though his duty may force him to discuss religious matters; he reminds them how much he loves English literature (represented here by Dickens) and English humour ('the great comic culture of the English tradition'). One might again contrast Chesterton with Belloc. Belloc argues fiercely and demands that his readers take sides;²⁷ Chesterton politely invites his readers to walk with him for a while and see what the view is like from where he stands.

Another important factor is that Chesterton's own concept of theology is almost without boundaries, so that, for him, 'nothing can be irrelevant to the proposition that Christianity is true' and 'defending it may mean talking about anything and everything'²⁸ because 'there is no fact of life ... which has not its place ... in the glorious Carnival of theology.'²⁹ For him, theology speaks into any area of life; for his readers, however, many subjects would be seen as non-religious; fortunately, he can speak with authority on topics which his audience would see as unrelated to theology, even if he would not. The huge amount of writing and speaking he did on many 'non-religious' subjects³⁰ helps to give him credibility in his positioning of himself as one who can claim common ground with his audience: all that humorous journalism, all those detective stories, biographies, works of literary and artistic criticism, and so on, convincingly show that he is interested in many

²⁶ 'Where is the Paradox?' In *W&S*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 528-33 (528, 532).

²⁷ Consider a characteristically confrontational claim: 'The Catholic faith is the dominating fact, not only in the history of Europe (and therefore of the world) but in our own contemporary society. ... by the extent to which a man recognises that truth you may test his knowledge or his ignorance upon the things of the present or the past.' Belloc, *Gilbert Chesterton*, 58-59. See also Belloc, *Survivals and New Arrivals*, 273-88.

²⁸ *Daily News*, 12 December 1903, quoted in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 89-90.

²⁹ Chesterton, *Watts*, 167-68.

³⁰ Even though he wove a strand of indirect apologetics through it all.

subjects in which his non-religious readers and listeners are also interested. He is a more effective apologist because he is not only an apologist.

His famous wit and humour are also significant in this context. For example, what does the humorous nature of this argument add to its ability to break down objections to Christianity?

If you can prove your philosophy from pigs and umbrellas, you have proved that it is a serious philosophy. If you have, let us say, a theory about man, and if you can only prove it by talking about Plato and George Washington, your theory may be a quite frivolous thing. But if you can prove it by talking about the butler or the postman, then it is serious, because it is universal. So far from it being irreverent to use silly metaphors on serious questions, it is one's duty to use silly metaphors on serious questions. It is the test of one's seriousness. It is the test of a responsible religion or theory whether it can take examples from pots and pans and boots and butter-tubs. It is the test of a good philosophy whether you can defend it grotesquely. It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it.³¹

He is working to link Christianity and humour; this makes it at least possible that the positive associations humour brings with it may come, in his audience's minds, to add to the appeal of Christianity. Rather than make apologetics a solemn and separate subject, far removed from everyday discourse, Chesterton here, typically, brings it into territory where his readers are likely to be at home, making the most of anything that creates connections between him and them. It is another way he brings himself close to his readers; unlike most apologists, he makes humour a central part of his work, and even gives it a place in his argumentation, a serious role in religious and philosophical discussions (see chapter three, and later in this chapter).

The above examples illustrate an important feature of Chesterton's creation of empathy: while he may be combative in relation to the many opponents he debates with,

³¹ 'Spiritualism and Frivolity – Westminster, the Heart of England,' *ILN*, 9 June 1906, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXVII, 205-10 (206).

he is not challenging or confrontational towards his readers; towards his audiences, his tone is emollient, warm, and humble, on occasion even wistful and confiding. He does not issue direct challenges to his readers that would make them uncomfortable, such as calls for conversion. To do so would be out of step with his friendly and inclusive approach to the reader: he presents himself as representing the viewpoint of reasonable and sensible people, and assuming that his readers count themselves among that number. This positions him as arguing alongside his readers and listeners, and in sympathy with them, against the follies of others, rather than correcting or arguing against his own audience. He avoids writing about aspects of his own religion with which his readers might be uncomfortable. For example, instead of describing the sacrament of penance, he writes: ‘absolution, like death and marriage, is a thing that a man ought to find out for himself.’³²

The creation of empathy in ways such as this is an important part of this strategy. Without it his claim to write from common ground would be much less convincing. Natural theology allows much scope for addressing non-theological topics and gives him plenty of room for English cultural references and other means of creating empathy, within his presentations of Christian apologetics. He is very adept at these kinds of inculturation, using them as bridging devices to make connections with his audience.

As the examples above indicate, the tone and style of Chesterton’s writing form an integral part of his strategy: they enable him to present himself as someone to whom his readers and listeners can relate in an informal, relaxed way, thus giving credibility to his claim to be working from common ground. In general, he is friendly, playful, humorous, relaxed, sometimes serious but never solemn – very distant from the formal, rigorous approach of some academic apologetics. He makes the most of anything that links him to

³² *CCC*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 86. By humorously linking absolution to death and marriage, he aligns it with experiences which were as much part of his readers’ worlds as of his own.

his audience, such as humour or a love of literature and art. Where a solemn, rigorous approach might well set up a more formal and confrontational environment for discussion, the entertaining nature of Chesterton's work brings his readers onto his side and makes his writing feel friendly and sympathetic, rather than positioning himself and his readers on opposing sides in an argument. Shared humour creates a sense of affinity, and Chesterton is regularly sharing humour with his audience.

He also points to the significance of a neglected aspect of apologetics: the role of association as a complement to argument; by positioning himself as his readers' friend and by his humour and wit, he associates Christianity with friendliness, fun, comedy, wit, and good humour. Chesterton's apologetics by association does not prove any Christian doctrine, but it does associate Christianity with ideas and values which are likely to be viewed positively by his readers; as a result, its effects on his readers' imaginations and emotions may have encouraged those readers to be more open to the persuasions of Christian apologetics.

Composite Positioning

The above examples show that, while seeming casual and simple in his approach, Chesterton is actually immensely subtle. His use of natural theology enables him to develop a strategy which might be called composite positioning, because in it he is able to combine elements which are not only distinct but even seemingly contradictory. The emotional connection Chesterton establishes with his readers through the aspects of his distinctive tone and style outlined above complements his positioning of himself as a neutral enquirer, and both diminish the sense of distance that a non-religious audience might expect to feel with regard to such a religious figure as a Christian apologist. Both

these ways of reducing the distance between him and his non-religious audience are made possible by his use of two contrasting features of natural theology.

One feature is that, as natural theology is not tied to a particular religion but, rather, inclusive of and open to different religious and philosophical viewpoints, the non-religious reader can follow the same paths of argument as the Christian apologist during a discussion that keeps within the boundaries of natural theology. This common ground enables Chesterton to place himself alongside his readers as a friend inviting them to join him.

The second is that, because neither the non-religious reader nor the Christian apologist nor anyone else can be said to have any kind of ownership of natural theology, it is open to use by an unbiased investigator, who can bring in concepts new to the non-religious reader without associating himself or herself with a particular religious allegiance. Chesterton uses that second characteristic of natural theology to position himself in the role of neutral enquirer, barring himself from using any resource that an impartial critic could not use, so as to approach the non-religious reader with arguments which cannot be accused of reliance on revealed religion. By making use of these two features of natural theology he can, at one and the same time, establish common ground with his readers, by positioning himself as their friend, while preparing to break new ground by positioning himself as a neutral investigator.

To illustrate this strategy: it can be pictured as a game he plays with his readers. He moves the ground on which he and the reader engage to a mental space that is not labelled as religious, a space in which non-religious readers can feel at home, where the discussion will remain within rules with which they are comfortable, while that same space is simultaneously presented as one in which they will see the world in a new way. He then signals regularly that he is keeping to the rules of this game, while steering his discussions

as close to the limits of the game as he possibly can, by suggesting, implying, or hinting at supernatural conclusions to his arguments yet overtly keeping within the bounds of natural theology, until the very end of the game.

Chesterton's own background explains why he could adopt this composite positioning and play this 'game' with sincerity. He had himself grown up in a non-religious environment, so had genuine empathy with his non-religious readers and could place himself back in a non-religious framework of thought, that is to say, in his readers' framework of thought, for the purposes of argument. He had thought himself from that worldview to the doorstep of Christianity by means of natural theology (see chapter two), so could honestly use that same natural theology to guide his readers on the same journey, restricting himself to the methods of natural theology and the intellectual approach he had adopted when he genuinely was a neutral enquirer himself. Because of this personal history he could play the 'game' of composite positioning with his readers and yet be sincere.

The 'game' unfolds in the following way. His role as apologist is public and clearly signposted before the reader starts reading. He then introduces himself to the reader as one who writes as an unbiased investigator, in spite of his own beliefs. At the same time, he employs a number of tactics, outlined above, to create empathy with his readers, and position himself as their sympathetic friend. His positioning as unbiased investigator sets him up to startle his readers; his positioning as friend sets him up to keep those readers comfortable, in spite of the surprises he administers in his other role. It is as if he takes apologetics 'through the looking-glass' and approaches his readers from three different directions at once. By using this strategy of composite positioning, Chesterton manages both to subvert and to fulfil his audience's expectations at the same time.

Context, genre, and impact

Chesterton's column in the *Daily News* in the early years of the twentieth century presented its readers with statements such as 'It is obvious that Punch is the most Christian of all possible figures. Punch is Christian because Punch is grotesque;' ³³ or, 'The primary things in the universe, before all letters and all language, are a note of exclamation and a note of interrogation.' ³⁴ These examples remind the reader that the significance of his work lies not only in the words he wrote, but also in the contexts in which those words appeared; he was able to gain controversial, provocative Christian apologetics an entry to the pages of mass-circulation newspapers, far beyond religious circles.

As Ker has observed, journalism suited Chesterton's desire to reach the broadest possible audience, and his anti-elitist views. ³⁵ Stapleton has pointed out that Chesterton prized journalism as 'a means of broadening the basis of cultural and social criticism away from elites.' ³⁶ He embraced demotic forms of writing such as journalism and detective stories ³⁷ as part of his strategy of creating a sense of alliance between Christianity and ordinary people (see below).

Academic study usually focuses on the quality of a writer's work, but in the case of an apologist, the wideness of the circulation of their ideas is also significant, not the sheer

³³ *Daily News*, 26 October 1907, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 86.

³⁴ *Daily News*, 8 July 1905, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 89.

³⁵ See Ker, *Chesterton*, 89-92.

³⁶ Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism*, 213.

³⁷ Marty Roth comments on the populist nature of the classic detective story, pointing out that some observers have seen the 'virtue' of the detective story as being 'to preserve classical narrative, pure story-telling, in a fallen world. According to some writers, detective fiction was the last stronghold of a plain style that had been perversely abandoned by the prevailing literary culture in the 1880's and after.' Marty Roth, *Foul & fair play: reading genre in classic detective fiction* (Athens, Ga.; London: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 5. See also Bernard De Voto, 'The Easy Chair,' *Harper's Magazine*, December 1944.

volume of their output, but the number of influential forums they are able to reach with it. Chesterton's reach was so wide in his own time that T.S. Eliot could say, on his death, that Chesterton's were '*the* ideas for his time that were fundamentally Christian and Catholic.'³⁸ The phrase 'for his time' reminds the reader that Chesterton's ideas, and the ways he expressed them, were carefully calibrated for the debates of his time. That careful calibration meant that he could find ways of infiltrating 'fundamentally Christian and Catholic' ideas into a range of forums which perhaps no other Christian apologist managed to reach in the same way; it is also one reason why much of his work has not aged well.

At the same time the nature of the journalistic and other popular forums he inhabited (debating societies and so on), together with his positioning of himself as a friend sharing common ground with his readers, conditioned how he could operate. This partly explains the indirect, roundabout ways he addressed Christian ideas in articles and essays – he had to find ways his readers could digest them, in the context of a newspaper or a magazine, while maintaining his empathetic connection with his readership. Context can only partly be blamed, however, for the fragmentary and frustrating nature of much of Chesterton's argumentation; he is frequently guilty of digressing, of disorderly and confusing argument, he often fails to develop his own ideas, and the occasional nature of much of his writing only exacerbates his own shortcomings.

Apologetics and the detective story

The most sustained and successful of all Chesterton's introductions of apologetics into unusual contexts comes in the case of Father Brown. Father Brown is introduced as having

³⁸ T.S. Eliot, signed obituary article in *The Tablet*, 20 June 1936, in *Critical Judgments*, 531-32. Eliot's italics.

‘a face as round and dull as a Norfolk dumpling ... eyes as empty as the North Sea’ and as appearing so intellectually inadequate that ‘he did not seem to know which was the right end of his return ticket;’³⁹ the description makes him seem both completely ordinary and completely English, as English as ‘a Norfolk dumpling’, with a very common English name, ‘Brown’. At a time when Roman Catholic priests were widely viewed in England as alien and sinister creatures, Father Brown is marked out as reassuringly English and entirely unsuspecting, from the first.

He is described with adjectives such as ‘small’ and ‘harmless’, with a ‘round, simple face’, defusing any animosity that might be directed at a Catholic priest.⁴⁰ This is the key to the role in apologetics of the Father Brown stories: it is less to do with any particular theological points Father Brown might make than with popular perception of Catholic Christianity; Chesterton creates a thoroughly inoffensive and entirely English Roman Catholic priest, takes him out of a religious context and places him in the reassuring landscape of one of the most popular genres of English fiction, the detective novel.

Throughout the stories, Father Brown is hardly ever seen performing any kind of priestly ritual. Instead, he brings logic, philosophy, and theology to bear on the detection of crime. While he is reassuringly and overtly rational – he is clear that ‘alone on earth, the Church makes reason really supreme’ – Father Brown also, in his detective work, takes into account, ‘mystery’, ‘moral evidence’, ‘miracles’, ‘belief’ and ‘the supernatural’, ‘the impossible, but not the improbable’, ‘moral impossibility’, and ‘moral’ truth,⁴¹ gently hinting at the metaphysical and even the eschatological without quite breaking the boundaries of the conventions of the detective story genre.⁴² Because Chesterton keeps so

³⁹ Chesterton, *CFB*, 18-19.

⁴⁰ Chesterton, *CFB*, 37, 32.

⁴¹ Chesterton, *CFB*, 28, 112-23, 412, 414, 431, 324, 493-99.

⁴² He is helped by the fact that, as Michael Cook has pointed out: there is a ‘nexus that exists ... between the detective story and Christian theology ... at the metaphysical level of understanding,

carefully to the conventions of the detective genre in most respects, he can insinuate such religious ideas into the Father Brown narratives without alienating his secular readers, even though, as Christopher Routledge points out, his ‘detective fiction breaks with the view ... that the mysteries of the universe can be revealed through the ratiocinative method.’⁴³

Moreover, as Michael Cook puts it, ‘By allying Christian faith to the logic of the detective and the formulaic structure of the detective story itself, Chesterton gives his stories an authority outside the conventional appeal to faith.’⁴⁴ Chesterton’s ‘apologetics by association’ appears again as he uses the actual structure and logic of the detective story genre to add authority to the indirect apologetics built into these narratives. The reader of a detective story expects the detective hero to judge rightly and to reveal truth; where that detective is a Roman Catholic priest these characteristics become associated with that priest.

Father Brown associates the Catholic Christianity he represents with a number of positive ideas and values, which he embodies. These include virtue, humility, integrity, commitment to the battle against crime, and logic, as in his retort to Flambeau: “‘You attacked reason. It’s bad theology.’”⁴⁵ In addition, there is the measure of presence and profile: Father Brown represents a cluster of Catholic and Christian ideas, focused in the shape of a fictional priest, and his popularity as a detective has created a niche for those ideas in the public discourse of a secular age, ensuring that they have been positively

by means of its association of eschatological ideas;’ both deal with sin and move towards judgement, and to the revelation of truth. Michael Cook, *Narratives of enclosure in detective fiction: the locked room mystery* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, England; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 67.

⁴³ Christopher Routledge, ‘The Chevalier and the Priest: Deductive Method in Poe, Chesterton and Borges’, *Clues* 22.1 (2001), 1-2, quoted in Cook, *Enclosure*, 76.

⁴⁴ Cook, *Enclosure*, 75.

⁴⁵ Chesterton, *CFB*, 32.

presented in a much-loved genre of English fiction for over a century. Thus, Father Brown illustrates how Chesterton's use of natural theology in non-religious contexts involves the persuasive power of association as well as that of argument.

The example of Father Brown also demonstrates that the placement of apologetics in genres and in media which would usually be secular was not only a work of considerable creative skill, it expressed Chesterton's convictions about the relevance and importance of theology to all aspects of life (see chapter two). Instead of conventional, solemn, closely argued apologetics he used a form of indirect apologetics which might be called 'embedded apologetics' in newspapers, or in detective stories, in which his apologetics was embedded in the conventions of those literary forms, so as to disarm the non-religious reader's aversion to religious writing.

Chesterton was able to use such secular forums for apologetics, because of the combination of two things: the dramatic nature of his natural theology, with its focus on joy and wonder, its mysticism and theological anthropology in paradoxical counterpoint with its sense of evil and the fallenness of humanity; and the creativity to embody all this in a variety of literary forms, which meant that his natural theology could play successfully in the popular media of his day. The non-religious nature of the contexts he worked in may have magnified the disorienting, defamiliarizing effects of his approach. The insertion of apologetics into such innovative contexts was a strategy Chesterton might fairly be said to have fallen into, since he set out into the world of journalism before becoming a Christian apologist, but it was a strategy he executed with great flair.

Natural theology, biography, and indirect apologetics

How do Chesterton's apologetics strategies relate to the biographies, essays, and articles he wrote about Christian figures, such as Francis of Assisi and Thomas Aquinas? In the

introduction to his biography of Francis of Assisi, for example, he first considers and discards the idea of writing of him ‘as a figure in secular history and a model of social virtues’. Then he considers and discards the idea of writing from a ‘defiantly devotional’ perspective and treating ‘religion as the real thing that it was to the real Francis of Assisi’. Instead, characteristically, he decides to ‘put himself in the position of the ordinary modern outsider and enquirer,’ and to ‘try to use what is understood to explain what is not understood’⁴⁶ about Francis, making it clear that he, as author, will abide by the rules of this, his usual apologetics ‘game’ (see above).

At the same time, the biography form allows his discussion of Francis, and other religious subjects, to stray into areas of faith beyond the boundaries of the common ground from which Chesterton himself pledges to continue to write, because he is describing the faith of the subject of the biography, not his own faith. Thus, Chesterton turns biographical writing into a kind of indirect apologetics, in a rather roundabout way. When writing about Christian figures he can give sympathetic accounts of their faith, their theology, and their trust in Christian revelation and authority.⁴⁷ He can thus use them to present a particular kind of indirect apologetics, mediated via the beliefs of the subject of the biography, while keeping his own authorial perspective separate from his subjects’ views (even where his own personal views coincide with theirs). The biography genre gives Chesterton the opportunity to discuss the full range of Christian ideas while continuing to play his ‘game’ of apologetics in the form of natural theology.

⁴⁶ *Francis*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 25-27.

⁴⁷ See *Francis*, and *Aquinas*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II.

The alliances of natural theology

Chesterton depicts Chaucer in this way: ‘Chaucer ... feels in a vast if vague fashion that he has Reason behind him; as he has Aristotle and Aquinas and a whole civilization behind him.’ Chesterton also discerns in Chaucer: ‘a quite indescribable serenity that comes from security ... the consciousness of a cosmic philosophy at the back of the mind ... the feeling of a sort of reasonable repose in the common sense of Christian philosophy.’⁴⁸ Chesterton here suggests that Chaucer can rely not just on ‘Christian philosophy’ but also on the support of ‘Aristotle and Aquinas and a whole civilization’ and ‘Reason’ itself; significantly, he places the pagan Aristotle alongside the Christian Aquinas as supporters of Chaucer’s Catholic civilization.

This is not an isolated instance of Chesterton attempting to demonstrate points of affinity between Christian ideas and those of great thinkers beyond the bounds of the church. In his book on William Blake, he places Blake as a member of ‘a European school of optimistic mystics; among whom the great name is Plato,’ which is ‘on the side of historic Christianity’, both against Eastern mysticism (which Chesterton characterises in very negative ways), and in its ‘defiance of materialism, a work upon which all the mystics, Pagan and Christian, have been employed from the beginning’. In writing this he claims Plato, Blake, and an entire European school of ‘this healthier heathen mysticism’⁴⁹ as allies for Christianity, whose weight can be put behind his battles with secular materialism. In a similar vein, he enthusiastically celebrates the compatibility of Aristotelian ideas with Christianity in *St. Thomas Aquinas*.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 287, 241-42.

⁴⁹ Chesterton, *Blake*, 208-09, 183, 208.

⁵⁰ *Aquinas*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 455-77.

He writes: 'I myself am working in defence of civilisation side by side with men who call themselves Agnostic, Atheist, Anglican, Methodist,' making it very clear that he is willing to defend civilization alongside those who hold very different beliefs. For him, this 'defence of civilisation' is aligned with his Christian apologetics because, in his view, 'our whole civilisation is a Catholic civilisation,' and provides a 'home' for those of all beliefs, in which 'justice, freedom, property and the family' are protected, for the benefit of all. As a result, he can argue that 'the practical thing is to call all men of good will, who trust their common sense, who believe in the family and who think that our civilisation is worth preserving' to defend it.⁵¹ He finds further commonality in 'the sacredness of every human being', which he suggests is 'the whole essence and power and force of Christianity, and indeed not only of Christianity, but of every other religion'.⁵² Once again, he generalises beyond Christianity, including 'every other religion' in his natural theology and his search for common ground.

Perhaps the early influence of authors such as Whitman, Browning, and Stevenson may have informed his inclination to make common cause, as far as possible, with them and with others who would not subscribe to a Christian confession, but had points of agreement with Christian belief. He takes an enormously positive approach to such commonalities, and then makes great use of this in his apologetics, suggesting that an implicit alliance exists between Christianity and non-Christian thinkers and writers such as Plato and Aristotle and the others mentioned above, so that their intellectual and artistic prestige can be used to support the Christian cause.

In making this alliance, Chesterton seems to be working to encourage in his readers a sense of an 'intellectual hinterland'. As the examples above show, this concept of the

⁵¹ G.K. Chesterton, 'The Revival I Want,' *The Chesterton Review* XX, no. 2/3 (1994): 155-57 (156-57). First published in *Have we lost God?*, ed. W.R. Titterton (Pamphlet, 1933).

⁵² Chesterton, 'Vox Populi, Vox Dei,' 261-266 (266).

intellectual hinterland expresses a sense that his own work should be seen as just a tiny part of a much greater whole, a minor outcrop set against a vast and rich intellectual backdrop, as if his work were a tiny peninsula with behind it an entire, vast continent, or the intellectual equivalent thereof, that hinterland being composed of both Christian thought and that of allies of Christianity such as Plato and Aristotle. This sense of an intellectual hinterland assists Chesterton's attempts to create a sense of assurance with regard to the intellectual validity of Christian thought; in this, his own position seems similar to his depiction of Chaucer's position above. Chesterton's natural theology, especially his theology of creation and his theological anthropology, is important here; it lends itself to his envisioning of many of the insights of non-Christian thinkers as forming part of the theological architecture of meaning from which his apologetics operates.

Alliance with the common man and woman

Alongside the alliance between Christianity and the non-Christian thinkers and writers referenced above, I will now argue that Chesterton tries to create a very different alliance. When he defends the reality of the spiritual against materialist sceptics, he turns for support not to religious authorities but to 'the whole human race', suggesting that this is 'one thing which the whole human race, without any exception at all, attests. From the dimmest ages and lands, wherever the seed of man is found, it declares this ... If human evidence means anything at all, this is perhaps the only thing on which we have overwhelming evidence.' He concludes: 'We have nearly overwhelming human witness to the necessity of morality; we have quite overwhelming human witness to the reality of the spiritual life.'⁵³ His belief in the value of ordinary human beings means he can legitimately

⁵³ *Daily News*, 14 March 1903, in Chesterton, *DN*, II, 22-26 (25).

place great weight on the ‘overwhelming human witness’ he discerns here in support of morality and the spiritual life. Elsewhere, he cites against sceptics the ‘human testimony’ of ordinary people, which he refers to as ‘a choking cataract of human testimony in favour of the supernatural’;⁵⁴ he pits this communal ‘testimony’ of the mass of humanity against the sceptic.

He writes of ‘that normal and universal Deism which really is natural to most men,’⁵⁵ and suggests: ‘There is the normal man with the natural religion, which accepts the general idea that the world has a design and therefore a designer; but feels the Architect of the Universe to be inscrutable and remote ... That sort of theism is perfectly sane.’⁵⁶ This amounts to a claim that Deism is the natural religion of humanity. He even suggests that ‘pagan mythology’ may perhaps ‘give a hint of some enormous natural religion behind all history and from the first foreshadowing the Faith.’⁵⁷ He does not claim that Christianity is the ‘natural religion’ of humanity. Instead he posits a vague monotheism as natural and writes of it sympathetically, not in a judgemental way, as ‘perfectly sane’. This sympathetic approach enables him to present Christianity as an ally of ordinary people who believe this ‘natural religion’, even though Christianity differs from it.⁵⁸

He even uses Thomism to support his strategy of alliance with the common man and woman, arguing that ‘the Thomist philosophy is nearer than most philosophies to the mind of the man in the street.’⁵⁹ Margaret Canovan comments: in Chesterton’s hands, ‘Thomism turned into a populist philosophy of sanity and common sense.’⁶⁰ While this is an

⁵⁴ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 355.

⁵⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXI, 595.

⁵⁶ ‘The Protestant Superstitions,’ in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 255-59 (257-58).

⁵⁷ *Francis*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 129

⁵⁸ See Fagerberg’s thoughtful discussion relating Chesterton, paganism, natural religion, and Catholicism, Fagerberg, *Chesterton*, 63-103, 170-72. See also Lauer, *Chesterton: Philosopher*, 158-66.

⁵⁹ Chesterton, *CW*, II, 514.

⁶⁰ Canovan, *Chesterton*, 123.

exaggerated and distorted judgement, it does reflect something of Chesterton's determination to include Thomism in this strategy, as part of his effort to align Christianity with the common sense of humanity.

He is able to bring this alliance with the common man and woman to bear on very specific topics. For instance: 'It is usual to hear a man say that he likes common sense and does not like the mummeries and flummeries of church ritual. But common sense is in favour of mummery and ritualism, the common sense of mankind. The man who attempts to do without symbols is a prophet so austere and isolated as to be dangerously near to a madman.'⁶¹ Here he allies church ritual with the 'common sense of mankind' against rationalist critics. With regard to miracles, he declares: 'the materialists have to prove the impossibility of miracles against the testimony of all mankind.'⁶² He suggests that those who deny the supernatural are setting their 'own theory of things inexorably against the sincerity or sanity of human testimony;' instead, he avers, 'How natural is the craving for the supernatural.'⁶³ When he insists that Christianity can accept 'all the superstitions that are necessary to man'⁶⁴ he shows how far his natural theology can stretch to accommodate the beliefs of ordinary people. In relation to these and other controversial points, he asserts confidently that ordinary people are on his side and that of Christianity. Again and again, working on the basis of his social theology (see chapter three), he turns to the communal knowledge of ordinary people as a resource, enlisting it to support his arguments, often contrasting it with the fashionable opinions of various elite groups.

Chesterton argues that 'modern emancipation has really been a new persecution of the Common Man,' that secular society and government have consistently been on the side

⁶¹ Chesterton, *Blake*, 172-73.

⁶² *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 327.

⁶³ 'Inge versus Barnes,' in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 292-96 (295-96).

⁶⁴ Chesterton, *Blake*, 108.

of 'the wealthy' against 'the Common Man', that "'liberal economics" were a proclamation of freedom, for the few who were rich enough to be free,' and that the modern secular idea of 'Progress ... encouraged anybody who had anything to say against God, if it was said with a priggish and supercilious accent; but discouraged anybody who had anything to say in favour of Man, in his common relations to manhood and motherhood and the normal appetites of nature.'⁶⁵ Note that he does not contrast those who speak 'against God' with those who speak for God, but with 'anybody who had anything to say in favour of Man.' By putting the contrast this way he aligns those who speak for God with those who speak for humanity, for the ordinary person, and against those whom he depicts as an oppressive secular elite, speaking 'against God ... with a priggish and supercilious accent'. In all of this, he continually presents secularism as the enemy of ordinary people.

Chesterton's defence of the common man and woman was very unusual for an intellectual in his time. As John Carey revealed, in *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, George Bernard Shaw, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, W. B. Yeats, and other leading thinkers among Chesterton's contemporaries took a completely different, and very dismissive, view of the working classes.⁶⁶ Chesterton saw this as, at least in part, the result of their philosophies of life,⁶⁷ in particular what he viewed as the 'tendency of all fine naturalistic thought towards oligarchy, which can be seen from Aristotle to Hume and from Hobbes to Nietzsche'; he

⁶⁵ 'The Common Man,' in G.K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950), 1-9.

⁶⁶ John Carey, *The intellectuals and the masses: pride and prejudice among the literary intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber, 1992), 3-90.

⁶⁷ He argued: 'It is this profound scepticism about the common man that is the common point in the most contradictory elements of modern thought.' G.K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity* (Dublin: Carraig Books, 1974), 218. Originally published in 1926.

contrasted this with ‘the divine vulgarity of the Christian religion’,⁶⁸ which takes the side of the poor. He satirized the views of his fellow intellectuals, writing: ‘The poor in London are not left alone, but rather deafened and bewildered with raucous and despotic advice. They are not like sheep without a shepherd. They are more like one sheep whom twenty-seven shepherds are shouting at.’⁶⁹

The condescending attitudes of these secular intellectuals set up a strong contrast which enabled Chesterton to position himself and his religion very clearly on the side of the poor and of ordinary people. As he put it: ‘I am ordinary in the correct sense of the term; which means the acceptance of an order; a Creator and the Creation, the common sense of gratitude for Creation, life and love as gifts permanently good, marriage and chivalry as laws rightly controlling them, and the rest of the normal traditions of our race and religion.’⁷⁰ In his efforts to align Catholic Christianity with ordinary people, he wrote, for example: ‘We follow the rule of reason, and we base our religion on the value of common people and common things.’⁷¹ Importantly, he stood up, not just for the value of the poor and marginalised, but for the value and importance of their ideas, at a time when many of his peers had no idea that the poor and uneducated might have any sort of place in intellectual debates. He was keen to make this contrast a part of his apologetics, because it demonstrated the practical consequences of Christian theology and its rivals.⁷²

⁶⁸ ‘Oliver Wendell Holmes,’ in Chesterton, *M.C.*, 11-18 (17).

⁶⁹ Chesterton, *WWWTW*, 212.

⁷⁰ ‘Obstinate Orthodoxy,’ in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 169-78 (169).

⁷¹ Chesterton, ‘Revival I Want,’ 155-57.

⁷² While Chesterton is convinced that Catholic Christianity has generally had benevolent social consequences, he is rather less positive about Protestant Christianity. For instance, as Stapleton has pointed out, he sees part of ‘the success of the Reformation’ as being ‘in weakening national bonds by heightening class divisions.’ Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism*, 210.

Association, alliance, and argument

In sum, Chesterton's apologetics involves the making of associations and alliances as well as the creation of arguments and narratives; he works to associate Christianity with ideas and values which are likely to be viewed positively by his non-religious readers, and he attempts to demonstrate that there are implicit alliances between Christianity and certain non-Christian groups of people, ordinary men and women on the one hand and great thinkers, mystics, and writers on the other. He does also make arguments and create narratives in his apologetics, but he does not limit himself to doing this; his apologetics reaches beyond argument to associations and alliances in ways which might be thought more a part of the worlds of politics and advertising.

In this strategy, he might be said to be defending an exclusive position by very inclusive means. That is, he is willing to align Christianity with individuals and groups who do not profess orthodox Christianity, into order to defend orthodox Christianity. He is able to make these alliances, at least in part, because he is working on the basis of natural theology. That means he can claim that many of the instincts and thoughts of ordinary people, and the natural religion he imputes to them, correspond with his own Christian natural theology, and thus call them as witnesses and supporters in his defence of Christianity. In appealing to 'the whole human race'⁷³ and 'the testimony of all mankind'⁷⁴ for support for his theological ideas, he follows the example of Newman, who appealed to 'the common voice of mankind', 'the voice of mankind', and 'the universal testimony of mankind' to support his own philosophical and theological arguments.⁷⁵

⁷³ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 350.

⁷⁴ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 327.

⁷⁵ Newman, *GA*, 270, 303.

Chesterton also points to parallels between Christian ideas and some of the thinking of noted non-Christian thinkers, mystics, and artists, so that he can claim at least a partial alliance with them, aligning them with Christianity against secular materialism. He then uses these two contrasting alliances to make a kind of rhetorical pincer movement against the secular elites of his day, arguing on the one hand that ordinary people are in sympathy with the Christian cause, and on the other hand that the finest thinkers and mystics outside the Christian camp are on its side in the battle against secular scepticism and materialism.

Chesterton's models of apologetics

As noted in chapter two, Chesterton feels that the wonder of creation is veiled by humanity's fallen state, because, in a fallen world, the 'sunrise of wonder' at existence is submerged by the influence of sin. This collision between the doctrines of sin and creation in his thought leaves him with a sense of a need to shock and to surprise. In his thought, Christian ideas are associated with energy, while sin is seen as making life dull, in addition to its corrupting power. This theology, I will argue, leads him to find models of apologetics which upturn convention and startle his audience out of their settled ways of seeing the world.

I will outline three distinctive models of apologetics which are at the heart of his work, conceptual models which underlie the forms in which he writes his apologetics. I will then argue that three particular forms of apologetics are key in his work, forms which build on these three conceptual models.

Apologetics as subversion

In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton depicts Christianity as ‘The Eternal Revolution,’ and writes about ‘The Romance of Orthodoxy’ rather than the rightness and respectability of orthodoxy. He also declares, when writing of Christian ideas about the crucifixion of Christ: ‘That a good man may have his back to the wall is no more than we knew already; but that God could have His back to the wall is a boast for all insurgents for ever.’ He suggests that Christianity has always been subversive: ‘The orthodox Church never took the tame course or accepted the conventions; the orthodox Church was never respectable.’⁷⁶ He is clearly determined to place Christianity on the side of romance and rebellion, working from a model of apologetics as subversion, and using the power of association (see above).

To see why Chesterton felt there was a need for subversion, ask why he wrote, in 1901, ‘The act of defending any of the cardinal virtues has to-day all the exhilaration of a vice;’⁷⁷ in his view, materialism and materialist philosophies were already dominant in England, and Christianity was no longer ‘the establishment’ but was rebelling against a new secular ascendancy. He was a contemporary of Max Weber, who summed up the triumphalism of secularizers who felt themselves victorious, saying: ‘There are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play ... the world is disenchanting.’⁷⁸ Chesterton was keen to ‘re-enchant’ the world and saw apologetics as having a subversive role to play in this task.

⁷⁶ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 307-45, 343, 305.

⁷⁷ ‘A Defence of Humility,’ in Chesterton, *Defendant*, 130-39 (131).

⁷⁸ Max Weber, ‘Science as a Vocation,’ in Max Weber, *Max Weber: essays in sociology* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2013), 129-57 (139) (Ebook). The words come from the lecture ‘Science as a Vocation’, first delivered in 1917 or 1918.

He fiercely criticises secular ethics for, among other things, ‘the absence of vivid pictures of purity and spiritual triumph ... the absence of a clear idealism,’ creating ‘the problem of a human consciousness filled with very definite images of evil, and with no definite image of good;’⁷⁹ this suggests that secular ethics cannot inspire or give clear guidance. In contrast, he argues that: ‘balanced morality’, such as the Christian morality of the Middle Ages, is ‘alive like a dance;’⁸⁰ that morality based on Christianity ‘is the most dark and daring of conspiracies,’⁸¹ is ‘the romance of conscience’, is a ‘rapid and thrilling game’,⁸² even that ‘Man lives by his devouring appetite’ for such morality.⁸³ This approach subverts the frequent linkage of Christian ethics with duty and dullness and secular ethics with excitement, progress and the breaking of taboos; Chesterton reverses these associations, making ethics a part of his portrayal of apologetics as a subversive activity.

In his advocacy of Christian ethics for apologetics purposes, he turns to experience for validation, avoiding truth claims, but showing how well the ethics he supports work in practice.⁸⁴ In doing this, he anticipates Oliver O’Donovan’s ‘general claim about ethics and apologetics: the critical edge of the encounter between belief and unbelief often locates itself where faith displays an ability to comprehend the tasks of life’.⁸⁵ Chesterton uses the ethics which forms part of his natural theology to ‘comprehend the tasks of life’ in vivid and entertaining ways which further his purposes in apologetics.

⁷⁹ ‘On the Negative Spirit,’ in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 47-53 (48-51).

⁸⁰ Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 157.

⁸¹ ‘A Defence of Detective Stories’, in Chesterton, *Defendant*, 155-62 (162).

⁸² Chesterton, *WWWTW*, 121.

⁸³ Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 157.

⁸⁴ See, for example, ‘The Mercy of Mr Arnold Bennett,’ in Chesterton, *FVF*, 86-92.

⁸⁵ O’Donovan, *Judgment*, xv.

Moreover, suggesting that the positive view of ethics he puts forward provides more illumination of the ethical issues faced in daily life than secular ethicists can provide contributes to the worldview aspect of his apologetics (see below). Making the defence of the virtues a subversive operation, as exhilarating ‘as a vice’, is a typical example of how he uses disorienting, unexpected models of apologetics. By creating a model of apologetics which associates it with subversion and rebellion, depicting orthodox Christianity as a romantic rebel against the materialist mainstream, he makes it easier to generate a sense of excitement and novelty in his advocacy of Christianity.

Christianity as adventure

Chesterton suggests that ‘the Christian conception of life’ sees life as ‘a Quest, a Test and an Adventure,’⁸⁶ and that ‘We are to regard existence as a raid or great adventure; it is to be judged, therefore, not by what calamities it encounters, but by what flag it follows and what high town it assaults.’⁸⁷ His own fiction picks up on this conception of life and gives it a role in his apologetics. Gabriel Syme goes through a nightmare of testing, seemingly called to fight the impossible, in *The Man who was Thursday*; in *Manalive*, Innocent Smith gives himself the quest of going round the whole world, in order to see his wife, family, and home properly, on his return; Patrick Dalroy flees and fights impossible odds in *The Flying Inn*;⁸⁸ and so on.

At the same time, Chesterton’s novels do not operate in a conventional manner: he wrote himself that he could not be a novelist because he liked ‘to see ideas or notions wrestling naked,’⁸⁹ and his ‘novels’ are not novels in any conventional sense. The two

⁸⁶ Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 157.

⁸⁷ *T.P.’s Weekly* (Christmas Number, 1910), in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 161-62 (162).

⁸⁸ *The Flying Inn*, in Chesterton, *CW*, VII, 421-665.

⁸⁹ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 289.

protagonists of *The Ball and the Cross*, for instance, embody the ideas of atheism and Catholicism.⁹⁰ The heroes of his novels all go on quests, tests, and adventures which embody philosophical and theological conflicts in an allegorical manner. In this way, he puts his defence of a Christian worldview into fictional form as a kind of narrative theology (see chapter three).

His belief that a Christian idea of life involves quest, test, and adventure means that his apologetics is shaped by adventure, and not only his fictional apologetics. *Orthodoxy* also presents Christianity in terms of adventure, with chapter titles such as ‘The Flag of the World,’ ‘The Eternal Revolution,’ and ‘The Romance of Orthodoxy.’⁹¹ He writes: ‘All science, even the divine science, is a sublime detective story. Only it is not set to detect why a man is dead; but the darker secret of why he is alive.’⁹² His readers may never have thought of theology as a detective story. He uses this as an aspect of his presentation of Christianity as adventure, suggesting that he and his readers are like detectives solving a mystery, or explorers making great discoveries.

As these examples show, in his apologetics he presents a Christian understanding of life as a series of adventurous quests, often involving detection and discovery. This helps him to draw his readers in by making his apologetics a story of discovery and adventure. Once again, he is making use of the power of association, linking Christianity with concepts such as adventure, quest, and discovery, with the solving of mysteries and the detection of crimes. Moreover, in both his fiction and his non-fiction, he understands the value of narrative in apologetics, and uses the power of narrative for purposes of persuasion.

⁹⁰ See *The Ball and the Cross*, in Chesterton, *CW*, VII, 35-258.

⁹¹ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 209-366.

⁹² ‘What Do They Think?’ In *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 191-95 (191).

Apologetics, hypothesis, and worldview

As discussed in chapter one, Chesterton uses the ‘method of the hypothesis’ a great deal in his work. I will argue here that Chesterton’s apologetics characteristically uses the ‘method of the hypothesis’ to present Christian ideas in terms of their effects in human experience and of their explanatory power, as aspects of a Christian worldview. Working in this way allows him to stay within the bounds of natural theology, because he is supporting Christianity with evidence in terms of fact rather than in terms of metaphysical truth claims.

The Catholic Church and Conversion shows very clearly the way he uses natural theology in his apologetics to defend a Christian worldview, so I will use it to illustrate some of his characteristic methods, methods which appeared in many of his writings. To begin with, he several times makes it clear that he is deliberately avoiding dogmatic or doctrinal theology: ‘When we come to that conviction of divine authority, we come to ... the unfathomable idea of grace and the gift of faith; and I have not the smallest intention of attempting to fathom it;’ and again, ‘The supernatural truths are connected with the mystery of grace and are a matter for theologians,’⁹³ not one he sees as within his remit.

Instead, he works by examining the effects of Catholic doctrines rather than the doctrines themselves. For example, he accuses the national churches created by Protestantism of fostering a narrow nationalism:

There was this in common between the Catholics to whom I have come and the Liberals among whom I was born: neither of them would ever have imagined for a moment that patriotism was enough. ... The point is here that hundreds of the most heroic and high-minded people in Protestant countries have really assumed that it is enough to be a patriot. The most careless and cynical of Catholics

⁹³ CCC, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 95, 117.

knows better; and so did the most vague and visionary of Universalists.⁹⁴

By bracketing Roman Catholic attitudes with those of theologically liberal Universalists, he makes it very clear that he is treating all these sets of beliefs equally and not privileging the beliefs of his own church.

Where he does argue for the uniqueness of the Roman Catholic Church among other Christian churches, he does so on historical, not theological, grounds: ‘In a perfectly plain and historical sense ... if in no other sense, the Catholic Church stands alone. It does not merely belong to a class of Christian churches. It does not merely belong to a class of human religions. Considered quite coldly and impartially, as by a man from the moon, it is much more *sui generis* than that.’⁹⁵ Note that he positions himself here, characteristically, as giving the viewpoint of a neutral outsider, ‘a man from the moon,’ not as someone appealing to Roman Catholic authorities.

He goes on to bracket his appeal to history with cultural arguments, claiming that it was the return of Catholic ideas that reinvigorated the best of nineteenth-century Protestantism, and that the impact of Catholicism on European culture is evidence that ‘the philosophy of the Catholic Church’ is the ‘summary’ of Christian civilization and its ‘central sanity’.⁹⁶ Here, once again, he avoids revealed theology, arguing for Roman Catholic philosophy instead. (As noted in chapter one, in Chesterton’s unusual terminology, a reference to philosophy can encompass natural theology.)

Where he does argue theologically, it is a distinctly natural theology, with repeated appeals to ‘experience’, to what is learned by ‘merely living in this world’, and to ‘the decisions which can be more or less tested by experience’.⁹⁷ For example, he argues that

⁹⁴ CCC, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 80.

⁹⁵ CCC, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 99-100.

⁹⁶ CCC, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 101-05.

⁹⁷ CCC, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 115, 117.

the intuitions of childhood are evidence for the truth of Christian ideas, referring to ‘the very earliest time’ of his life, ‘when I had a sort of glimpse of the meaning though I had never even heard of the doctrine ... I have come back to being able to think what I could then only feel ... It is not so much that I have found I was wrong as that I have found out why I was right.’⁹⁸ In all of this, Chesterton defends the Roman Catholic Church while avoiding Roman Catholic theology, and without giving any sort of privileged status to any Christian authority, or to any form of theology which might require a Christian belief commitment. Instead, he weaves together natural theology with arguments from philosophy, history, culture, and psychology to make his case.

He did this throughout his career: his brother Cecil, commenting on Chesterton’s debates with Robert Blatchford in 1903-04, noted, ‘Of the more mystical and questionable Christian dogmas he says little or nothing’⁹⁹ in the course of his defence of Christianity; in 1929, in *The Thing*, he was still turning to ‘historical proofs’ and ‘human and personal proofs’¹⁰⁰ (and not to metaphysical truth claims) as evidence for the theological case he was trying to make. These examples demonstrate the consistency with which he uses the inter-disciplinary nature of natural theology to support his theological arguments with historical, cultural, and other non-theological forms of evidence.

Another aspect of Chesterton’s approach can be discerned in *Orthodoxy*. Here he describes the grounds for his belief in Christianity in these terms: as an ‘accumulation of truth’, commenting, ‘a man is not really convinced of a philosophic theory when he finds that something proves it. He is only really convinced when he finds that everything proves it’, that proof being demonstrated by ‘converging reasons’ and a ‘multiplicity of proof’. He insists that ‘my own case for Christianity is rational; but it is not simple. It is an

⁹⁸ CCC, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 117-18.

⁹⁹ Cecil Chesterton, *A Criticism*, 73.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Why I am a Catholic,’ in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 184-90 (190).

accumulation of varied facts, like the attitude of the ordinary agnostic. But the ordinary agnostic has got his facts all wrong.’ He is clear that his arguments do not rely on mystical or metaphysical grounds accessible only to the religious, but instead exist in the same world of evidence as an agnostic’s arguments. He is clear that he believes:

quite rationally upon the evidence. But the evidence in my case, as in that of the intelligent agnostic, is not really in this or that alleged demonstration; it is in an enormous accumulation of small but unanimous facts. ...a man may well be less convinced of a philosophy from four books, than from one book, one battle, one landscape, and one old friend. The very fact that the things are of different kinds increases the importance of the fact that they all point to one conclusion.¹⁰¹

If we look for precedent for this approach, once again we find Newman. As the examples above show, there are strong similarities between the two in both language and mode of argument: Chesterton uses ‘converging reasons’ and the ‘accumulation of varied facts’ to build towards his conclusions in a way that parallels Newman’s use of ‘converging probabilities’ and ‘cumulation of probabilities’;¹⁰² like Newman, he admits no separation between the personal knowledge involved in religious faith and the personal knowledge concerned with other areas of life.¹⁰³

This is very far from an original observation; in an early review of *Orthodoxy*, Wilfrid Ward noted that the ‘Paradoxes of Christianity’ chapter of *Orthodoxy* ‘gives us a rough and unphilosophical expression of the line of reasoning’ in Newman’s *Grammar of Assent* concerning the Illative sense.¹⁰⁴ Other critics have made the same observation since, among them Oddie and Ker.¹⁰⁵ The full significance of Chesterton’s use of the Illative sense has not, however, been thoroughly explored, so far as I am aware.

¹⁰¹ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 287, 354, 348.

¹⁰² Newman, *GA*, 254, 233, see also 329-30.

¹⁰³ Lash, Introduction to Newman, *GA*, 1-7 (5).

¹⁰⁴ Wilfrid Ward, ‘Mr Chesterton among the Prophets,’ in Ward, *Men and Matters*, 105-44 (123).

¹⁰⁵ Oddie, *Chesterton*, 362. Ker, *Chesterton*, 277-78.

First, Chesterton uses his own, popularised version of Newman's ideas regarding the Illative sense, in suggesting that arguments from a wide variety of contexts which converge to support a particular position are more convincing than a single line of argument. Secondly, by insisting that his beliefs rest on the same kinds of evidence as the agnostic's beliefs, he makes it clear that he is arguing on ground common to himself and his non-religious readers. Thirdly, he does not just use the idea of the Illative sense within individual books; throughout his entire oeuvre he provides more and more 'converging probabilities', from more and more different contexts, which collectively build up the convergence of many different lines of thought in a 'cumulation of probabilities' across many genres.

To see how this works, consider the example of his article 'Three Foes of the Family.' In this he defends the family against three contemporary political forces, arguing that both capitalism and communism attack the family, and that Hitler's defence of the family is worst of all, by making it subservient to the state. The effects on the family of these three systems are quite sufficient, by themselves, all other considerations apart, for him to reject all three.¹⁰⁶ The article shows him using the place of the family in his social and political theology for apologetics purposes, as a yardstick to measure political systems by, to critique 'political institutions and traditions.'¹⁰⁷ He is not giving a complete argument for Christianity but arguing on the basis of one particular, social and political, aspect of his own Christian worldview; his argument reveals one dimension of his worldview and shows how that worldview leads to a particular line of argument in a particular situation. The narratives and arguments of his many occasional pieces, such as this one, cumulatively build up a worldview, often using the 'method of the hypothesis'; in

¹⁰⁶ 'Three Foes of the Family,' in *W&S*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 442-44.

¹⁰⁷ O'Donovan, *Judgment*, xiii.

effect, Chesterton develops the concept of the Illative Sense in the direction of worldview apologetics.

Newman may have sown the seeds of this when he wrote of giving ‘an interpretation to the course of things’, of the importance of ‘the voice of mankind, and the course of the world, that is, of human life and human affairs’, in ‘acquiring’ the knowledge of God, and of the need to ‘test, interpret, and correct’ what ‘the universal testimony of mankind ... the history of society and the world’ present ‘to us for belief’;¹⁰⁸ Chesterton uses his natural theology and the ‘method of the hypothesis’ to test and interpret human life, human affairs, and the history of society and the world (see below). As he does so, he presents an implied and implicit worldview, in the light of which he critiques and interprets all that crosses his path.

Negative and positive models of apologetics

I have argued that Chesterton relies, very largely, on one negative and two positive models of apologetics, all of which are grounded in his natural theology. The negative model is that of apologetics as subversion: he does not just see Christianity as an opponent of secular materialism, he presents secular materialism as dominant and Christianity as a rebellious, subversive force. The first of his positive models relates to the spirit of Christianity: he presents Christianity in terms of adventure, as more exciting than secular or other alternatives. The second of his positive models uses his key idea of the hypothesis in relation to the Illative sense and the validation of a Christian worldview.

Underlying the characteristic forms of Chesterton’s apologetics (see below) is the idea that his individual arguments and narratives are presenting a series of hypotheses that,

¹⁰⁸ Newman, *GA*, 312, 303.

collectively, provide, in Newman's terms, the convergence of many different lines of thought in a 'cumulation of probabilities' which build a pattern of evidence in support of a Christian worldview. As they interpret and explain aspects of human culture, experience, and history, the individual writings which comprise Chesterton's apologetics present the reader with 'converging probabilities', all pointing towards the trustworthiness of the Christian worldview on which those writings are based.

Natural theology and forms of apologetics

In 1903, when asked why he was a Christian, Chesterton replied, in his column in the *Daily News*: 'Because I believe life to be logical and workable with these beliefs and illogical and unworkable without them.'¹⁰⁹ As he so often does, rather than argue over untestable truth claims he refers to testable human experience. He regularly asks (see chapter one), of his own and other belief systems, not just 'Is it true?' but 'Does it work?' I have argued that it is because he is working within the boundaries of natural theology that his analysis is directed very often towards the practical effects of Christian and other ideas, not just their theoretical truth. I will now argue that Chesterton's natural theology, having shaped the three main conceptual models which inform his apologetics, also shapes the three particularly characteristic forms which that apologetics takes.

Natural theology as theological compass

Consider the Introduction to *Orthodoxy*. Here, Chesterton writes that the book will discuss 'the actual fact that the central Christian theology (sufficiently summarized in the

¹⁰⁹ *Daily News*, in 1903, quoted in Barker, *Chesterton*, 169.

Apostles' Creed) is the best root of energy and sound ethics.'¹¹⁰ He is not free at this point in his narrative to assert that 'the central Christian theology' is true, or even mention what it includes, because he is communicating with his readers in terms of natural theology. Therefore, he cannot here analyse the content or truth value of that 'central Christian theology', but natural theology does allow him to discuss the effects of a set of ideas in human experience. That means he can claim as an 'actual fact' that Christian theology produces measurable, positive results in human life, a claim that makes the results produced by that theology, in terms of 'energy and sound ethics', a kind of experimental test of it, as if these ideas were points on a theological compass, and the reader is asked to see what direction such a compass might give.

By putting his argument in terms of 'actual fact' and experience, rather than in terms of truth or revelation, he keeps the discussion at the level of natural theology, referencing what can be measured and observed in human experience rather than making claims involving metaphysics or religious authority. In *What's Wrong with the World*, even though he states clearly that 'This book must avoid religion,'¹¹¹ he nevertheless asks the reader to try the experiment of imagining what would happen if Christ was made society's guide to social progress. It as if he suggests that society might steer itself by a theological compass oriented around the human figure of Christ. Chesterton suggests that in order to have social progress, it is necessary to have 'a permanent human ideal' and proposes Jesus Christ as that ideal, promising: 'in dealing with this, I will try to be as little transcendental as is consistent with reason.'¹¹² Then, in the rest of the book, he suggests what social effects might follow from taking Christ, not as God incarnate, not as saviour and lord, but as that 'permanent human ideal'. Similarly, in his book on William Cobbett, he uses Jesus

¹¹⁰ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 211, 215.

¹¹¹ Chesterton, *WWWTW*, 122.

¹¹² Chesterton, *WWWTW*, 23, 22.

Christ as a moral touchstone and reference point (without any supernatural or incarnational reference, so remaining within the terms of natural theology), writing that in what Cobbett did for the English poor, he was doing ‘the work of Jesus Christ’.¹¹³

One way that Chesterton’s use of natural theology as a theological compass links us with his theological anthropology is that he makes the ability to encompass all that is entailed in being human a test for any belief system: not asking questions about divine authority or the supernatural, but asking if that belief system is sufficient to provide a home for all that is human. Thus, he judges Theosophy and other ‘modern attempts at Syncretism’ unfavourably because ‘They are never able to make something larger than the Creed without leaving something out. I do not mean leaving out something divine but something human; the flag or the inn or the boy’s tale of battle or the hedge at the end of the field.’¹¹⁴ The Christian creeds, of course, do not literally refer to flags, inns, boys’ tales of battles, or hedges at ends of fields. He uses these images to stand for a larger vision of humanity, which he believes is implied by the creeds, and claims that Christian ideas offer more in human terms, leaving aside questions of the divine.

Chesterton’s natural theology underlies all these examples; he refers to it to give direction to his discussions. He consistently uses the ideas that form his architecture of meaning, the framework of his natural theology, as reference points in his work, as if they were, so to speak, the points of a ‘theological compass’, offering valuable guidance in life. He sets these ideas as hypotheses before his readers to consider what value they have as guides to life, by seeing what effects and what explanatory power they may have in life generally, outside a specifically religious context. Each time this ‘theological compass’ appears in different arguments and narratives it points towards validation of aspects of a

¹¹³ G.K. Chesterton, *William Cobbett* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925), 35.

¹¹⁴ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 310.

Christian worldview, thus providing, on each occasion it appears, another of those ‘converging probabilities’ which together create a pattern of evidence in favour of a Christian worldview.

Natural theology as intellectual scalpel

As his brother noted, ‘It is one of the characteristic notes of G.K.C. that he writes with his eye always on a real or hypothetical opponent.’¹¹⁵ For example, in *The Thing*, in the article ‘Why I am a Catholic,’ Chesterton claims that ‘historical proofs’ speak for Catholic Christianity and against its rivals. He argues that historical evidence, ‘true historical cases’, will vindicate his theological position and disprove his opponents’. In the same article he demonstrates how inter-disciplinary his apologetics is by supporting his theological position with reference to ‘human and personal proofs’, to ‘the colour and poetry and popularity of religion,’ and to ‘the deepest lessons of practical psychology’. He goes on to write:

Psycho-analysis is the Confessional without the safeguards of the Confessional; Communism is the Franciscan movement without the moderating balance of the Church; and American sects, having howled for three centuries at the Popish theatricality and mere appeal to the senses, now “brighten” their services by super-theatrical films and rays of rose-red light falling on the head of the minister.¹¹⁶

Characteristically, he combines defence with attack in a pithy mini-narrative which aims to change perceptions of three of his opponents at once: in one sentence, he casts psycho-analysis, communism, and ‘American sects’ as purveyors of debased versions of Catholic ideas, thus inviting his readers to reject conventional understandings of all three of them

¹¹⁵ Cecil Chesterton, *A Criticism*, 63.

¹¹⁶ ‘Why I am a Catholic,’ in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 184-90.

and instead join Chesterton in defining them in relation to his own narrative about Catholic Christianity.

Consider his response to one of Dean Inge's claims: 'Here is the Dean's attempt at a definition. "What is the main function of Protestantism? It is essentially an attempt to check the tendency to corruption and degradation which attacks every institutional religion." So far, so good. In that case St. Charles Borromeo, for instance, was obviously a leading Protestant. St. Dominic and St. Francis ... were obviously leading Protestants. The Jesuits who sifted legend by the learning of Bollandism, were obviously leading Protestants.'¹¹⁷ Here, as so often, he takes his intellectual scalpel to an opponent's argument to subvert the intellectual position they advocate.

These analyses typically combine a critique of other philosophies and religions with a presentation of a Christian alternative, negative criticism of others' views with a positive presentation of his own. *A Short History of England* is a characteristic example: the book combines two kinds of analysis into one narrative: a critique of the Whig theory of English history, which saw the move from Catholicism to Protestantism as part of a story of progress culminating in a secular society; and a contrasting argument for a Catholic and Christian version of English history. In this book, the two analyses are embedded in the narrative itself.¹¹⁸

In another analysis of history, Chesterton argues: 'The fact is this: that the modern world, with its modern movements, is living on its Catholic capital. It is using, and using up, the truths that remain to it out of the old treasury of Christendom; including, of course, many truths known to pagan antiquity but crystallized in Christendom.'¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ 'Protestantism: a Problem Novel,' in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 210-14 (211).

¹¹⁸ See Chesterton, *SHOE*, 1-176 (especially 152-76).

¹¹⁹ 'Is Humanism a Religion?', in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 146-56 (147).

Characteristically, he is not so much concerned with the overall historical picture as with the role of Catholic Christianity in a given historical context, and also with attacking the Whig view of history and other historical schemes which depict the rise of secularism and the decline of religion as progress.

These examples show how Chesterton tries in his Christian apologetics to deconstruct the arguments and narratives of other belief systems and tell what he considers to be a better and more accurate story with regard to historical progress and the role of Christianity in history. He uses his natural theology to analyse human experience, history, and culture, not just to support a Christian worldview, but also to dissect and deconstruct the claims of alternative worldviews. He uses natural theology as what might be called an intellectual scalpel, that is to say, as an analytical tool for the theological analysis of human experience, culture and history; this is one of the ways he gives form to the subversive conceptual model underlying his apologetics.

Natural theology as a bridge between intellectual disciplines

In his book on Chaucer, Chesterton argues that Chaucer's 'cheerfulness or sanity came from theology', adding: 'I say deliberately, not religion, but theology. It was not *his* theology: it was the theology at the back of the philosophy at the back of his mind.'¹²⁰ He could see theology as being so deeply influential because he believed that 'the truth is that a man's philosophy of the cosmos is directly concerned in every act of his life,'¹²¹ and so Chesterton's work in this respect involves a sustained argument for the importance of philosophy and theology generally, not just the theology he himself advocated. This view of the central role of theology in society and culture appears throughout Chesterton's

¹²⁰ Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 278.

¹²¹ *Daily News*, 13 February 1906, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 90-91.

writing, as does the very close link he makes between philosophy and theology (see chapter three). He relates even intangible things such as a writer's temperament back to that writer's overall philosophy or theology.

There are endless other examples of his habit of combining theological investigations with help from a range of other disciplines. In *The Everlasting Man*, for instance, his interpretation of comparative religion works on the basis of the analysis of human experience and of psychology: rather than divide religions geographically, he divides religion 'psychologically ... into the strata of spiritual elements and influences that could sometimes exist in the same country, or even in the same man. ... I believe some such classification will help us to sort out the spiritual experiences of men much more successfully than the conventional business of comparing religions.'¹²² Characteristically, he here seeks to analyse religious history and religious experience to see if his particular theological theories enable a better understanding of 'the spiritual experiences of men' – once again he makes human experience the test of his theology.

The breadth of his approach means that it does not entirely rely on theological debate, nor is it individualistic. He does not see apologetics in terms of individual thinkers grappling with different arguments; instead, he is very aware of its communal and social dimensions. For instance, he questions the ideologies that might seek to replace religion in a secular future, asking what social cohesion they could achieve:

Before we call either Culture or Humanism a substitute for religion, there is a very plain question that can be asked in the form of a very homely metaphor. Humanism may try to pick up the pieces; but can it stick them together? Where is the cement which made religion corporate and popular, which can prevent it falling to pieces in a debris of individualistic tastes and degrees? What is to prevent one Humanist wanting chastity without humility, and another humility without chastity, and another truth or beauty without either? The problem of an enduring ethic and culture consists in finding an

¹²² *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 219.

arrangement of the pieces by which they remain related, as do the stones arranged in an arch.¹²³

Chesterton here, typically, argues about how well belief systems work in practice, not just discussing theoretical truth, but also actual cultural and ethical effects. He makes that argument at a social, not an individual, level, testing different schools of thought by their effects on communal life. This social and communal dimension broadens his apologetics considerably.

In order to keep to the rules of the ‘game’ of apologetics within the bounds of natural theology, he has to be very careful with regard to truth claims in relation to the deductions which theology can make from historical evidence. One instance where he tests the limits of his own position comes in his Introduction to *The Soul of Ireland* by W.J. Lockington, S.J., (published in 1919). Chesterton writes:

The resurrection of Ireland ... is really a historical event that has the appearance of a miracle. That is, it is one of a class of undisputed facts, not actually in form supernatural, but so unique as almost to force anyone, however rationalistic, to an explanation at least transcendental. ... There are but a few of these historical events which while natural in mode seem to be almost supernatural in meaning. One of them is the mysterious international position of the Jews. Another was the historical mission of Joan of Arc.¹²⁴

His terminology keeps him just within the rules of his own game, while suggesting something more than he actually states: in writing ‘the appearance’ of a miracle, ‘not actually in form supernatural,’ ‘natural in mode’ and ‘almost supernatural in meaning,’ he finds ways of implying supernatural conclusions while not quite stating them.

When Chesterton writes, ‘The historic advantage of religion was that it made every part of a man’s life, art and ethics and the rest, dependent upon a general view of life

¹²³ ‘Is Humanism a Religion?’, in *TT*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 146-56 (156).

¹²⁴ ‘Erin Go Bragh!’, in Chesterton, *M.C.*, 108-12 (109-11).

itself,'¹²⁵ this formulation places religion (and, by implication, theology) at the heart of a multi-disciplinary understanding of 'every part' of life, including 'art and ethics and the rest.' Here, as so often, Chesterton makes use of the capacity of natural theology to work easily with other intellectual disciplines. Because it does not depend on revelation, it makes a natural bridge between theology and philosophy, in particular, but also between theology and numerous other disciplines, including historical and literary studies.

Chesterton enthusiastically makes use of this potential.

Examples might be cited from endless books and essays: perhaps the most sustained application of his theological analysis of history came in *The Everlasting Man* and *A Short History of England*; his theological interpretation of culture can be seen particularly clearly in his biographies, of Watts, Dickens, and others; his theological understanding of human experience in the Father Brown stories and his other fiction,¹²⁶ and in his *Autobiography*. This inter-disciplinary approach is itself very well suited to Chesterton's worldview apologetics, because the different disciplines he involves in his work, in combination with his natural theology, multiply the different 'converging probabilities' he can create to point towards validation of a Christian worldview.

Apologetics, natural theology, and language

Does Chesterton's use of language reflect the natural theology which underlies his apologetics strategies? Consider the language of *Orthodoxy*: he sets the tone for the book in the Introduction by announcing a non-theological starting point and aim: 'the thing I

¹²⁵ *Daily News*, 1 August 1903, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 117.

¹²⁶ See, for example, Chesterton, *Thursday*; Chesterton, *Manalive*.

propose to take as common ground between myself and any average reader, is [the] desirability of an active and imaginative life, picturesque and full of a poetical curiosity ... the general proposition that we need this life of practical romance.¹²⁷ This is not religious language, it is the language of romantic literature and of the quest. By using it he avoids confronting the reader with formal religious discussion. Characteristically, having delineated this 'common ground' at the start, he remains on it as far as he possibly can for the rest of the book (see above). Where he references Christianity, he does so in terms of human experience rather than doctrine or revelation. Throughout the book he continues in this vein, until the very end, where his argument moves from natural theology to a discussion of the figure of Christ.

Chesterton's avoidance of obviously religious language in *Orthodoxy* is typical of his work. William Oddie overstates only a little when he points out: 'nearly always ... overtly biblical or devotional language ... is avoided in his writings.'¹²⁸ As noted in chapters two and three, Chesterton skilfully veils religious concepts in non-religious terminology across both his non-fiction and his fictional works. I have discussed above how he uses tone and style (including the avoidance of religious language, on most occasions) to present himself to his readers as both a neutral enquirer and a sympathetic friend. His decision to use natural theology makes it possible for him to avoid overtly religious language, and he is careful, most of the time, to eschew it. His theology of creation, his theological epistemology, and his sacramental mysticism mean that, like Newman (see above, and chapter three), he regards religious knowledge as belonging to the same realm of discourse as other forms of personal knowledge, so can clothe it, for the most part, in the same linguistic forms. His purposes as an apologist encourage him to

¹²⁷ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 212-13.

¹²⁸ Oddie, *Chesterton*, 295.

communicate in registers and within linguistic boundaries which are comfortable for the secular reader.

Sparsely though he uses it, however, he does not entirely avoid religious language throughout his oeuvre. He employs it on occasion. When he does choose to include it, does it play a more important part than Oddie's words would seem to imply? Consider some examples. In the Introduction to *The Defendant*, Chesterton cites the prophet Isaiah in the same breath as the poet Shelley: 'Every one of the great revolutionists, from Isaiah to Shelley, have been optimists. They have been indignant, not about the badness of existence, but about the slowness of men in realising its goodness.'¹²⁹ He puts both into the usually secular category of 'revolutionists'. The casual manner in which he does this may have a purpose: such a casual manner can suggest confidence. Is this the case here?

Compare these lines from *Charles Dickens*: 'It is ... said that hope goes with youth ... But the power of hoping through everything ... that great inspiration comes to the middle-aged; God has kept that good wine until now.'¹³⁰ In *The Ball and the Cross* Michael feels 'that pleasure from which the proud shut themselves out ... men who have escaped death by a hair have it, and men whose love is returned by a woman unexpectedly, and men whose sins are forgiven them.'¹³¹ In these examples, Chesterton caps a seemingly secular sentence or paragraph with a spiritual ending, inserted naturally in a way that suggests such a spiritual endpoint is the natural conclusion to an apparently secular train of thought. By interweaving his sacred and secular references together so casually, so seemingly lazily, without ever bothering to argue for his right to do so, he makes this seem a natural thing to do, not a point that requires argument.

¹²⁹ Chesterton, *Defendant*, 14.

¹³⁰ Chesterton, *Dickens*, 24-25.

¹³¹ *The Ball and the Cross*, in Chesterton, *CW*, VII, 49.

He makes similarly swift, smooth moves from secular to sacred language in many different ways. In *Robert Browning*, during a discussion of the French Revolution and its impact in spreading ‘a spirit of revolt’ among ‘the young of the middle classes’ in England, he suddenly makes a rapid linguistic shift:

The great dominant idea of the whole of that period, the period before, during, and long after the Revolution, is the idea that man would by his nature live in an Eden of dignity, liberty and love, and that artificial and decrepit systems are keeping him out of that Eden. ... The Shelleyan enthusiast ... represented ... a revolt of the normal against the abnormal; he found himself ... in the heart of a wholly topsy-turvy and blasphemous state of things, in which God was rebelling against Satan.¹³²

The reference to ‘Eden’ prepares the way for the sudden change of register from political to religious language, from the French Revolution to ‘God ... rebelling against Satan’. He embraces the non-religious Shelleyans in that move and makes them part of the theological picture he is painting. Thus, without explicitly stating an argument, he implicitly suggests that their secular political purposes are best understood within a theological frame of reference.

Chesterton may, for instance, refer to a Christian doctrine in passing, without naming it, as when he writes: ‘Tyranny over man is not tyranny, it is rebellion, for man is royal,’ leaving implicit a reference to the Christian idea that ‘man is royal’ because made in the image of God. Or he slips a religious phrase into an unexpected context, as when he writes of Dickens, ‘his enthusiasm fills us, as does the love of God, with a glorious shame.’¹³³ By such means, he regularly insinuates theological suggestions through his use of language.

He often performs similar operations on a larger scale where he brings Christian reference into literary or other non-religious discussions, frequently in a way that allies

¹³² Chesterton, *Browning*, 15.

¹³³ Chesterton, *Dickens*, 197, 186.

Christianity with popular sentiment. For instance, in *Charles Dickens*, he asks his readers to remember great nights talking with their ‘more fascinating friends round a table’ when ‘every man was more himself than he had ever been in this vale of tears,’ then adds:

The man who has not known such nights will not enjoy *Pickwick* nor (I imagine) heaven. For ... Dickens is, in this matter, close to popular religion, which is the ultimate and reliable religion. He conceives an endless joy ... He is not come, as a writer, that his creatures may copy life and copy its narrowness; he is come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. It is absurd indeed that Christians should be called the enemies of life because they wish life to last for ever ... Both popular religion, with its endless joys, and the old comic story, with its endless jokes, have in our time faded together.

The smooth transition from ‘*Pickwick*’ to ‘heaven’ sets up an implicit alignment between the joy and ‘life’ of Dickens’ writing and the joy and life of Christianity, which is presented as life-affirming and on the side of ‘the old comic story’ and ‘popular religion’. Chesterton, in passing, adapts the words of Jesus from John 10: 10, ‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,’¹³⁴ into a sentence about Dickens. By doing so, by the tone of his writing, and by his declaration that Dickens is, in this, ‘close to popular religion’, he suggests that Dickens is in close sympathy with Christianity, even if not actually a Christian himself, and further suggests that the best aspects of Dickens might find their fulfilment in a bigger picture provided by Christian theology.

He inserts spiritual reference into secular contexts in many different ways, but always with a casual assurance which suggests confidence in the right of the spiritual to be present in what might seem non-religious contexts. He does not argue a case for this, he assumes one. For instance, he comments on two characters in Dickens’ *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Mr & Mrs Sapsea: ‘You could scarcely have such immortal folly as that in a world where there is also death. Mr Sapsea is one of the golden things stored up for us in a

¹³⁴ *The Bible (NRSV)*. John 10: 10.

better world.’¹³⁵ Chesterton does not feel a need to argue for the afterlife here, he uses the power of suggestion rather than the power of argument, presenting it as something any sensible reader of Dickens can take for granted.

He demonstrates his relaxed assurance with regard to his own theology by, for example, tweaking biblical references in a playful manner: ‘For the glory of this world is a very small and priggish affair’; or ‘The fear of the waiter is the beginning of dining.’¹³⁶ Such playfulness is another way of suggesting confidence: someone who was unsure if religious references had a rightful place in such secular contexts would be unlikely to make jokes about them; those who feel at home feel free to joke, and Chesterton is asserting that he does feel at home, with his religious references, in what might seem non-religious contexts.

He does similar things many times. For instance, he remarks that Dickens ‘loved that great Christian carelessness that seeks its meat from God;’¹³⁷ the reader might reflect that, in a secular age, the ‘great Christian carelessness’ with which Chesterton makes such remarks is itself an apologetic tactic, embodying the argument that theology has just as much a right to be taken for granted in public discourse as any secular ideology. This is typical; in many such cases, he briefly inserts religious words and phrases which suggest support for Christian ideas, without explicitly stating such support.

In these and many other examples, Chesterton places the sacred and secular alongside each other, seemingly without a thought and without distinguishing between the two, yet that placement itself is arranged so that the sacred appears more interesting, or is

¹³⁵ Chesterton, *Dickens*, 172.

¹³⁶ Chesterton, *Dickens*, 184, 191.

¹³⁷ Chesterton, *Dickens*, 147.

associated with desirable and attractive things, or is described so as to suggest that it frames the secular in a bigger, religious framework.

What of specifically biblical references? Many apologists use the conventional way of referencing the Bible, giving chapter and verse, say, 2 Corinthians 3: 5, for example. But that method of referencing, in itself, privileges the Christian scriptures, because it is a unique form of referencing, suggesting that the Christian Bible is being treated as having a unique role or status. Chesterton may have believed that, but, as discussed above, his apologetics strategy and his natural theology dictate that he should treat all religions and ideologies fairly, giving them equal status. He frequently declares that this is how he operates as an apologist, that he writes from a neutral perspective, for instance when declaring: ‘I take historic Christianity ... as I would take Jacobinism, or Mormonism, or any other mixed or unpleasing human product.’¹³⁸ Here, as elsewhere in his apologetics, he presents a theology that does not rely on revelation in language that does not reference revelation, or at least does not reference the Christian scriptures as divine revelation. In *The Everlasting Man* he manages to write a defence of the Incarnation without giving chapter and verse from the Bible at all.

So, for instance, he classes the Genesis creation account with fairy tales in his article ‘Fairy Tales.’¹³⁹ He may bracket Christ with a philosopher or other major figure:¹⁴⁰ ‘It is overwhelmingly probable that almost all the documents on which we base our belief in the existence of Jesus Christ or Socrates have been mangled and edited again and again.’¹⁴¹ On other occasions he cites Christ as part of a group, not as standing apart: ‘Figures that

¹³⁸ ‘Paganism and Mr Lowes Dickinson,’ in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 122-131 (123).

¹³⁹ ‘Fairy Tales,’ in Chesterton, *ATC*, 188-92 (191). Here he includes a reference to the Genesis creation account in a list of references to eight fairy tales.

¹⁴⁰ For the exceptions to this treatment, see chapter five. At climactic moments, Chesterton does treat Christ as breaking out of any categories he might be placed in.

¹⁴¹ ‘Boswell,’ Chesterton, *M.C.*, 1-10 (2).

come before and create convulsion and change (for instance, the central figure of the New Testament) always have the air of walking in an unnatural sweetness and calm. They give us their peace ultimately in blood and battle and division; not as the world giveth give they unto us.¹⁴² Such examples illustrate the ways in which, by referring to Christ in the same manner as to other religious or philosophical figures, Chesterton can avoid giving him privileged status much (though not all) of the time, until he reaches the climax of an argument.

Over the course of his career, Chesterton consistently references biblical texts and figures in the same way and on the same terms as he references any other book: casually and imprecisely, paraphrasing rather than quoting exactly, giving no references, let alone references in the correct biblical format, and displaying no unique reverence for the biblical texts. This habit is consistent with his general approach to referencing religion, and applies that general approach to biblical texts, in a way that normalises scriptural reference. It also signals the neutrality of his positioning as an apologist (see above) and embodies that neutrality at the linguistic level, giving no special status to the Christian scriptures, instead using natural theology as a neutral medium of communication.

More broadly, as the examples above demonstrate, Chesterton's use of religious language is delicate and unobtrusive, yet it plays a significant role in his work. Where he allows religious language to show its head he does so discreetly, so as not to disturb his readers. Religious language and reference are kept to brief appearances, in passing, but they do have a more important role to play in his work than might at first appear, a role which may have been somewhat neglected.

¹⁴² Chesterton, *Dickens*, 195.

By his subtle, sparing insertion of religious language into seemingly non-religious texts Chesterton is able to suggest and insinuate his views on the relationship between the sacred and the secular without actually stating those views. This use of language expresses aspects of his theology in two major ways: he mixes sacred and secular references so as to implicitly frame the secular in terms of the spiritual; and he is able to suggest a relaxed assurance about the right of his religion to be given a place in discourse on topics which many would have considered secular, by means of the suggestiveness of his style alone, even before he makes any overt arguments.

One might sum up this strategy by saying that he treats the religious as part of the same ‘language game’ as the non-religious, while subtly suggesting that it is the spiritual which provides the bigger picture and so encompasses the secular within a greater reality. The ways in which Chesterton includes religious references in his texts serve very effectively to put his theology and apologetics into action at a linguistic level. Perhaps he shows here the influence of Stopford Brooke, who wished ‘to rub out the sharp lines drawn by that false distinction of sacred and profane’;¹⁴³ Brooke would have been delighted by the way Chesterton references the spiritual and the secular without boundaries between them.

Overall, where Chesterton chooses to use religious language, he does so in a manner which expresses his theology of creation, his theological epistemology, and his sacramental mysticism. In his understanding, a spiritual view of life is normal (see chapter two) and his apologetics seeks to present his natural theology to his readers at every level of discourse; his use of religious language embodies this theology at the linguistic level. In

¹⁴³ Brooke, *English poets*, xii.

effect, this approach constitutes a theologically-driven challenge to any post-Kantian separation of religious knowledge from other forms of knowledge.

Style, apologetics, and natural theology

What of Chesterton's style and its relation to his theology and his apologetics? His style has long been problematic.¹⁴⁴ Certain scholars have noted that the relationship between thoughts and words, between ideas and style, is important in Chesterton's work.¹⁴⁵ Their investigations, however, lack the informing structure which results from a full discussion of the natural theology at the heart of Chesterton's work. To see how the lack of such a theological framework has handicapped discussions of Chesterton's work at the linguistic level, consider the work of one of the most able of modern Chesterton scholars, Michael Hurley.

Hurley understands that Chesterton 'thinks through language, in ways that confound attempts to read him as a thinker without first appreciating him as a writer.'¹⁴⁶ He goes on to make a great number of interesting points about Chesterton's work, but his analysis lacks a central organizing principle. Instead, he tours Chesterton's work by genre, examining in turn 'Fiction,' 'Poetry,' 'Essays,' 'Biography,' and 'History,' while giving the chapters of his book a 'designed independence ... in conversation with each other,' without a 'terminal conspectus' or 'linear narrative'.¹⁴⁷ In other words, Hurley lacks the theological structure which would enable him to put his valuable insights into perspective.

¹⁴⁴ There is a long and tendentious history to the discussion of Chesterton's style. It has always been controversial. See, for example, *Critical Judgments*, 105-106, 244-46. See also T.S. Eliot, 'Robert Louis Stevenson,' in *Critical Judgments*, 444-46 (444). This is a review of Chesterton's *Robert Louis Stevenson*, first published in *The Nation and Athenaeum*, 31 December 1927. See further Herbert Marshall McLuhan, Introduction to Kenner, *Paradox*, xi-xxii (xix-xxii). See, in addition, Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism*, 1.

¹⁴⁵ See, for example, Milbank, *Chesterton*, viii-xv, 8-25, 56-95. See also Hunter, *Allegory*, 159-74.

¹⁴⁶ Hurley, *Chesterton*, xiii.

¹⁴⁷ Hurley, *Chesterton*, 15-17.

The end result is that his many incisive observations remain in a stimulating but unfocused conversation with themselves. Does the argument I have outlined about Chesterton's theology enable clearer analysis of his dramatic and distinctive style, in relation to his thought? Space does not allow for a full discussion of his style, but I will analyse certain aspects of it to discern if consideration of his natural theology clarifies discussion of those aspects of his style.

Chesterton was sure that theology should be 'startling' and 'arresting to the soul', and should have a 'dark and drastic quality', because theology attempts 'to reveal the divine secret' and that secret is 'mighty and shattering'.¹⁴⁸ He declared that 'Christianity, whatever else it is, is an explosion. Whether or no it consists of the Fall, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, it does certainly consist of thunder, of prodigy, and of fire. Unless it is sensational there is simply no sense in it. Unless the Gospel sounds like a gun going off it has not been uttered at all.'¹⁴⁹ If 'the gospel' must sound 'like a gun going off' to be deemed to have 'been uttered at all', the style in which Christian apologetics presents that gospel would seem to be required to be dramatic, if it is to express such an approach to theology. Are there elements of Chesterton's style which reflect this and other aspects of his theology? I will consider five important elements of his style.

Antithesis is the most prevalent rhetorical device in Chesterton's work. It pervades his writing:¹⁵⁰ 'He was damned by John Calvin; he was almost saved by John Gilpin;'¹⁵¹ 'The truth is that when critics have spoken of the local limitations of the Galilean, it has always been a case of the local limitations of the critics;'¹⁵² 'A man was meant to be

¹⁴⁸ G.K. Chesterton, 'Reading the Riddle,' in Chesterton, *Common Man*, 60-64.

¹⁴⁹ Chesterton, 'Christmas Presents,' 283-87 (284).

¹⁵⁰ Antithesis is defined as 'Conjoining contrasting ideas' in Richard A. Lanham, *A handlist of rhetorical terms*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley; Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), 16-17.

¹⁵¹ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 219.

¹⁵² *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 327.

doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth. ... The trouble with our sages is not that they cannot see the answer; it is that they cannot even see the riddle;¹⁵³ and so on. He not only uses antithesis within single sentences, but also across several sentences, for instance: 'It is typical of our time that the more doubtful we are about the value of philosophy, the more certain we are about the value of education. That is to say, the more doubtful we are about whether we have any truth, the more certain we are ... that we can teach it to children.'¹⁵⁴ He very often writes sentences like these, in which the parallel syntactical structures frame contrasting ideas: 'doubtful about himself ... undoubting about the truth', or 'cannot see the answer ... cannot even see the riddle'; the parallel syntax emphasises the contrast between the concepts.

Antitheses like these divide their subjects into binary opposites, and thus set up possible debates. This makes antithesis a useful tool for Chesterton's apologetics. His theology is one of stark contrasts, not shades of grey, and his use of antithesis reflects that characteristic. Chesterton's antitheses often encourage his readers to see an issue in terms of clear dichotomies, strongly contrasted with each other, rather than in terms of nuanced and similar positions which might be reconciled. Thus, antithesis prepares his readers' minds for Chesterton's rhetorical persuasion by presenting the world in terms of contrasts and conflicts which require choices to be made.

This use of antithesis is not just a question of binary oppositions in the moral sphere. As Michael Shallcross has noted, in cultural matters Chesterton has a 'consistent preoccupation with juxtaposing ostensibly incongruous binaries of "high" and "low", and "serious" and "comic", discourse'.¹⁵⁵ By using antithesis to present cultural and social

¹⁵³ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 234-35.

¹⁵⁴ 'Talking about Education,' *ILN*, 26 January 1907, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXVII, 380-85 (380).

¹⁵⁵ Shallcross, *The Worshipper's Half-Holiday*, 10.

realities, as well as morality, in terms of binary opposites, Chesterton sets up his readers for the sudden moves by which, often using inversion and paradox, he attempts to transform their perception of what is normal, reversing normality and abnormality.

A second rhetorical device, or perhaps simply a strong form of antithesis, was named by Chesterton himself as ‘inversion’. At the heart of his theology is the idea that ‘all the real argument about religion turns on the question of whether a man who was born upside down can tell when he comes right way up,’¹⁵⁶ a radical inversion of reality, and of perception. He expresses that idea of inversion at the level of language in the form of what he himself called ‘a trick of style ... a trick of sharp inversions’; he acknowledged that he probably relied on it too much.¹⁵⁷ This ‘trick of sharp inversions’ is found very often in his style, in formulations such as ‘The ordinary condition of man is not his sane or sensible condition ... the normal itself is an abnormality;’¹⁵⁸ or, ‘To the place where God was homeless | And all men are at home.’¹⁵⁹ Such inversions give syntactic embodiment to his theology. Inversion is similar to antithesis, and might be viewed as a sub-category of antithesis: they differ in that antithesis merely contrasts two ideas, whereas inversion goes further – the second of the two ideas reverses, or inverts, the first. Thus, inversion includes the contrast of antithesis and goes beyond it to create a sense of radical reversal.

Chesterton uses a number of forms of inversion in his style, some of those forms being rather longer than the simple ‘normal ... abnormal’ example above. For instance, in *Orthodoxy*, he suggests that when he was a boy, old men told him that the young believed in abstract ideals, the mature in practical politics. He then turns their advice on its head:

¹⁵⁶ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 363.

¹⁵⁷ G.K. Chesterton, ‘The Solemn Spoofer. A reply to Mr. Belfort Bax,’ *The New Age*, 26 November 1908, in *Critical Judgments*, 182-185 (183).

¹⁵⁸ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 363.

¹⁵⁹ G.K. Chesterton, ‘The House of Christmas,’ in G.K. Chesterton, *Poems for all purposes: the selected poems of G.K. Chesterton*, ed. Stephen Medcalf (London: Pimlico, 1994), 54-55.

Since then I have grown up and have discovered that these philanthropic old men were telling lies. What has really happened is exactly the opposite of what they said would happen. They said that I should lose my ideals and begin to believe in the methods of practical politicians. Now, I have not lost my ideals in the least; my faith in fundamentals is exactly what it always was. What I have lost is my old childlike faith in practical politics. I am still as much concerned as ever about the Battle of Armageddon; but I am not so much concerned about the General Election.¹⁶⁰

He exaggerates for humorous effect, so as to sharpen the effect of the inversion, which he uses to suggest that faith in ‘the Battle of Armageddon’ (something firmly in the realm of the spiritual) is actually more credible than ‘faith’ in ‘practical politics’ (part of the secular world), which he deems ‘childlike’. Characteristically, he uses concrete examples metonymically to stand for broader realities: ‘the Battle of Armageddon’ for his own Christian ideas, and ‘the General Election’ for a secular view of politics.

Chesterton’s inversions are sometimes delivered in the form of chiasmus,¹⁶¹ such as: ‘The function of imagination is not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange; not so much to make wonders facts as to make facts wonders,’¹⁶² or ‘There might sometimes be a reason for a priest being a profligate. But what was the reason for a profligate being a priest?’¹⁶³ On a larger scale, there are chiastic patterns in the structures of some of Chesterton’s writings. As Eric Tippin notes, chiasmus is useful for someone who wants to tell stories about radical shifts in thinking. Tippin points out that not only does Chesterton use chiasmus at the sentence level, but his novels are sometimes chiastic in outline, with the ending returning to and reversing the beginning.¹⁶⁴ For instance, the last scene of *The Man Who was Thursday* reflects the first in several ways, as

¹⁶⁰ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 249.

¹⁶¹ Defined as ‘The ABBA pattern of mirror inversion’, in Lanham, *Rhetorical terms*, 33.

¹⁶² ‘A Defence of China Shepherdeses,’ in Chesterton, *Defendant*, 81-89 (84).

¹⁶³ *CCC*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 74.

¹⁶⁴ R. Eric Tippin, ‘G.K. Chesterton as Stylist’ (*unpublished lecture to The Oxford University C.S. Lewis Society, 13 November 2018*).

Gabriel Syme returns to Saffron Park, to his ordinary waking consciousness, and to Lucian and Rosamond Gregory, yet, for Syme, all is changed.¹⁶⁵ The entire structure of *Manalive* is overtly chiasmic, as Innocent Smith takes himself around the entire world in order to return to his home and his wife able to see them properly;¹⁶⁶ this illustrates with particular completeness how chiasmus is one of the devices by which Chesterton can transform the relationships within narratives, as well as within sentences.

A third important rhetorical device in Chesterton's work, and the one most often linked with his name, is paradox.¹⁶⁷ His use of paradox has been analysed extensively.¹⁶⁸ How does it relate to his theology? As I argued in chapter two, paradox is at the heart of Chesterton's natural theology, one of the two main ways he relates his theology of the wonder and joy of creation to his theology of sin and evil. He asserts in 'Pope and the Art of Satire' that 'An element of paradox runs through the whole of existence itself.'¹⁶⁹ For Chesterton, paradox is not just a verbal trick, although he does use it plentifully at that level; more importantly, it is a central theological reality. In addition, it has a second key role, important for his apologetics: in *St. Thomas Aquinas*, he writes, 'the use of paradox is to awaken the mind';¹⁷⁰ his theology of wonder leads him to an apologetics which shares that purpose (see below). Chesterton gives paradox a central part in his linguistic armoury because it is so suited to creating surprise and to leading his readers to see issues in a new light, thus creating insights unanticipated by those readers.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ Chesterton, *Thursday*, 9-19, 183-84.

¹⁶⁶ Chesterton, *Manalive*, see especially 156, 158, 165-66.

¹⁶⁷ Defined as 'A seemingly self-contradictory statement, which yet is shown to be (sometimes in a surprising way) true,' in Lanham, *Rhetorical terms*, 107.

¹⁶⁸ See: Kenner, *Paradox*. Yves Denis, *Paradoxe et Catholicisme* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1978), especially 287-326. Nichols, *Chesterton*, 87-106. Milbank, *Chesterton*, 87-95. David L. Derus, 'The Chesterton Style: Patterns and Paradox,' *The Chesterton Review* IV, no. 1 (1977-78): 45-64.

¹⁶⁹ 'Pope and the Art of Satire,' in Chesterton, *Twelve Types*, 28.

¹⁷⁰ *Aquinas*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 513.

¹⁷¹ See Kenner, *Paradox*, 24-39, 43.

Chesterton illustrates a fourth theologically-informed aspect of his own style, exaggeration, when writing that Dickens ‘is there, like the common people of all ages, to make deities; he is there ... to exaggerate life in the direction of life.’¹⁷² That phrase, ‘exaggerate life in the direction of life’, is not only relevant to Dickens, it also sheds light on the exaggeration which is so characteristic of Chesterton’s own style. This exaggeration relates to his purpose of shaking secular perceptions of reality and pointing to the underlying, concealed wonder of creation which is at the heart of his natural theology. In Chesterton’s view Dickens ‘is there ... to make deities’; Chesterton’s purpose is to make people aware of the divine, and he finds exaggeration useful for that purpose, perhaps learning from Dickens’ methods.

In terms of the relationship between Chesterton’s style and his theology, and in light of his view that the ‘extravagance’ of the grotesque is ‘the extravagance of vitality,’¹⁷³ Chesterton’s treatment of the grotesque (see chapter three) can be considered, in part, as one aspect of his use of exaggeration. The grotesque is one of the forms he uses, with extravagant vitality, to ‘exaggerate life in the direction of life’ in order to startle his readers into a change of perception.¹⁷⁴ Chesterton’s use of exaggeration creates a dissonance between his descriptions of the seemingly ordinary and his readers’ usual perceptions of it. Just as, in his view, the grotesque provokes a ‘sense of wonder’ which draws ‘attention to the intrinsically miraculous character of the object itself,’¹⁷⁵ so his other forms of stylistic exaggeration draw attention to the ‘intrinsically miraculous’ character of the seemingly ordinary objects, people, and situations he discusses. Thus his exaggeration expresses his claim that reality is more dramatic and exciting than it is usually perceived to be, a claim

¹⁷² Chesterton, *Dickens*, 65. See also Wills, *Chesterton*, 67-73.

¹⁷³ ‘A Defence of Ugly Things,’ in Chesterton, *Defendant*, 111-18 (118).

¹⁷⁴ See Milbank, *Chesterton*, 56-86.

¹⁷⁵ Chesterton, *Browning*, 151.

which is itself, of course, based on his theology of wonder, a theology which insists that the ordinary is extraordinary.

Unfortunately, as well as being a useful element of his style, exaggeration is a device he uses so often that it becomes, at times, a flaw: for instance, various versions of, and variations on, phrases including the words ‘the whole’ occur over 3,500 times in the 23 volumes of the Electronic edition of the *Collected Works*.¹⁷⁶ In many cases it is transparently obvious that what is being referred to is by no means ‘the whole’ of the issue under consideration; such overuse can, on occasion, vitiate the effects of this stylistic device.

A fifth weapon in the stylistic department of Chesterton’s apologetics armoury is his playfulness. In ‘On the Essay’ Chesterton writes:

I am tempted to feel that Evil re-entered the world in the form of Essays. The Essay is like the Serpent, smooth and graceful and easy of movement, also wavering and wandering.... That misleading air of irresponsibility about the Essay is very disarming through appearing to be disarmed. But the serpent can strike without claws, as it can run without legs. It is the emblem of all those arts which are elusive, evasive, impressionistic, and shading away from tint to tint.¹⁷⁷

His observations may be debatable for the essay form in general, but they are most certainly relevant to his own use of it. He uses that ‘misleading air of irresponsibility’ to make serious theological points while keeping his readers at their ease with his seemingly casual approach, thus disarming them before turning to ‘strike without claws’, delivering his theological shock treatment in a style that can suddenly change key from relaxed and humorous to intense and rhetorical. By such means he can achieve his aim of playfully

¹⁷⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton. Electronic edition* (Charlottesville, Va.: InteLex Corporation, 2002).

¹⁷⁷ ‘On the Essay’, *ILN*, 16 February 1929, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXXV, 41-45 (41).

disturbing his readers' certainties and challenging them with his own theology; his reflections on the essay form illustrate the value of his own playfulness for his apologetics.

Eric Tippin has noted the importance of this playfulness in Chesterton's essays: 'A purposeful, cross-inflecting, often playful relationship between the form and the thought ... is the most recognizable trademark of Chesterton's ... essay style.'¹⁷⁸ Tippin also insightfully discusses, from a literary perspective, the effects of Chesterton's playfulness and the highly stylised, artful nature of his writing, which in themselves help to create 'constant uncertainty as to whether what one is encountering is illusory, substantive, or, somehow, both'.¹⁷⁹ Bringing Tippin's observations to bear on theology and apologetics, it can be seen that this playfulness reflects the joyful nature of Chesterton's theology, and the uncertainty Chesterton's style engenders makes the reader more open to the surprises and shocks which his apologetics administers.

Antithesis, inversion, paradox, exaggeration, and playfulness: these, I would argue, are five of the six most important of the linguistic devices by which Chesterton disturbs his readers' confidence in their understanding of reality. The sixth of the most important linguistic devices in his armoury is his use of humour, which will be dealt with separately below. This list, it should be said, is not exhaustive, but space does not allow further consideration of other tropes and stylistic devices, except for three very specific techniques identified by the Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky in his work on defamiliarization. Alison Milbank points out that Chesterton uses all three of these stylistic techniques: first 'The avoidance of direct naming, so that an event or familiar object is described as if for the first time'; secondly, the use of 'an unusual point of view ... the unregarded

¹⁷⁸ R. Eric Tippin, 'Serious Humor: The Play of Style and Thought in G. K. Chesterton's Essays,' *Nineteenth Century Prose* 44, no. 1 (2017): 87-112 (88).

¹⁷⁹ R. Eric Tippin, 'The Trick of Modernist Difficulty,' *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 62, no. 3 (2019): 391-413 (393).

perspective’; thirdly, ‘the almost childlike description of something familiar as if it were seen for the first time.’¹⁸⁰ As Shklovsky’s concern was only with defamiliarization in a literary sense, he does not consider the value of these three techniques in relation to Christian apologetics; all three of these devices form part of the armoury with which Chesterton tries to startle his readers into a discovery of the sense of wonder so central to his theology of creation.

Natural theology and modes of argument

I have argued that Chesterton’s natural theology, and the aims of his apologetics, influence his writing at the linguistic level in a number of ways. I will now investigate his theology and his aims in apologetics in terms of their effects on his modes of argument. To take one example, Chesterton claims: ‘I can undertake to justify the whole Catholic theology, if I be granted to start with the supreme sacredness and value of two things: Reason and Liberty.’¹⁸¹ In writing this, he is declaring, very loudly, that he will work in terms of natural theology rather than rely on revelation: doing so, he takes the abstract ideas of ‘reason’ and ‘liberty’ and pushes them into a relationship with the Catholic church which, for many of his readers, would have been quite unexpected. In addition, in terms of linguistic structures, he is making his argument in very a compressed, exaggerated, dramatic way.¹⁸² He uses that very compression, exaggeration, and drama to startle his readers. Had he made the same claim very slowly, as part of a measured, systematic argument, he would have lost the shock value which he seeks. His style embodies the

¹⁸⁰ Milbank, *Chesterton*, 31-39. See also Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique,’ 8-14.

¹⁸¹ *CCC*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 119.

¹⁸² Derus perceptively observes: ‘The compression of Chesterton’s prose lends itself naturally to the yoking of disparate ideas.’ Derus, ‘The Chesterton Style,’ 45-64 (52).

dramatic purpose of his apologetics, which stems from the drama inherent in his natural theology.

For a more extended examination of the effects of Chesterton's natural theology and his purposes in apologetics, consider the article 'The Mercy of Mr Arnold Bennett.' In this article, Chesterton is defending traditional Christian ethics against secular alternative theories of justice. He points out that punishment according to guilt limits punishment to fit the guilt, whereas punishment to protect the community, as proposed by secularists, has two major drawbacks: it is not limited; and it usually falls on the poor. He invokes a broad historical context for his argument:

The modern world has returned to the test of the heathen world, that of considering service to the state, and not justice to the individual. ... the modern world, like the heathen world, is here inflicting it [tyranny] chiefly on the subordinate and submerged classes of society. ... Nobody could pretend that the affectionate mother of a rather backward child deserves to be punished by having all the happiness taken out of her life. But anybody can pretend that the act is needed for the happiness of the community. Nobody will say it was so wicked of her to love her baby that she deserves to lose it. But it is always easy to say that some remote social purpose will be served by taking it away. Thus the elimination of punishment means the extension of tyranny.

Chesterton is building up his rhetoric as he turns his opponents' arguments against them, suggesting that the changes to the justice system these secular reformers propose would have the reverse of the benevolent effects they promise.

He progresses, as so often, to a highly rhetorical climax:

There is no hope for liberty or democracy until we all demand again, with a tongue of thunder, the right to be blamed. We shall never feel like free men until we assert again our sacred claim to be punished. The denunciation of a man for what he chose to do is itself the confession that he chose to do it; and it is beneath his dignity to admit that he could have done nothing else. The only alternative theory is that we can do nothing but what we do, and our rulers can do anything whatever to restrain us. Compared with that, it would

be better that roaring mobs should rise all over England, uproariously demanding to be hanged.¹⁸³

He uses his argument about justice to make a broader, theological point about free will. In doing so, he piles surprise on surprise: who would expect to ‘demand ... the right to be blamed’, or to ‘assert ... our sacred claim to be punished’? He finishes with a powerfully dramatic image of a ridiculous imagined event, to illustrate the absurdity of his opponents’ proposals: ‘that roaring mobs should rise ... uproariously demanding to be hanged’.

This essay is typical of Chesterton’s usual mode of argument as an essayist and illustrates several of the ways this expresses his theology and furthers the aims of his apologetics. He begins gently, with humour: ‘Mr Arnold Bennett ... showed that his mercy and magnanimity were indeed on a heroic scale by reviewing a book of mine, and even saying many kind things about it.’¹⁸⁴ The humour and gentle tone invite the reader in and make it clear that Chesterton’s purposes are benevolent and that his arguments are directed against ideas, not people; his style excludes personal animosity, creating affinity and minimising the distance between Christian apologist and non-religious reader.

Then Chesterton builds up his argument, using constant antithesis. He makes his argument twist and turn unexpectedly to create surprise and builds both the logic of his argument and his rhetoric together, in parallel, to a dramatic climax. Here, as elsewhere throughout his writing, both the style and the structure of his writing are in perfect harmony with the purposes of his apologetics, which seeks to open his readers’ eyes to the truth of the natural theology he unveils for them. That structure and style are also in tune with the dramatic composition of his natural theology, which is embodied in the dramatic nature of his writing.

¹⁸³ ‘The Mercy of Mr Arnold Bennett’, in Chesterton, *FVF*, 86-92 (90-92).

¹⁸⁴ ‘The Mercy of Mr Arnold Bennett’, in Chesterton, *FVF*, 86-92 (86).

His argument is grounded in his theological anthropology: he could simply have argued that all human beings have ‘dignity’ and are able to make significant choices because they are made in the image of God, therefore punishment is legitimate, whereas the alternative theory of justice advocated by Mr Arnold Bennett makes the value of the individual subordinate to the perceived needs of the broader community and the state. Rather than put his argument in such a pedestrian style, he enlists the power of imagination to shock his readers into understanding the importance of the theological point he is making. Other apologists might refer to the sacred, only Chesterton would invert his readers’ expectations by asserting a ‘sacred claim to be punished’ and picturing people rising up and demanding to be hanged, rather than demanding to be free; by doing this, he demonstrates, in an inverted, circuitous way, that the theological anthropology he is advocating is powerful enough to revolutionize society.

As in the case of this essay, the relationship between the themes of Chesterton’s apologetics and the structure of his arguments is often so strong that it can make the structuring of his essays and articles rather predictable. Michael Hurley goes so far as to claim that Chesterton’s essays ‘always work by the same principle: of saying something surprising enough, or in a surprising enough way, to roust the reader into life’.¹⁸⁵ There is some exaggeration in that ‘always’, but Hurley’s observation is very largely correct. Chesterton’s essays, articles, and individual chapters in books do indeed very often turn on a surprise, or build to final perorations, or both. They often begin in relaxed, humorous fashion, then the argument builds, and the rhetoric with it, to a final flourish. The dramatic quality of the language itself conveys a sense of surprise and excitement, stemming from the wonder and joy of the theology undergirding the argument.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Hurley, *Chesterton*, 57.

¹⁸⁶ See Hurley, *Chesterton*, 70.

Are there other aspects of Chesterton's modes of argumentation which reflect his theology? Consider his use of imagery. One of his most famous images is the picture of orthodoxy as a chariot in *Orthodoxy*. Here, he depicts 'the thrilling romance of Orthodoxy' in pictorial form: he visualises historical theological controversies as obstacles and traps, with orthodoxy swerving between Arianism, 'orientalism' and other heresies in an exciting chariot ride. Having claimed that 'There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy. It was sanity: and to be sane is more dramatic than to be mad,' he suggests that, historically, Christian orthodoxy:

Was the equilibrium of a man behind madly rushing horses, seeming to stoop this way and to sway that, yet in every attitude having the grace of statuary and the accuracy of arithmetic. The Church ... swerved to left and right, so exactly as to avoid enormous obstacles. ... To have fallen into any of those open traps of error and exaggeration which fashion after fashion and sect after sect set along the historic path of Christendom – that would indeed have been simple. ... To have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect.¹⁸⁷

The image of the chariot reinforces and develops Chesterton's argument. Rather than put his case in terms of abstract propositions, he combines visual image with historical reference to make a truth-claim about Christian orthodoxy, which he sees as 'the wild truth' proved by the evidence of 'the historic path of Christendom'. Measured in terms of logic his argument might seem problematic; measured in terms of rhetoric it is very strong, thanks to his imagery. In the word-picture he paints, Christianity is the only lively, graceful, moving element, the only one intelligently guided, the only glamorous and exciting entity in the entire picture; the heresies, in contrast are pictured as static items – bulky monoliths, or sunken traps, or dull, prostrate obstacles – all left behind by the rapid

¹⁸⁷ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 305-06.

forward progress of orthodoxy. His picture of the chariot brings the dramatic power of his theology into his argument here. It is a characteristic example of his use of imagery as a way of intensifying his arguments; the image of the chariot adds greatly to the imaginative and rhetorical effect of his narrative, and enables him to compress concepts together in a powerful fashion.¹⁸⁸

This example illustrates the importance of imagery in Chesterton's style and his argumentation, which may reflect, in part at least, the influence of Newman, who taught that 'an image derived from experience or information is stronger than an abstraction, conception, or conclusion.'¹⁸⁹ At certain points in Chesterton's argumentation, such as the picture of the chariot of orthodoxy above, it might be said that the image becomes the argument, that is, the image does not just illustrate an existing argument, but Chesterton embodies a new part of his argument in the form of an image. Compressing 'several themes and narrative threads' into a single image¹⁹⁰ is one of the most important means by which he creates the explosive shock value he aims at in his apologetics, in order to change his readers' perceptions. Comic images in serious apologetics; subversive images to show how silly his opponents' arguments are; surprising images to cast unexpected new light on different arguments: all these different kinds of images have effective parts to play in his plan to startle the age and teach it the meaning of wonder.¹⁹¹ His imagery is one of the most important parts of his apologetics armoury: he uses it to provoke a change of

¹⁸⁸ Kenner touches on this point when he notes: 'Chesterton in his best work manipulates his images functionally, to control the reader's response towards a total meaning which cannot itself be briefly and exactly stated.' Kenner, *Paradox*, 125.

¹⁸⁹ Newman, *GA*, 49-50.

¹⁹⁰ To borrow a phrase from Natasha O'Hear, who has observed, in relation to visual imagery, that images can pull together 'several themes and narrative threads into a single visual space'. Natasha O'Hear (*unpublished lecture at Worcester College, Oxford, on 22 September 2018*).

¹⁹¹ G.K. Chesterton: 'The age needs, first and foremost to be startled; to be taught the nature of wonder.' *Black and White*, 14 February 1903, in Chesterton, *MWWO*, 160.

perception in his readers, to enable them to perceive the wonder and mystery his theology seeks to teach them.

These examples illustrate an important feature of the harmony between Chesterton's theology, his apologetics, and his modes of argument. As related in chapters two and three, Chesterton sees imagination as performing a vital role in theology, and he also sees a very close link between theology and the arts. His use of imagery is one of the most important ways in which he engages the imagination with theological ideas. It also expresses his understanding of the closeness of the relationship between theology and the arts, as his verbal images embody vital theological ideas. His imagery illustrates his arguments, in unusually vivid, humorous and dramatic ways, which serve the theological purposes outlined above.

For those scholars who like to see rational arguments delivered without ornament or distraction, Chesterton's exuberant manner of argumentation makes it hard to take him seriously. Yet, he is not alone in this approach: as Aidan Nichols has pointed out, 'Chesterton belongs to the tradition of philosophy, stretching from Plato to Kierkegaard, which regards rhetoric as a necessary concomitant of argument, precisely because rhetoric can begin to shift certain mental blocks to insight by enlisting the imagination's power to unsettle and reshape consciousness. If all were left to ratiocination alone, such a shift might never occur.'¹⁹² Once again, the example of Newman comes to mind, and his verdict that: 'The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description.'¹⁹³ Chesterton's modes of argumentation seem to reflect this dictum to a

¹⁹² Nichols, *Chesterton*, 114.

¹⁹³ John Henry Newman, *The Tamworth reading room. Letters on an address delivered by Sir Robert Peel, Bart. M.P., on the establishment of a reading room at Tamworth* (London: Historical Collection from the British Library, 2020), 32-33. Originally published in 1841.

considerable extent; he certainly works ‘through the imagination .. by ... facts and events ... history ... description’, as well as using reason, emotion, and communal knowledge (see chapter three).

The persuasive power of rhetoric, narrative, imagination, and emotion is, however, only part of the value they have for Chesterton’s argumentation. Given his conviction that reason alone is not enough to reveal reality fully, it is necessary for Chesterton to involve narrative, emotion, imagination, and imagination’s tools, such as rhetoric, in his processes of argument, to reveal to his readers the theological understanding of wonder and joy which sin and the Fall conceal from them.¹⁹⁴ His integration of narrative, rhetorical, imaginative, and emotional elements, alongside ratiocination, into his structures of argument gives his argumentation what might be called, by analogy with music, a polyphonic quality, as he interweaves not just separate lines of argument but separate modes of argument. This polyphonic quality of argument reflects the complex nature of his theological epistemology.

Natural theology, humour, and apologetics

I will argue here that Chesterton’s use of humour embodies his natural theology, and his apologetics strategies, in several ways. For instance, at a time when Roman Catholic priests were often seen in England as rather alien, he used humour to challenge that perception:

I could never take seriously the fear of the priest, as of something unnatural and unholy; a dangerous man in the home. Why should a man who wanted to be wicked encumber himself with special and

¹⁹⁴ See Hurley, *Chesterton*, 54. Hurley notes that in essays Chesterton ‘typically appeals to a literary rather than logical authority’.

elaborate promises to be good? There might sometimes be a reason for a priest being a profligate. But what was the reason for a profligate being a priest? There are many more lucrative walks of life in which a person with such shining talents for vice and villainy might have made a brighter use of his gifts.¹⁹⁵

Humour creates a sense of empathy, and by joking about Christianity Chesterton normalises it, making it seem less distant to his non-religious readers.

Humour serves a similar function in his article ‘Jesus or Christ? A Reply to Mr Roberts.’ In this article, he seizes on Mr Roberts’ assertion that ‘If Jesus was God He knew that the people's belief in diabolic obsession was an error.’ Chesterton points out that if Jesus was God, then Mr Roberts is claiming to know the inner thoughts of the divinity. Chesterton humorously highlights the fact that this seems somewhat presumptuous, ending:

How, may I ask, does Mr. Roberts know exactly what God thinks about diabolic possession? To understand men or the most ordinary life is mystery enough for most of us; and here is an enlightened gentleman who not only knows about God, but knows God's private opinion upon the mystery of evil. One would think that the meditations of the Omniscient upon the subject of devils might reasonably be left undisturbed.¹⁹⁶

He aligns himself with his readers by writing ‘To understand men or the most ordinary life is mystery enough for most of us,’ suggesting that he, like them, finds this enough of a challenge. He thus sets himself and his readers – ‘most of us’ – in opposition to one of his theological opponents, Mr Roberts. In doing this, he suggests that his own form of orthodox Christianity has more in common with his readers’ ideas than the sceptical theology of Mr Roberts. Characteristically, his use of humour creates affinity with his readers, thus encouraging them to view his own theological position more favourably and to distance themselves from his opponent’s.

¹⁹⁵ CCC, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 74.

¹⁹⁶ Chesterton, ‘Jesus or Christ?’, 95-107 (104-05).

In using humour as part of his apologetics project, Chesterton is simply applying the theology of humour discussed in chapter three; with such a theology as his, he could hardly avoid humour. He links his theology of humour to the worldview aspect of his apologetics where he claims that humour is ‘the test of a responsible religion or theory’ because religion should be ‘universal’, that is, able to provide an account of all of life, or, in other terms, a complete worldview, and if ‘a thing is universal it is full of comic things’.¹⁹⁷

There are other ways in which Chesterton’s use of humour in apologetics embodies his theology. It puts into practice his theological epistemology, outlined in chapter three, in two respects: first, his conviction that humour has cognitive value, and thus can play a part in imaginative and rational argument – for example, he uses humour to bring flaws in Mr Roberts’ argument to the reader’s attention (above). Secondly, Chesterton’s theological epistemology places a strong emphasis on the communal dimensions of knowledge. Humour appeals very directly to those communal dimensions: his humorous arguments can only have force if his readers understand his jokes; if they understand his jokes, they are revealing a whole context of common ground, which must be present to enable them to make the connections and understand the connotations which are part of understanding humour. By directing his readers’ attention, through humour, to the common ground they share, Chesterton attempts to win their sympathy and make them more favourably disposed to the arguments he presents.

In addition, Chesterton’s theology means that, for him, theological argument, although serious, should include a sense of joy and wonder. Humour helps him to put this article of his faith into practice. Humour is also an important part of the imaginative part of

¹⁹⁷ ‘Spiritualism and Frivolity,’ *ILN*, 9 June 1906, in Chesterton, *CW*, XXVII, 205-06.

his apologetics: he seeks to make his readers see the world in new ways, and humour is a valuable tool in this because it can cast a new light on the familiar and the known, thus preparing his readers for the imaginative steps required to see the world differently.

Indeed, his use of humour makes an implicit theological claim. By using humour as he does, on the basis of the natural theology of humour outlined in chapter three, he is aligning Christianity with joy and laughter, suggesting that the strength of Christianity does not just lie in the strength of its arguments, that in addition to its reasons for faith it has an integral connection with joy, play, laughter, and good humour, and that these provide in themselves evidence of the value of Christianity. They also normalise Christianity: if it can be joked about in a friendly way, it cannot be too alien; shared humour creates affinity and Chesterton's humour creates an affinity with spiritual things that might, without that humorous approach, have seemed strange to his readers. Apart from what it adds to the strength of his arguments, humour changes the climate in which he conducts his debates, creating empathy between himself and his audience, and so making constructive resolutions of the discussions he conducts with them more likely.

In sum, his humour is an integral and important element in his apologetics and is one of the ways he takes that apologetics far beyond simply presenting arguments for Christianity. In the process of changing perceptions and subverting expectations, his humour embodies and enacts aspects of his natural theology: its wonder and joy; its complex theological epistemology; and its understanding of paradox as central to human existence.

Overall strategy and aim

The discussion of the conceptual models and the forms of Chesterton's apologetics, his use of language, his style and modes of argument, and his use of humour in apologetics, together with the strategies concerning positioning, contexts, associations, and alliances discussed earlier – all this leads to a question. Do Chesterton's various apologetics strategies together form a coherent overall strategy for his apologetics? I will argue here that this question should be answered in the affirmative.

One of his central contentions is that 'The primary paradox of Christianity is that the ordinary condition of man is not his sane or sensible condition; that the normal itself is an abnormality.' He himself goes on to provide a test for verifying that contention in human experience: 'All the real argument about religion turns on the question of whether a man who was born upside down can tell when he comes right way up.'¹⁹⁸ He used this 'upside down' idea many times.¹⁹⁹ It is an image which suggests a radical transformation of vision, perhaps even a complete change of worldview.

Another of his recurring refrains is about trying to help people to see the world in a new way,²⁰⁰ trying to educate their thinking so they might discover 'the most wild and

¹⁹⁸ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 363.

¹⁹⁹ For instance, 'any scene ... can sometimes be more clearly and freshly seen if it is seen upside down,' in *Francis*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 70. See also Gabriel Syme's realisation that 'For the last twenty-four hours the cosmos had really been upside down, but now the capsized universe had come right side up again', in Chesterton, *Thursday*, 82. Or Gabriel Gale's assertion: 'It's a very good thing for a landscape-painter to see the landscape upside down. He sees things then as they really are; yes, and that's true in philosophy as well as art.' Chesterton, *Poet and Lunatics*, 25.

²⁰⁰ The word 'see' occurs 5,342 times in the electronic edition of the *Collected Works*. Chesterton, *Collected Works. Electronic edition*. His emphasis on seeing may also be related to his reliance on natural theology: because he largely limited himself to natural theology, he could only use in argument things that both he and his audience could 'see'; he could not use in evidence matters that could only be discerned by reliance on revelation. Therefore, he began with what his non-religious readers could 'see', while attempting to make them 'see' very differently.

soaring sort of imagination; the imagination that can see what is there'.²⁰¹ If Chesterton's redefinition of normality and abnormality and his desire to transform his readers' vision are considered together, it is clear that it is his desire to cause a dramatic change in his readers' understanding which leads him into the set of apologetics strategies, outlined above. All of these strategies have in common an attempt to redefine what is considered as normal, and a concern to disrupt and subvert his audience's expectations so as to encourage them to see both the secular and the Christian radically differently. These strategies involve, at the same time, the aim of, and also processes of, defamiliarization and normalisation.

As noted in chapter three, there are certain links between the Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky's ideas about defamiliarization as one of the purposes of art and Chesterton's ideas about art, but Chesterton's form of defamiliarization through art and literature is a part of his attempts to defamiliarize secular normality and normalise Christian ideas, and so is very different from Shklovsky's more purely literary concept. Several scholars have developed Shklovsky's idea of defamiliarization in relation to Chesterton, Alison Milbank, for one: she notes that the reader of Chesterton's work 'moves from a "fallen" perception of the world as dull or in his control to a "redeemed" apprehension of it as God's creation and thus beautiful'.²⁰²

Much of Chesterton's apologetics revolves around an attempt to provoke a change in worldview: persuading his readers that what was considered normal in their secular society was abnormal (defamiliarization – making a secular view seem strange), and showing them what true normality, life 'the right way up,' as he saw it, might look like

²⁰¹ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 148. See also his claim that 'The mission of all the prophets from the beginning has not been so much the pointing out of heavens or hells as primarily the pointing out of the earth,' in 'A defence of the goodness of existence', in Chesterton, *Defendant*, 11-16 (12).

²⁰² Milbank, *Chesterton*, 38-39. See also Hurley, *Chesterton*, 5-6.

(normalisation – making a Christian view seem normal).²⁰³ This defamiliarization and normalisation may be considered the overall aim towards which his various strategies are directed. The different strategies outlined above reinforce each other, combining to guide his audience towards a change of perception.

One aspect of this overall strategy has, perhaps, received more attention than the other. Chesterton once declared: ‘the function of imagination is not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange; not so much to make wonders facts as to make facts wonders;’²⁰⁴ this emphasis in his own work has tended to direct scholarly attention more to the ‘defamiliarization’ aspect of his overall strategy than to the ‘normalisation’ aspect. Yet, in spite of his own words, he actually works to make the ‘strange things’ of a Christian worldview ‘settled’ in his reader’s perception, as well as to make the ‘settled things’ of a secular worldview ‘strange’. In addition to undermining secular understandings of the world he tries to make Christian viewpoints seem settled and normal, however strange they might initially appear to non-religious readers, by translating religious matters into terms and frameworks comprehensible for secular people, using the strategies outlined above.

The ‘defamiliarization’ aspect of his work has been much discussed, often without using that terminology.²⁰⁵ I have tried to contribute to this discussion by relating Chesterton’s apologetics to his underlying natural theology and suggesting that he was engaged in a precursor of worldview apologetics, before that term had been invented. I

²⁰³ Although he does engage with other religions on occasion, particularly Buddhism and Islam, his main opponent is secular materialism. In *William Blake* he writes: the ‘war’ which has been waged by ‘mystics’ against ‘materialism ... from the beginning ... has been ... the noblest and most important effort of human history.’ Chesterton, *Blake*, 183.

²⁰⁴ ‘A Defence of China Shepherdesses,’ in Chesterton, *Defendant*, 81-89 (84).

²⁰⁵ See, for example: Milbank, *Chesterton*, 38-39. Hurley, *Chesterton*, 5-6. Kenner, *Paradox*, 43, 67-68. Fagerberg, *Chesterton*, 21-44. Clark, *Chesterton*, 187-200. Reyburn, *Seeing Things as They Are*, 221-59. Rowan, *Scrappy Evangelist*, 80-105.

have used the term ‘normalisation’ to emphasise the positive aspect of his overall strategy: as well as trying to provoke a change of perception in his readers through defamiliarization, he is also, in an unsystematic and fragmentary way, providing those readers with elements of a Christian worldview. In terms of his own famous image of the man born upside down coming right way up, he is not just trying to get that imaginary man to see the world in a new way, but also to give him a sense of solid reality beneath his feet; he does this by presenting Christian ideas as a series of hypotheses, embodied in narratives and arguments, which collectively provide a set of converging probabilities indicating the credibility of a Christian worldview.

Conclusions: Chesterton’s natural theology in relation to his apologetics

In this chapter I have outlined the central strategies of Chesterton’s apologetics, endeavouring to show how these strategies were built around the shape of his idiosyncratic natural theology, and also his particular gifts and character. Other apologists have used natural theology, few, if any, can be said to have brought such enormous creativity, humour, and charm to their work as Chesterton did to his, often in rather circuitous ways, using an exceptionally wide range of imaginative and rational forms of discourse.

Since his reliance on natural theology directed him towards what might be discovered about the divine in creation, theological anthropology was central in his apologetics, together with wonder, joy, and paradox, a strong awareness of sin and the Fall, combined with veiled mystical and sacramental views. Where Alister McGrath has described natural theology as ‘an attempt to interpret and appreciate common human

experience of the natural world ... in the light of the received Christian tradition,'²⁰⁶ Chesterton's natural theology makes an attempt to interpret and appreciate common human experience of the cultural world, past and present, in the light of the received Christian tradition, to create an apologetics of cultural engagement, utilising the areas where his knowledge was strongest, literature, history, art, and religion, and his combination of the gifts of creative writer and of debater.

I have tried to show how he expressed this theology in the form of an apologetics which ranged across vast areas of human culture, history and experience, in remarkably supple, subtle, and adaptable ways. Working in this way enabled him to engage with many readers and debating partners who were not specifically interested in religion, but were interested in the other subjects and genres he wrote about and in; it gave him the scope to apply the shock and surprise at the heart of his apologetics to vast areas of life, from art to philosophy, and from the domestic to the political, so as to defamiliarize secular normality and normalise the Christian.

I have also tried to demonstrate the importance of a number of aspects of his apologetics beyond his actual arguments: his positioning of himself as an apologist in relation to his readers; the underlying models of apologetics he used; the use he made of the contexts in which he wrote; and the associations and alliances he made in his apologetics: all these were important. The persuasive power of his apologetics did not consist only of the strength of his arguments.

²⁰⁶ McGrath, *Re-imagining Nature*, 40.

Style as the sacrament of thought

In addition, in the discussions above of the relation of words and ideas in Chesterton's work, I have endeavoured to combine literary and theological analysis to argue that Chesterton's natural theology is reflected in his style and other aspects of his use of language, in ways that are conditioned and shaped by his apologetics strategies. I have attempted to show that Chesterton's natural theology, together with the apologetics strategy he built round his natural theology, enables a much clearer understanding of his use of language and of the ways in which his 'theology emerges within and through the stylistic modes and tropes' of his writing.²⁰⁷

The evidence I have provided supports the view that his brother Cecil was right when he said, of Chesterton: 'No critic ever had a keener sense of Wordsworth's maxim that "style is the sacrament of thought."' ²⁰⁸ In all Chesterton's work, both critical and creative, his style is the sacrament of his thought, because his style embodies key aspects of his theological thinking. His particular didactic purposes as an apologist, which reflect and enact his theology, demand dramatic language, because those purposes involve defamiliarization and normalisation, radical theological enlightenment, reformation of the imagination, and transformation of vision.

I have tried to show that his use of language embodies the dramatic composition of his theology, as well as its dramatic content: it expresses the wonder, joy, and excitement of his doctrine of creation, the powerful clash between this and his awareness of sin and evil, and the consequent place of paradox and the idea of the Fall at the heart of his theological thinking. All these contribute to a sense of theology as a drama, and this drama

²⁰⁷ Milbank, *Chesterton*, 25. Unfortunately, space precludes further discussion of the relationship between words and ideas, style and thought, in Chesterton's work, vitally important though this topic is.

²⁰⁸ Cecil Chesterton, *A Criticism*, 58.

is an important part of his theology (as noted in chapters two and three). His sacramental mysticism enhances that drama, suggesting that the world is full of hidden meaning and of signs pointing beyond themselves, if those who look can only be taught to see truly.

I will now, in chapter five, discuss the main exception to his reliance on natural theology, his movement into incarnational theology at climactic moments in his work.

Chapter V:

The Natural Theologian and the Incarnation

The Everlasting Man and natural theology

I have argued that in Chesterton's work, natural theology is usually the road by which he travels, as he uses natural theology to translate Christian concepts into forms accessible to non-religious readers, while incarnational theology is often his final destination. In this chapter I will investigate the ways in which he engages with the Incarnation. First, I will address what might, at first sight, seem a major obstacle for my argument: *The Everlasting Man*. The title of that book would suggest that it is entirely about the Incarnation. How, then, does it relate to this thesis?¹

A cursory inspection of *The Everlasting Man* reveals that the Introduction and the first eight chapters deal with human prehistory and ancient history before Christ. There are then three chapters which actually discuss the life and work of Jesus Christ, followed by three which survey Church history, and finally a conclusion which presents Christ as the centre of history. It might seem strange to find a book, ostensibly about the Incarnation, in which fewer than one-fifth of the pages are focused on the historical person of Christ.

What determines the unusual relationship between the structure of this book and its subject?

¹ Chesterton wrote his book as a reply to H.G. Wells's *The Outline of History*, hence a number of the points he makes are rejoinders to Wells, of only historical interest today, and not germane to the argument of this thesis. See: Sullivan, 'Everlasting Man,' 57-65. Schwartz, *Third Spring*, 95. Michael Coren, *Gilbert - the man who was G.K. Chesterton* (London: Cape, 1989), 231-32.

The framework of the discussion

Why does Chesterton take so long to bring his discussion to bear on the historical Christ?

He explains in the second part of the book:

In the first section I often treated man as merely an animal, to show that the effect was more impossible than if he were treated as an angel. In the sense in which it was necessary to treat man merely as an animal, it is necessary to treat Christ merely as a man. I have to ... assume this limitation even in order to remove it. I must try to imagine what would happen to a man who did really read the story of Christ as the story of a man; and even of a man of whom he had never heard before. And I wish to point out that a really impartial reading of that kind would lead, if not immediately to belief, at least to a bewilderment of which there is really no solution except in belief.²

In other words, the end-point of his argument requires him to spend the whole first half of the book setting up a *reductio ad absurdum*, outlining arguments which try to explain human beings in naturalistic terms so that he can prove those arguments false. It is necessary for him to do this because he wishes to paint Christ as a unique exception who does not fit within the categories that define human beings. The first part of persuading the reader of this, is for Chesterton to provide definitions of these categories, in order for him to argue that Christ transcends them.

It is essential for Chesterton to define these categories in terms which allow him to present the second part of his argument. If human nature could be explained in purely naturalistic terms, there would be no possibility of Christ being presented as someone who is both human and inexplicable in naturalistic terms, therefore Chesterton has first to argue that human beings are inexplicable without a frame of reference which includes the supernatural as well as the natural.³

² *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 318.

³ See Wills, *Chesterton*, 183-94.

How does Chesterton's extensive treatment of comparative religion relate to this frame of reference? First, he attacks a conventional approach to comparative religion which is incompatible with his argument:

We are accustomed to see a table or catalogue of the world's great religions in parallel columns, until we fancy that they are really parallel ... the names of the great religious founders all in a row: Christ; Mahomet; Buddha; Confucius. But in truth this is only a trick; another of these optical illusions by which any objects may be put into a particular relation by shifting to a particular point of sight.

He argues that 'those whom we choose to lump together as religions and religious founders, do not really show any common character.' Then he presents his own way of structuring discussion of comparative religion:

Instead of dividing religion geographically ... into Christian, Moslem, Brahmin, Buddhist, and so on, I would divide it psychologically ... into the strata of spiritual elements and influences that could sometimes exist in the same country, or even in the same man. Putting the Church apart for the moment, I should be disposed to divide the natural religion of the mass of mankind under such headings as these: God; the Gods; the Demons; the Philosophers. I believe some such classification will help us to sort out the spiritual experiences of men much more successfully than the conventional business of comparing religions.⁴

This way of structuring analysis of religions suggests criteria by which comparative analysis of religions can be combined with analysis of different elements within one particular religion and it focuses on 'spiritual experiences', thus linking the study of spirituality with that of other aspects of religions.

For Chesterton's purposes, however, it serves mainly as a way of framing the argument of the second part of the book so as to make it possible to claim a unique place for Christianity without relying on revelation. Chesterton must present his own concept of comparative religion in order to prove that Christ cannot be contained within it; other

⁴ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 216, 219.

concepts of comparative religion might be framed in ways that made such a conclusion impossible, so Chesterton has to define a framework which allows for the conclusion he wishes to reach, without invoking revelation. Just as he must define human nature in categories which allow space for the argument he wishes to make, he must also define the categories within which religious phenomena are explained in terms which allow that argument to progress; he justifies the categories and definitions he chooses largely through appeals to historical evidence, writing an outline religious history of the world which supports his definitions of human nature and of religion.⁵

Chesterton's reliance on natural theology and its interdisciplinary partners, limiting though it is, allows him to make this comparison, in relation to himself and his opponents: 'I do profess to be a great deal more impartial than they are; in the sense that I can tell the story fairly, with some sort of imaginative justice to all sides; and they cannot.'⁶ His avoidance of reliance on revelation and refusal to privilege any Christian source or authority enables him to say this. He ties his claim to fairness to his reliance on imagination when he refers to 'imaginative justice', citing imagination rather than reason as the resource which enables him to 'tell the story fairly'. He develops this claim: 'In order to strike, in the only sane or possible sense, the note of impartiality, it is necessary to touch the nerve of novelty. ... we must try at least to shake off the cloud of mere custom and see the thing as new, if only by seeing it as unnatural. ... We must invoke the most wild and soaring sort of imagination; the imagination that can see what is there.'⁷ Here we see the theological epistemology discussed in chapter three at work: he is claiming that the

⁵ See Schwartz, *Third Spring*, 94-97.

⁶ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 147.

⁷ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 147-48.

breadth of his epistemology allows him to reach a higher degree of impartiality than his opponents, through imagination.

This analysis shows that, while natural theology gives Chesterton limited scope to discuss the Incarnation, since he is eschewing systematic theology and considering it as a historical phenomenon, his use of narrative to convey theological concepts enables him to compensate for this limitation by expanding his book to frame the Incarnation in the context of an outline religious history of the world, which includes an unusual analysis of comparative religion. He combines this with the argument that man ‘seems rather more supernatural as a natural product than as a supernatural one,’⁸ that is, an attempt to prove that humanity cannot be explained in purely rationalistic and naturalistic terms. He then links this argument to the Incarnation: ‘I maintain that when brought out into the daylight these two things look altogether strange and unique ... The first of these is the creature called man and the second is the man called Christ.’⁹

When he at last arrives at the historical person of Christ, Chesterton begins by, so to speak, flirting with the boundaries of natural theology. He starts to make statements that suggest Christian truth claims, but mitigates these statements by writing of the gospel narratives in terms of story and idea, rather than of history and revelation. He writes, for example, of ‘the drama of Bethlehem’, ‘this strange story’, ‘the miracle play of Bethlehem’; he declares that his ‘purpose in this place is merely to sum up the combination of ideas that make up the Christian and Catholic idea, and to note that all of them are already crystallised in the first Christmas story’;¹⁰ there is no suggestion of historical investigation in that formulation, which is set out in terms of ‘story’ and ‘idea’.

⁸ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 166.

⁹ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 147.

¹⁰ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 312, 313, 314.

He develops the narrative with statements such as: ‘Herod had his place ... in the miracle play of Bethlehem because he is the menace to the Church Militant and shows it from the first as under persecution and fighting for its life;’ by framing the story in such terms, he is treating the elements in it symbolically, as representing something greater than themselves, rather than at the level of historical literalism.

He turns to psychology, not systematic theology, to bolster his argument: ‘The truth is that there is a quite peculiar and individual character about the hold of this story on human nature; it is not in its psychological substance at all like a mere legend or the life of a great man;’¹¹ here he suggests that this ‘story’ has a unique ‘hold’ over ‘human nature’ by the very nature of the narrative itself, which he treats as ‘irreplaceable and untranslatable’, in Richard Niebuhr’s terms.¹² Here Chesterton is using narrative theologically, in combination with psychology, to make his case: it is the irreducible nature of the story itself that is his argument; he does not try to translate the narrative into abstract concepts, rather he dwells upon it and retells it so as to make the reader attend to the persuasive power of the story itself, allowing the narrative, rather than a systematic logical argument, to make a theological claim about Christianity.

When he makes claims for Christianity, he does so in these terms: ‘Christendom is larger than creation; as creation had been before Christ. ... this is true in relation to all the other religions and philosophies ... That every other single system is narrow and insufficient compared to this one; that is not a rhetorical boast; it is a real fact and a real dilemma.’¹³ This is the language of historical fact, not theological truth. He puts his claim as ‘a real fact’ to be judged ‘in relation to all the other religions and philosophies’, that is,

¹¹ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 314, 316.

¹² Richard Niebuhr, ‘The Story of our Life,’ from *The Meaning of Revelation*, originally published in 1941, in Hauerwas and Jones, *Why narrative?*, 21-44 (23).

¹³ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 309.

by comparative analysis in terms of history, ideas, and experience, not by reference to divine revelation.

In the second of the three chapters he devotes to the life and teaching of Christ he begins: 'I must try to imagine what would happen to a man who did really read the story of Christ as the story of a man; and even of a man of whom he had never heard before.' It is his characteristic claim to be a neutral investigator. In relation to miracle, he writes: 'I do not refer to what is commonly called the miraculous element; for on that point philosophies vary and modern philosophies very decidedly waver. ... I refer here rather specially to unmiraculous and even to unnoticed and inconspicuous parts of the story.'¹⁴ In writing this, he carefully sidesteps the issue of miracles and remains within the limits of natural theology.

Instead of addressing the debates around the miraculous, he focuses on another aspect of the gospel narratives: 'the point here is that if we could read the Gospel reports as things as new as newspaper reports, they would puzzle us and perhaps terrify us much more than the same things as developed by historical Christianity. ... the Christ of the Gospel might actually seem more strange and terrible than the Christ of the Church.'¹⁵ Within the 'unmiraculous' limits of natural theology, he continually focuses the reader on the surprising, even shocking aspects of the gospel narratives. In his characteristic style, he is appealing to the imagination to provoke a transformation of vision, trying to shock the reader into seeing Christ in a new way.

He completes the *reductio ad absurdum* which he began in the first part of the book by declaring: 'I maintain therefore that a man reading the New Testament frankly and freshly would not get the impression of what is now often meant by a human Christ. The

¹⁴ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 318, 321.

¹⁵ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 324-25.

merely human Christ is a made-up figure, a piece of artificial selection, like the merely evolutionary man.¹⁶ In saying this he dismisses numerous attempts to reconstruct a ‘historical Jesus’ in terms acceptable to modern secular sensibilities;¹⁷ where others have tried to make him more explicable and accessible, Chesterton highlights the mystery of Christ.

The third of the three chapters which focus on the historical Christ develops rather differently. He begins the chapter with reflection on the most startling aspects of Christ’s attitude to children and of the style of his discourse, as evidences of his uniqueness. There is one aside where he departs from his usual restraint and refers to Christ as ‘the most merciful of judges and the most sympathetic of friends’. Even here he puts this in terms of ‘our own private lives’ and ‘historical speculations’ rather than making a clear truth claim as such. He follows with a straightforward, rational argument, noting that he is writing ‘hypothetically ... in a quite dry and detached spirit’, concerning the contradiction between the wisdom of Christ’s teaching and the seeming madness of his claims to divinity. Chesterton concludes this propositional part of his argument by suggesting: ‘Even on the purely human and sympathetic side ... the Jesus of the New Testament seems to me to have in a great many ways the note of something superhuman; that is of something human and more than human.’¹⁸ Up till this point he has remained almost entirely within ‘purely human’ limits.

Then he turns to narrative, a narrative which he categorises: ‘the story of Christ is the story of a journey ... in the manner of the quest of a hero moving to his achievement or

¹⁶ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 328.

¹⁷ Albert Schweitzer had arrived at a somewhat similar scepticism about much of nineteenth-century research into Jesus, by rather more scholarly methods, in 1906, in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. See Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 205-15.

¹⁸ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 331-36.

his doom.’ He moves from propositional argument to theological narrative and retells the story of the last part of Christ’s life, pointing out the differences between that story and those of other religious leaders, almost entirely avoiding discussion of historicity and the supernatural until he reaches the crucifixion.¹⁹

When he arrives at the Resurrection, at the very end of the chapter, he does not pause to defend it with rational argument, but states it as the theological fulfilment of the narrative of history. He frames this passage with two implicit comparisons: first, he contrasts the cave in which Christ was born with the cave in which his body lay; he ends by contrasting the garden of Eden with the garden of the Resurrection. He begins: ‘In that second cavern the whole of that great and glorious humanity which we call antiquity was gathered up and covered over; and in that place it was buried. It was the end of ... the history that was merely human. The mythologies and the philosophies were buried there, the gods and the heroes and the sages.’ He concludes:

On the third day the friends of Christ coming at daybreak to the place found the grave empty and the stone rolled away. ... They realised the new wonder; but even they hardly realised that the world had died in the night. What they were looking at was the first day of a new creation, with a new heaven and a new earth; and in a semblance of the gardener God walked again in the garden, in the cool not of the evening but the dawn.²⁰

He has finally burst the bounds of his natural theology and, for one passage of text only, moves into a theological narrative that does not avoid but revels in the supernatural. He does not defend this approach with his own logical arguments; and neither here nor elsewhere does he cite the vast body of literature on this subject in support of his own work. Instead, at this point in his narrative, he relies on imagination rather than reason; the

¹⁹ He finally unequivocally invokes the supernatural in his description of the crucifixion. *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 339-45.

²⁰ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 345.

reader will accept or reject this text on the basis of imagination, not logical argument. The interweaving of logical argument with narrative apologetics is a key aspect of Chesterton's approach; he dextrously switches from one mode of persuasion to the other so that the reader is faced with a polyphonous rather than a monochrome mode of argumentation.

That third chapter might seem a natural place to end a book on the Incarnation, but instead Chesterton moves on to three chapters on church history before recapitulating the argument of the entire book in his conclusion.²¹ This might lead the reader to wonder why Chesterton's focus switches from Christ to the Church at this point.²² Here we must reflect on a second line of argument which runs through this book.

Argument to fulfilment through narrative and rhetoric

Chesterton pictures the shepherds at Bethlehem in this manner: he suggests that 'Men of the people, like the shepherds ... had everywhere been the makers of the mythologies,' and had 'felt most directly ... the mythology that was a sort of search; the tempting and tantalising hints of something half-human in nature; the dumb significance of seasons and special places.' This part of his narrative culminates:

Though no man knew it, the hour was near which was to end and to fulfil all things ... The shepherds had found their Shepherd. ... Mythology is a search. ... They and all the other mythologists would be justified in rejoicing that the event had fulfilled not merely the mysticism but the materialism of mythology. Mythology had many sins; but it had not been wrong in being as carnal as the Incarnation.²³

²¹ See Schwartz, *Third Spring*, 97-100.

²² See Rowan, *Scrappy Evangelist*, 357-59.

²³ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 306-08.

He makes the shepherds representatives of the mythology and popular religion he has described,²⁴ and so as representing its fulfilment when they find the Christ-child on the first Christmas night. The argument is conveyed more by the power of rhetoric than by the force of logic: having used logical argumentation elsewhere against rationalist interpretations of history, here Chesterton moves into a different mode of persuasion: he simply gives his own interpretation of historical events in the form of a narrative with commentary, without pausing to justify it with further logical argument.

Chesterton also depicts philosophy as a search fulfilled in Christ and the Church. He portrays the Magi thus:

the philosophers had also heard. ... there came with them all that world of wisdom that had watched the stars in Chaldea and the sun in Persia; and we shall not be wrong if we see in them the same curiosity that moves all the sages. They would stand for the same human ideal if their names had really been Confucius or Pythagoras or Plato. They were those who sought not tales but the truth of things; and since their thirst for truth was itself a thirst for God, they also have had their reward. But even in order to understand that reward, we must understand that for philosophy as much as mythology, that reward was the completion of the incomplete. ... Philosophy also, like mythology, had very much the air of a search. It is the realisation of this truth that gives its traditional majesty and mystery to the figures of the Three Kings; the discovery that religion is broader than philosophy and that this is the broadest of religions, contained within this narrow space.²⁵

He presents the Magi as representing the whole philosophical tradition, and their encounter with Christ as a picture of the fulfilment of philosophy. There is an irony here: elsewhere in the book Chesterton declares that other critics have found 'too many keys to mythology';²⁶ here, he presents his own key to mythology, and to ancient philosophy, focusing on the single idea of the search, or quest, as the key to both. Those who find his

²⁴ See Leo A. Hetzler, 'G.K. Chesterton and the Myth-Making Power,' *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review* III (1982): 72-82.

²⁵ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 308-11.

²⁶ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 328.

overall argument persuasive may accept the way he narrows his focus down at this point; others could well find this highly questionable, or indeed criticise his substitution of narrative, imaginative, and emotional persuasion for explicit rational argument at several crucial points of the book, even though his theological narratives embody implicit ratiocination.

In depicting Christ as the fulfilment of mythology and philosophy, Chesterton is developing a second major line of argument.²⁷ This second line of argument, like the first, relies on the definitions and categories which Chesterton puts in place in the first half of the book, where he sets up a definition of comparative religion which presents it as split into two parts: on the one side, poets, mythology, and popular religion, all working primarily in imaginative terms; on the other side, philosophers, philosophy and formal theology, all working primarily in terms of reason. He also presents both mythology and philosophy, before Christ, as quests, searching for meaning and truth. Having defined religions thus, in the first half of the book, he is, in the second half of the book, able to present Christ as the fulfilment of both those searches, as unifying the two separated halves of religion, and as uniting reason and imagination. The way he has defined religion means that he can present Christ, and therefore also Christianity, as, at one and the same time, fulfilling the deepest longings of human nature and the deepest searches of the religious quest. Aidan Nichols sees this as so significant that he argues that ‘the Christocentric theology of history’ Chesterton develops in *The Everlasting Man* is ‘the principal locus for his Christological contribution’.²⁸

²⁷ He is also following in the footsteps of Newman, who affirmed the view that ‘pagan literature, philosophy, and mythology, properly understood’ are ‘but a preparation for the gospel’, Newman, *Apologia*, 106.

²⁸ Nichols, *Chesterton*, 149-59 (149).

Chesterton's first major line of argument, the *reductio ad absurdum*, is clearly sign-posted and is put primarily in negative terms, as a deconstruction of rationalist attempts to explain Christ and humanity in naturalistic terms. His secondary line of argument is not sign-posted and is conveyed largely through the way the book is structured, and through Chesterton's rhetoric, imagery, and style. It communicates in positive terms a vision of Christ as the fulfilment of the religious history of the world before his birth, and of the religious, philosophical, and mythological yearnings of humanity.²⁹

Chesterton explains his purpose thus: 'I do desire to help the reader to see Christendom from the outside in the sense of seeing it as a whole, against the background of other historic things; just as I desire him to see humanity as a whole against the background of natural things. And I say that in both cases, when seen thus, they stand out from their background like supernatural things.'³⁰ This second line of argument combines with the first line of argument to serve the normalisation/defamiliarization purpose of his apologetics strategy, serving his overall aim of transforming his readers' vision of both humanity and Christianity. The structure of the book is, in part, designed to create this change of vision in the reader. That is one of the reasons why it does not follow the conventional outline of a history of the world or of a study of comparative religion or of an introduction to Christ or of an introduction to church history, but instead combines elements of all of those.³¹

Chesterton's second line of argument raises several questions, however. One concerns how he sees this fulfilment as having been continued since the life of Christ. Chesterton's three chapters on the Church (primarily the Roman Catholic Church) present

²⁹ See Wills, *Chesterton*, 194-99.

³⁰ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 151.

³¹ See Ker, *Chesterton*, 516-30.

it as, in effect, continuing the Incarnation, as the continuation of Christ's mission and of the fulfilment he brought to the quests of mythology and philosophy.³² In relating Christ and the Church in this way, Chesterton is following a well-grounded Catholic tradition.³³ This is a mystical and sacramental view, but he leaves his sacramental mysticism implicit, because he is writing apologetics. It can be discerned in the shape of his argument, but on the surface of his text he largely stays within the bounds of natural theology, in this section of the book, except in the concluding peroration of the first of these three chapters, in which he breaks out to assert that 'the only explanation' he can find for 'the faith' is that 'like Pallas from the brain of Jove, it had indeed come forth from the mind of God'; even here he uses classical rather than Christian imagery, avoiding Christian religious language.³⁴

Historical argument and theological conclusion

In answer to the question with which I began this chapter, I have argued that it is the combination of Chesterton's natural and his narrative theology, together with his approach to apologetics, which dictates the relationship between the structure of this book and its subject. In sum, the surprising structure of the book is determined by the combination of three central aspects of Chesterton's theology.

First, he finds arguments that work within the self-chosen limits of his natural theology, which leads him to the largely negative thrust of his primary line of argument: 'The argument which is meant to be the backbone of the book is of the kind called the *reductio ad absurdum*. It suggests that the results of assuming the rationalist thesis are

³² *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 346-93. See Hollis, *Mind of Chesterton*, 262-71.

³³ See, for example, Catherine Pickstock, *After writing: on the liturgical consummation of philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 253-73.

³⁴ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 362-63.

more irrational than ours; but to prove it we must assume that thesis.³⁵ Natural theology is compatible with the *reductio ad absurdum* argument, whereas it would not have been compatible with lines of argument which required him to discuss aspects of systematic theology. By framing his primary argument as a critique of rationalism, he can use the deficiencies he discovers in his opponents' arguments as pointers towards the trustworthiness of his own approach. This makes up for the limitations his natural theology imposes on his ability to argue on theological grounds; spending so much of his time on his opponents' ground enables him to avoid needing to invoke overtly Christian theology that relies on revelation.

Secondly, because his natural theology limits him in relation to the Incarnation, he exploits the interdisciplinary aspect of natural theology to bring in history, psychology, and other disciplines to provide evidence that guides the reader towards essentially theological conclusions.³⁶ In the Prefatory Note to the book, he writes, 'the view suggested is historical rather than theological';³⁷ what that actually means is that he is using historical (and other non-theological) evidence to point towards theological conclusions.

Thirdly, he chooses to use both propositional arguments and theological narrative, moving from the former to the latter at the most important, climactic moments in the book, so that overall he presents the story of Christ as the centre-piece of an outline religious history of the world.³⁸ His second major line of argument utilises the resources of narrative theology within the terms of natural theology; it takes as its end-point Christ as the fulfilment of theology, philosophy, and the spiritual desires of humanity, incorporating mystical, literary, and psychological elements into an extended theological narrative which

³⁵ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 318.

³⁶ See Schwartz, 'Theologies of History,' 65-83.

³⁷ *EM*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 141.

³⁸ See: Barker, *Chesterton*, 257-58; David L. Derus, 'Chesterton and W.B. Yeats: Vision, System and Rhetoric,' *The Chesterton Review* II, no. 2 (1976): 197-214 (209).

expresses his theology of history.³⁹ This use of theological narrative, in some degree, anticipates Niebuhr's 'two-aspect theory of history', with its distinction between 'internal' and 'external' history; Chesterton, like Niebuhr, sees 'Christian faith' as in 'partnership with history'.⁴⁰ He argues from the effect Christ has had on the world, and from the historical records of Christ's life and teaching, proposing that his impact on history has been so great that he cannot have been a mere man, that his words and works are inexplicable on rationalist assumptions, and that if Christ combined teaching and a life-story which defy naturalistic explanations together with a unique impact on human history, then Christ must be more than just human. Chesterton does not try to explain Christian doctrines concerning the Incarnation. Rather, he reports its effects in history, that is, in the shared experience of humanity; he frames his arguments so as to attempt to provoke the transformation of vision that is at the heart of his apologetics.

The Incarnation as historical phenomenon

I will now consider other instances where Chesterton's work encounters the Incarnation and the role natural theology plays in how he approaches it, in his social criticism, for instance, such as *What's Wrong with the World*. In this work, he discusses various contemporary secular ideas of progress, which he finds highly unsatisfactory, and proposes a solution: 'The only logical cure for all this is the assertion of a human ideal. In dealing with this, I will try to be as little transcendental as is consistent with reason; it is enough to say that unless we have some doctrine of a divine man, all abuses may be excused, since

³⁹ See Kenner, *Paradox*, 86-91.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, 'The Story of our Life,' in Hauerwas and Jones, *Why narrative?*, 21-44 (40, 29).

evolution may turn them into uses.’ His solution is to use Christ as ‘a human ideal’ to guide social progress.⁴¹

By insisting that he will remain ‘consistent with reason’, he confirms that he is restricting himself to natural theology. He goes on:

The most important man on earth is the perfect man who is not there. The Christian religion has specially uttered the ultimate sanity of Man, says Scripture, who shall judge the incarnate and human truth. Our lives and laws are not judged by divine superiority, but simply by human perfection. It is man, says Aristotle, who is the measure. It is the Son of Man, says Scripture, who shall judge the quick and the dead.⁴²

Here, he sets aside theological questions in order to bring Christ into the discussion at a human, social, and political level. Having done so he introduces a biblical phrase (‘judge the quick and the dead’) to suggest, implicitly, a more spiritual aspect to the discussion, even though he is carefully avoiding such an aspect in his explicit argument. Before flirting with that biblical language, however, he has already reassured his readers that he is speaking about judgement ‘by human perfection’, with reference to ‘the ultimate sanity of Man’, and not by ‘divine superiority’; thus he keeps his overt discussion within the bounds of natural theology while covertly suggesting a larger and more spiritual dimension to it.

Another way he can bring the Incarnation into play in his apologetics, as a historical phenomenon, is to consider its effects, as an idea, on history and culture. A characteristic example is his declaration, in *St. Thomas Aquinas*, that in Aquinas’ day, ‘the Incarnation had become the idea that is central in our civilisation.’⁴³ Treating the Incarnation at the level of ideas, without making truth claims about it, enables him to consider it apart from revelation.

⁴¹ Chesterton, *WWWTW*, 22.

⁴² Chesterton, *WWWTW*, 23.

⁴³ *Aquinas*, in Chesterton, *CW*, II, 493.

In his biographical writing, Chesterton can discuss the faith-informed views of Thomas Aquinas or Francis of Assisi on the Incarnation while averring that his own position, for the purposes of those books, is that of a neutral enquirer (see chapter four). He can also have characters in his poems, novels, or plays express explicitly Christian views on Incarnational theology without explicitly aligning his own views, as author, with those of his characters. Thus, for instance, in *The Judgement of Dr. Johnson*, Samuel Johnson speaks words which rely on Christian revelation: ‘these are men; these are fallen men; these are they for whom their Omnipotent Creator did not disdain to die,’⁴⁴ but, so far as his work as an apologist is concerned, Chesterton does not explicitly claim those words and the faith they embody for his own.

His biographies and his creative writing allow him to engage in this kind of indirect apologetics, with the characters he writes about discussing the Incarnation from the perspective of faith while he presents himself as writing from the viewpoint of an unbiased investigator, not out of his own faith. As the above examples show, his first policy is often to restrict his discussion of the Incarnation to the historical and phenomenological level. He is able to make this a positive use of the restrictions he places on himself because treating it simply as a human and historical phenomenon makes it very much simpler to bring Christ into the indirect apologetics of his political, social, historical, and literary writings, while keeping those discussions within a framework of natural theology.

⁴⁴ *The Judgement of Dr Johnson*, in Chesterton, *CW*, XI, 295.

Incarnation, Intuition, Revelation

In the discussion of *The Everlasting Man* above, I have referred to a second line of argument Chesterton uses with reference to the Incarnation, which presents it in terms of fulfilment of intuition, imagination, and humanity's deepest longings, and as at the heart of what is, in his view, the paradoxical nature of reality.⁴⁵ I will now consider his use of that argument in other works, for instance, his introduction to O.F. Dudley's *Will Men be like Gods?* He writes here:

The spiritual hungers of humanity are never merely hungers for humanity. . . . The proof of this is not peculiar to theology or even to religion; it is equally apparent in poetry and all imaginative arts. The child in the field, if left entirely to himself, does not merely wish to find the perfect parish ruled over by the perfect parish council. The child in the field wants to find fairyland.

He moves from the child's dreams and intuitions to those of the artist, brings values into his argument, and concludes that all these desires point to one fulfilment:

Now just as that vague hope that we call romance or poetry points to a paradise even if it be called elf-land, so this vague charity or sense of sacred human values really points to a higher standard of sacredness. We have to look at men in a certain light in order to love them all; and the most agnostic of us know that it is not exactly identical with the light of common day. But the mystery is immediately explained when we turn towards that light itself; which is the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.⁴⁶

His interpretation of human and artistic intuitions is shaped so as to set up a final move which brings in the Incarnation as the explanation of what has been discussed before. He does not present arguments to justify his insertion of revelation into his writing; he leaves the justification implicit, in the structure and content of the preceding text of the article, and in the rhetorical power of the final passage. The force of his persuasion is in two parts: the logical argument which precedes the final climax, and the imaginative and emotional

⁴⁵ As Kenner points out. Kenner, *Paradox*, 86-99.

⁴⁶ 'Utopias,' in Chesterton, *M.C.*, 156-62 (158, 161).

appeal to which he moves at the end. The Incarnation is revealed to be the unannounced endpoint towards which the argument has been moving all along, whether the reader realised this or not.

In a very different context, Chesterton makes a similarly sudden move into encounter with the Incarnation at the end of *The Man who was Thursday*: the enigmatic figure of Sunday declares himself to be ‘the peace of God’ and then: ‘the great face grew to an awful size ... everything went black. Only in the blackness before it entirely destroyed his brain he seemed to hear a distant voice saying a commonplace text that he had heard somewhere, “Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?”’⁴⁷ The last words take the text, in an allusive manner, to Incarnational theology: they are the words of Christ at Gethsemane,⁴⁸ heard as Sunday disappears.

This pattern is repeated throughout his work, for instance in the ending to his essay on Thomas More, which at its climax abandons natural theology with the words, ‘He had done with all descents and downward goings, and what had been himself vanished from men's eyes almost in the manner of his Master, who being lifted up shall draw all men after Him.’⁴⁹ Chesterton’s book on Blake ends in a similar way: in the final peroration, he writes, ‘the more we know of higher things the more palpable and incarnate we shall find them; that the form filling the heavens is the likeness of the appearance of a man.’⁵⁰ These examples illustrate Chesterton’s characteristic way of moving into engagement with the Incarnation: he creates a sense of sudden encounter, as the reader is abruptly moved from one frame of reference to another. This swift movement is one of the ways Chesterton

⁴⁷ Chesterton, *Thursday*, 180, 183.

⁴⁸ Matthew 20:22, perhaps a slightly inexact remembrance of the Authorised Version (Chesterton quoted from memory).

⁴⁹ ‘St. Thomas More,’ in *W&S*, in Chesterton, *CW*, III, 505-09 (509).

⁵⁰ Chesterton, *Blake*, 209-10. See also the closing passage of ‘Omar and the Sacred Vine,’ in *Heretics*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 91-96 (96). Or the final words of ‘Why I Believe in Christianity,’ in *Blatchford*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 381-85 (385).

generates the shock and surprise that are central to his apologetics, as a way of startling his readers into seeing the Incarnation anew. These Incarnational encounters predominantly occur in the final perorations at the end of Chesterton's books, articles, and essays, although occasionally in the smaller perorations with which he ends most of his chapters.⁵¹

In certain books, such as *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton uses a longer build up to set the stage for the final encounter with the Incarnation. In *Orthodoxy* he works by first criticizing 'modern attempts to diminish or to explain away the divinity of Christ'⁵² and then arguing against them in ways that involve not just reason, but also imagination and the emotions. When he arrives at the Incarnation, he discusses it in original ways, from unusual angles, and especially by appealing to imagination and emotion, rather than using conventional theological modes of discourse. For instance, he puts forward propositions regarding the Incarnation which involve a call to imaginative sympathy:

If the divinity is true it is certainly terribly revolutionary. That a good man may have his back to the wall is no more than we knew already; but that God could have His back to the wall is a boast for all insurgents for ever. Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete. Christianity alone has felt that God, to be wholly God, must have been a rebel as well as a king. Alone of all creeds, Christianity has added courage to the virtues of the creator.

He does not claim that there was any logical necessity for Christianity to add courage to the virtues of the creator. He phrases this passage in terms of intuitions: 'Christianity ... has felt ... Christianity alone has felt ...' His rhetoric appeals to the romantic imagination,

⁵¹ Michael Hurley partly misses this point when he suggests that 'All of his [Chesterton's] books, and most of his individual chapters and essays conclude with an efflorescent whirl ... a distillation and an extension of what has gone before.' Instead, a number of those efflorescent whirls involve a rapid move into a new frame of reference, as Chesterton brings the reader into encounter with the Incarnation; they do not just distil and extend 'what has gone before'. Hurley is right, however, in remarking that at these moments, 'The argument suddenly grows in scale and becomes more vivid in its colouring, more dramatic in its appeal.' Hurley, *Chesterton*, 70.

⁵² *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 342.

and the emotions, with the picture of God as a rebel with ‘His back to the wall’. Chesterton then goes on briefly to retell some of the story of the Passion of Christ, asking the reader to picture the scene of Christ in Gethsemane in emotional terms: ‘there is a distinct emotional suggestion ... human horror ... When the world shook, it was at the cry from the cross.’ He ends with a paradox: ‘God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.’⁵³ It is one of the most powerful examples of his attempt to shock his readers into a transformation of vision.

On certain occasions he manages to combine his first, historical, line of argument regarding the Incarnation, described above, with this second, more intuitive approach, which sees the Incarnation in terms of fulfilment. He did this, for example in an article he wrote in 1909 for *The Hibbert Journal* in answer to the sceptical biblical criticism of a Congregationalist minister called Mr Roberts. Chesterton begins his article by setting out the usual composite positioning of his apologetics:

I will follow his [Mr Roberts’] example and divest myself of any old world disguises of reverence; and I will speak as he does of the actual Jesus as He appears in the New Testament; not as He appears to a believer, but as He appears to anybody; as He appeared to me when I was an agnostic: as He appeared and still appears to pagans when they first read about Him. ... Let it be understood that I am speaking for the sake of argument of a hypothetical human Jesus in the Syrian documents, and not of that divine personality in whom I believe.⁵⁴

He then proves, to his own satisfaction, that Jesus Christ is not explicable in those purely human terms. He ends by putting what he calls ‘my sentiment on the whole subject’, and says that ‘if I put myself hypothetically’ into an attitude of belief, ‘the case becomes curiously arresting’ (note the crucial ‘hypothetically’ here):

If I say, “Suppose the Divine did really walk and talk upon the earth, what should we be likely to think of it?” then ... I think we should

⁵³ *Orthodoxy*, in Chesterton, *CW*, I, 343.

⁵⁴ Chesterton, ‘Jesus or Christ?’, 95-107 (96).

see in such a being exactly the perplexities that we see in the central figure of the Gospels: ...

Chesterton lists a series of features of the life and teaching of Christ which might have been conjectured, hypothetically, as likely features of the life and teaching of an incarnate divinity, before such a figure's arrival, concluding:

I think, in short, that he would give us a sensation that he was turning all our standards upside down, and yet also a sensation that he had undeniably put them the right way up. So, if I had been a Greek sage or an Arab poet before Christ, I should have figured to myself, in a dream, what would actually happen if this earth bore secretly somewhere the father of gods and men.⁵⁵

Having begun the article by disclaiming his own beliefs and arguing analytically against sceptical biblical criticism, from what he depicts as a neutral viewpoint, Chesterton takes the liberty of presenting himself 'hypothetically' as the spokesman for 'a Greek sage or an Arab poet before Christ', a rather different but equally neutral position. By such means he keeps his discussions of the Incarnation within the boundaries of natural theology.

Overall, in Chesterton's other writings he tends to engage with the Incarnation in the same three ways as in *The Everlasting Man*. Most of the time, he presents himself as distancing himself from his own beliefs and practising apologetics as a neutral enquirer. When working in this mode he treats the Incarnation as a historical phenomenon. Alongside that approach he adopts a subtler, less explicit mode of argument, in which he suggests that the Incarnation fulfils the deepest yearnings, hopes, and intuitions of human nature, and of philosophy and mythology. The very broad scope of this line of argument gives him great opportunities to move from discussion of art, literature, and social issues to consideration of Christian theology, including Incarnational theology. Finally, there are the

⁵⁵ Chesterton, 'Jesus or Christ?', 95-107 (106-07).

climactic moments when his final perorations abandon his usual restraint and address the Incarnation in the language of revelation.

In relation to the worldview aspect of his apologetics, Chesterton's critique of rationalistic explanations of the Incarnation is part of his attack on secular worldviews; his imaginative line of argument in terms of fulfilment presents the Incarnation as the keystone of a Christian worldview which can satisfy humanity's deepest needs and intuitions; his climactic perorations provide a direct attempt at persuasion, seeking to startle his readers into a change of vision by which they come to see the Incarnation as credible, and hence a Christian worldview as credible, through rhetorical and imaginative modes of argument.

Natural theology's road to the Incarnation

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate that Chesterton's approach to the Incarnation is conditioned and shaped by his reliance on natural theology. I have argued that, when he approaches the person of Christ, he deliberately depicts natural theology breaking down, to demonstrate that it is not adequate to account for the Incarnation. This characteristically happens at the conclusions of his arguments, in the form of perorations which provide not just a logical conclusion but also an emotional and imaginative climax.

His use of natural theology as his primary mode of communication with his readers means that he cannot explore Incarnational theology in any depth, or several other areas of systematic theology, for that matter; this is one of the major limitations of his work and restricts the scope of his apologetics considerably. Because natural theology is his chosen path on which to journey alongside his readers, the Incarnation can only be an end-point, not a new road to travel. He leaves analysis of the doctrines of the Incarnation and

Atonement to systematic theologians, in the same way that he avoids discussion of other doctrines which are based on revelation; this leaves his apologetics very limited in relation to large areas of Christian doctrine.

Understanding that his view of his own role as an apologist causes him to limit himself to natural theology clarifies his engagement with Incarnational theology considerably, explaining why it is so restricted, and also so geared towards imagination, rhetoric and persuasion. Therefore, the role of natural theology enables the insights of previous scholars to be set in a coherent framework. For instance, Yves Denis goes so far as to say, ‘the image of Christ appears whenever the subject of any of Chesterton’s books comes to a head.’⁵⁶ This observation is somewhat exaggerated, but true of a number of those books. Denis, however, is unable to set his remark in a theological context which explains Chesterton’s treatment of the Incarnation.⁵⁷ Natural theology, in my view, provides that framework: it explains why Chesterton’s overall goal is to transform his audience’s vision, rather than to argue for particular doctrines (see chapter four). He cannot do this without reference to the Incarnation, which is central to any Christian worldview, so he must, in the course of his apologetics, give his readers an account of the Incarnation, approached via natural theology, which is accessible to the non-religious reader, while also challenging secular worldviews.

The Everlasting Man, as discussed above, shows Chesterton using the full range of his resources. Rather than stray into systematic theology, he brings his readers into encounter with Incarnational theology by narrating the effects, as he sees them, of the Incarnation in history, that is, in the shared experience of humanity; his natural and his

⁵⁶ Denis, ‘Theological Background,’ 57-72 (67).

⁵⁷ Denis does discuss Chesterton and paradox in relation to the Incarnation, but without relating this discussion to Chesterton’s natural theology, Denis, *Paradoxe*, 287-326. See also Nichols, *Chesterton*, 90-106.

narrative theology combine to provide the conceptual resources he needs to mediate the theological through the historical so that he can position his arguments on grounds accessible to non-religious readers for almost the entirety of his text. He adeptly exploits the interdisciplinary potential of both narrative and natural theology to bring in history, psychology, and other disciplines to provide evidence that guides the reader towards essentially theological conclusions; his understanding of narrative theology enables him to construct a theological narrative of religious history which remains within the boundaries of natural theology for almost all of the book, excepting certain climactic passages.

Chesterton's use of natural theology is at the heart of his attempt to bring non-religious readers with him into encounter with the Incarnation; he uses rhetorical and other techniques to try to open the eyes of their imaginations to see the Incarnation as something which cannot be explained within any perspective which does not admit the supernatural. In addition, natural theology provides a way for him to bring theology and history into dialogue in his discussions of the Incarnation, often using narrative as the locus of their encounter, while very largely avoiding questions regarding historicity.

This mode of argumentation lays itself open to criticism, as the reader might well expect questions regarding historicity and the miraculous to be addressed with arguments more substantial than Chesterton offers. Academic readers might also question the emotional and imaginative aspects of Chesterton's writing. In his appeal to the imagination and the emotions (see chapter four), there is once more an echo of Newman, who wrote: 'I do not want to be converted by a smart syllogism; if I am asked to convert others by it, I say plainly I do not care to overcome their reason without touching their hearts.'⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Newman, *GA*, 330. See also 239-40.

Chesterton's appeal to the imagination and to the heart follows in Newman's footsteps, however, although he does use rational argument alongside his narrative, rhetorical, and other imaginative methods of persuasion, he does not construct substantial, systematic, logical structures of argument in the way that Newman did. He does, instead, use his distinctive natural theology to combine narrative theology, rhetoric, and other innovative approaches to introduce the Incarnation to the non-religious reader, and to link Incarnational theology to his cultural apologetics in unusual and striking ways which challenge secular worldviews and present the Incarnation as the central focus of an alternative Christian worldview.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

Chesterton and natural theology

This thesis began with a research question designed to address an issue which has been persistently problematical in Chesterton scholarship: ‘Did Chesterton create a substantial, coherent body of thought?’ I have argued for an answer in the affirmative, seeking to demonstrate that he developed an idiosyncratic, often implicit natural theology, which comprises a body of thought both coherent and substantial, and then used that theology at the heart of his work as an apologist, both his direct and his indirect apologetics.

In chapter one, I put forward this concise working understanding of natural theology, for the purposes of this thesis:

Natural theology may be understood as a form of theology whose methods and resources do not rely on divine revelation or any particular faith commitment, but on the abilities and understandings human beings have by nature, and on the truths which can be known from nature. It may use only methods and resources which do not depend on any kind of divine revelation; it may use any theological methods or resources which do not depend on divine revelation.

In chapters two to five, I have endeavoured to delineate the structure and scope of Chesterton’s natural theology, the ‘methods and resources’ involved in it, and his use of it in apologetics and in relation to the Incarnation; chapters two and three, in particular, provide evidence to support the claim that at the heart of Chesterton’s work is a theology which can clearly be described in the terms of this working understanding.

The arguments put forward in this thesis, insofar as they are correct, refine the relationship between this working understanding of natural theology and Chesterton's work, in three main areas. First, I have proposed that he uses natural theology as a medium of communication to enable him to translate or transpose Christian concepts into forms accessible to the non-religious audiences of his apologetics; that is to say, he uses natural theology as way of mediating Christian ideas into a framework and a terminology accessible to non-religious dialogue partners and readers.¹

Secondly, I have argued that his use of natural theology enables him to vary the emphasis of his apologetics from the overtly Christian to the more broadly theistic: for instance, when trying to create an alliance between Christianity and the common man and woman (see chapter four), he stresses the common ground between natural religion, natural theology, and Christianity; on other occasions, he aligns natural theology more closely with Christian ideas, often as part of leading his readers towards encounter with the Incarnation (see chapter five). Thirdly, I have suggested that the various contexts and genres in which he writes demonstrate the capacity of natural theology to mediate Christian ideas in very varied literary and rhetorical forms across broad areas of cultural engagement.

In relation to these three areas in particular, this thesis provides a case study in natural theology and its use in apologetics, which offers support to those who argue for broader definitions or descriptions of natural theology. In historical terms, Chesterton was championing an expansive natural theology (without calling it that), at a time when restrictive views of natural theology were in the ascendant, when, indeed, natural theology was very much under a cloud (see chapter one). The version of implicit natural theology he

¹ See further Pickering, 'Medium of Communication,' 660-70.

was creating a century ago is, perhaps surprisingly, very much in tune with certain twenty-first century descriptions of natural theology, such as that of Alister McGrath, who has written that natural theology is usually ‘intellectually suggestive, not compelling,’ and points to ‘a fundamental resonance or congruence between experience of the world and a theistic framework.’² Chesterton’s writing very evidently seeks to demonstrate that ‘fundamental resonance’ between ‘experience of the world’ and an ultimately Christian but always ‘theistic framework’; in this area, as in others, there falls over his work the long shadow of John Henry Newman.

Chesterton, Newman, and worldview

I have sought to provide evidence throughout this thesis of parallels to and echoes of Newman’s ideas in Chesterton’s work. Although it is very difficult to prove influence, I have tried to provide evidence sufficient to show that, in many respects, the framework of ideas within which Chesterton operates is similar to the framework of ideas within which Newman operated, and that Chesterton’s reading of Newman was so substantial that he had ample opportunity to have imbibed this framework of ideas from Newman. Given that Chesterton had read a great deal of Newman by an early stage of his career, it is reasonable to infer significant influence.³ Chesterton does not just follow in Newman’s tracks, however; he adapts and develops Newman’s thinking. As noted in chapter three, the structure of Chesterton’s theological epistemology largely parallels that of Newman’s, but Chesterton introduces certain innovations: he pays more attention than Newman does to

² McGrath, *Re-imagining Nature*, 119.

³ See chapter one, and the research, referenced there, of Ker, in particular, and Gilley, Quinn and Deavel.

the communal aspects of knowledge, and to the cognitive roles of emotion and of humour; he builds a concept of the imagination as a faculty with the capacity to be transformed and also to transform human perception. He stays closer to Newman in his treatment of reason, and of the importance of sacramental mysticism in relation to reason, and in the emphasis he places on experience.

Newman's influence may well be revealed in other aspects of Chesterton's work. Newman writes of Christianity as 'a religion in addition to the religion of nature ... [it] does not supersede or contradict it', claims that Christ always treated 'Christianity as the completion and supplement of Natural Religion,' and adds that those who are likely to respond to arguments for Christianity are those 'whose minds are properly prepared for it' by being 'imbued with the religious opinions and sentiments which I have identified with Natural Religion.'⁴ Chesterton, perhaps taking Newman's ideas as his cue, develops his own idiosyncratic natural theology extensively, with its focus on wonder and paradox, so as to prepare his readers' minds, in many different contexts, for his apologetics of defamiliarization and normalisation.

In this enterprise, as discussed in chapters one and four, one of the central planks of Chesterton's approach is the 'method of the hypothesis', which he unites with Newman's use of 'converging probabilities' and 'cumulation of probabilities'⁵ as a guide to truth. Chesterton takes as his primary field of operations theological anthropology, or, in Newman's terms, 'the voice of mankind ... the course of the world ... of human life and human affairs', the need to 'test, interpret, and correct' what 'the universal testimony of

⁴ Newman, *GA*, 302, 303, 323.

⁵ Newman, *GA*, 254, 233.

mankind ... the history of society and the world' present 'to us for belief', in relation to 'the knowledge of God'.⁶

In Chesterton's own terminology, he tries to construct a complex case for 'the spiritual theory' of Christianity, as a whole, 'not because of this argument or that argument, but because the theory, when it is adopted, works out everywhere;' he claims that the case for Christianity 'rests ... on the fact that the thing works out. We put on the theory like a magic hat, and history becomes translucent like a house of glass;' he argues that Christianity provides an 'intelligible picture of the world' and makes the world 'suddenly rational', unlike competing ideologies such as materialist scepticism;⁷ he is an advocate for Christianity because, in his experience, he finds 'life to be logical and workable with these beliefs and illogical and unworkable without them.'⁸ I have suggested that these and other aspects of his apologetics methodology amount to an attempt to construct a precursor of worldview apologetics, before that term had been invented.⁹

One of Chesterton's most important innovations in this regard was his development of the use of narrative in apologetics, in both his fiction and his non-fiction. The significance of narrative for worldview apologetics is emphasized in the work of modern theologians such as Alister McGrath, who has written: 'Christianity is fundamentally a historically rooted interpretative and transforming narrative that gives rise to a system of concepts and values that provide an integrated framework of meaning in life. It establishes connections between God, Christ, and believers that are woven together within a coherent

⁶ Newman, *GA*, 303.

⁷ 'The Return of the Angels,' *Daily News*, 14 March 1903, in Chesterton, *DN*, II, 22-26.

⁸ *Daily News*, in 1903, quoted in Barker, *Chesterton*, 169.

⁹ Alister McGrath wrote in 2019, 'There is growing interest in using the term "worldview" to refer to any attempt, whether religious or secular, to make sense of life's big questions.' Chesterton was a very early forerunner of this 'growing' interest in 'worldview'. See McGrath, *Dawkins, Lewis*, 11.

worldview.’¹⁰ McGrath’s words indicate the importance of the relationship between narrative and worldview, a relationship which Chesterton made use of in varied and creative ways.

The numerous genres in which he wrote gave him opportunities to present aspects of a Christian worldview indirectly, through historical, political, and fictional writing, through social criticism, poetry and biography, alongside his works of direct apologetics. His understanding of the importance of the accumulation of evidence and of converging arguments (see chapter four) indicates an awareness that the many arguments and narratives which make up his work have their full value, not in isolation, but in the complex, multi-layered, multi-faceted case that they collectively make for a Christian worldview. Chesterton’s approach was relatively little concerned with individual theological doctrines and much more concerned with trying to change his audience’s ideas about what a credible ‘big picture’ of reality, or worldview, might look like, so as to show that a Christian understanding of life as a whole was richer and more convincing than any alternatives.

It may help to consider Chesterton’s apologetics strategies in relation to Charles Taylor’s concept of the ‘social imaginary’ As Taylor puts it, the ‘social imaginary’ is ‘the way that we collectively imagine ... our social life in the contemporary Western world.’¹¹ Taylor argues that ‘once we are well installed in the modern social imaginary, it seems the only possible one, the only one which makes sense.’¹² Chesterton was trying to challenge the power of the secular ‘social imaginary’ he found dominant in the West, gathering resources of reason, imagination, emotion, communal knowledge, mystery, and narrative

¹⁰ McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*, 124.

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 146.

¹² Taylor, *Secular Age*, 168.

to try to enable his contemporaries to imagine another kind of ‘social imaginary’ and so to be liberated from a secular worldview and enabled to discover a Christian alternative.

What analogies about social imaginaries miss out is the spirit in which Chesterton executed this strategy of altering perceptions. His own, very personal, natural theology is so much based on wonder and joy that the ways he tries to shift his readers’ views of life involve a great deal of wonder, enthusiasm, excitement, drama, and paradox, and a humour that stems from that sense of joy, caused by his understanding of the wonder of creation. This aspect of his natural theology is not reducible to an academic formula, yet it is an important aspect of his broadening of the scope of apologetics.

Chesterton’s influence on worldview apologetics may have been much greater than has been realised, particularly through his influence on C.S. Lewis,¹³ who went on to be enormously popular. To see how this may have been the case, it is helpful to refer to Alister McGrath’s description of Lewis’s approach: ‘to argue that a viewpoint derived from the Bible and the Christian tradition was able to offer a more satisfactory explanation of common human experience than its rivals – especially the atheism he had once himself espoused.’¹⁴ This is very much the approach which Chesterton followed, and its use by Lewis may reflect, at least in part, Chesterton’s influence.

At least since Wilfrid Ward’s review of *Orthodoxy* in 1909,¹⁵ the relationship between Newman and Chesterton, in connection with apologetics, has been a subject for scholarly discussion.¹⁶ I have tried to contribute to this conversation by mapping out some of the possible links between the two, and also relating the discussion to the development

¹³ See Lewis, *Surprised by joy*, 220-22, 260.

¹⁴ McGrath, *Dawkins, Lewis*, 17-18.

¹⁵ Wilfrid Ward, ‘Mr Chesterton among the prophets’, in *The Dublin Review*, January 1909, collected in Ward, *Men and Matters*, 105-44.

¹⁶ See chapter one and, in particular, Ker, *Chesterton*, especially 277-78, 329-37, 620.

of worldview apologetics. To the extent that this thesis is correct, its study of the relationship between Chesterton's thought and Newman's may help to give a clearer perspective on Chesterton's place in the history of apologetics; it may also help to show how Newman's influence reached through Chesterton to the generation of Christian intellectuals who were strongly influenced by Chesterton's writing (see chapter one).

Chesterton and approaches to apologetics

Consider Chesterton's pioneering role in narrative theology. Discussions of narrative theology usually start no further back than Richard Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation*, written in 1941.¹⁷ I have argued, however, that Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*, written in 1925, constitutes a substantial exercise in narrative theology, in the form of apologetics encased in a theological narrative which presents a theology of history, and his *Orthodoxy*, written in 1908, can be categorised in terms of narrative theology, in the form of apologetics embodied in a personal narrative. Insofar as this is correct, he did important work in this field and future histories of narrative theology will need to take Chesterton into account. In addition, his work has a significance for studies of other aspects of the relationship between theology and literature.¹⁸

As outlined in chapter three, Chesterton was aware of the significance of emotional knowledge and of mystery at a time when Modernist rationalism was at its zenith. He insisted on the importance of communal knowledge, tradition and the collective wisdom of ordinary people when individualist ideas of intellectual debate were firmly in the ascendant. The intellectual respectability of this strategy of Chesterton's with regard to

¹⁷ See, for example, Hauerwas and Jones, *Why narrative?*, 5-6, 21. See also McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*, 36-39.

¹⁸ See chapter three.

reason and mystery may have been less apparent at the time than it is with hindsight. In certain respects, his attitude to mystery might be said to have anticipated the later ‘return to mystery’ advocated by the distinguished leaders of the *nouvelle théologie*. As Hans Boersma puts it, ‘*Nouvelle théologie* was keen to recover “mystery” as a central theological category.’¹⁹ Decades earlier, Chesterton had a very similar ambition, put in rather less sophisticated terms. In books such as *Orthodoxy* he was working for the ‘re-enchantment’ of the world before Max Weber had even pronounced: ‘the world is disenchanted.’²⁰

More recently, support for the importance of mystery is evident in a broad range of intellectual disciplines. For example, scientific writers such as Iain McGilchrist have made arguments to this effect. McGilchrist suggests that ‘the paradox of philosophy is that we need to get beyond what can be grasped or explicitly stated, but the drift of philosophy is always and inevitably back towards the explicit.’²¹ That endorsement of the ‘need to get beyond what can be grasped or explicitly stated’ is in line with Chesterton’s approach, a century ago. Philosophers such as Richard Kearney have advocated a broadly sacramental and mystical approach: Kearney writes of the importance of ‘sacramental vision’, ‘sacramental imagination’ and ‘a sacramental return to the holiness of the everyday’, explaining that ‘sacramental return is a retrieval of the extraordinary in the ordinary.’²² All of this resonates with aspects of Chesterton’s sacramental mysticism.²³ So does the view of paradox adopted by contemporary theologians such as Andrew Davison. Consider Davison’s observation: ‘Christian theology contains paradoxes, and in the long run this

¹⁹ Boersma, *Nouvelle théologie and sacramental ontology*, 5-6.

²⁰ Weber, *Max Weber: essays in sociology*, 129-57 (139).

²¹ McGilchrist, *The master and his emissary*, 179; Speakman, ‘Extraordinary of ordinary.’

²² Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: returning to God after God* (New York, N.Y. ; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2010), 85-100 (99-100, 85-86).

²³ See chapter two, also Speakman, ‘Extraordinary of ordinary.’

goes in our favour. Our knottier or stranger doctrines do not impose paradoxes upon an uncomplicated reality; the paradoxes are there already. As every human being knows, life throws up mysteries and contradictions all the time.’²⁴ Davison’s words echo those of Chesterton (see chapter two).

Chesterton’s championing of the role of imagination also anticipated a twenty-first century movement. In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the theological role of the imagination, to the point at which an eminent theologian such as Rowan Williams can confidently assert, ‘no system of perceiving and receiving the world can fail to depend upon imagination;’²⁵ numerous other theologians concur.²⁶ When Chesterton was writing, the Enlightenment exaltation of reason and disparagement of imagination still held much greater sway than they do today, in spite of the influence of Romanticism. Echoes of Samuel Johnson’s famous dismissal of the imagination as a ‘licentious and vagrant faculty, unsusceptible of limitations and impatient of restraint’²⁷ were still to be heard, meaning that the use of the imagination in theology was liable to be seen as improper and untrustworthy, at best, or simply dismissed. Nevertheless, Chesterton, like Newman, claimed a central theological role for the imagination.

Moreover, Chesterton’s attacks on secular rationalism now seem prophetic. John Hughes summed up a twenty-first century view of rationalism thus:

²⁴ Andrew Davison, ‘Christian Reason and Christian Community’, in *Imaginative Apologetics*, 12-28 (21). The reference to ‘Christian Community’ in the title shows Davison’s emphasis on the importance of the community in relation to knowledge; Chesterton had the same emphasis, a hundred years earlier.

²⁵ Rowan Williams, in the Series Introduction to *The Making of the Christian Imagination*, a series of academic books whose existence is itself evidence of this resurgence of interest in the role of the imagination in theology: see Rowan Williams, Series Introduction, in Wood, *Nightmare Goodness*, viii.

²⁶ See: John Hedley Brooke, ‘Imagination and Natural Theology’ in *Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, 539-550. Alison Milbank, ‘Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange,’ in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Andrew Davison (London: SCM, 2011), 31-45 (44-45).

²⁷ In an essay in *The Rambler* in 1751, quoted in McGrath, *Re-imagining Nature*, 47-50.

Modernism [was] characterized by the assertion of human freedom and scientific reason against tradition and authority. ... Now, it seems, the rationalist attempt to establish consensus through an appeal to universal reason has been deconstructed and unmasked as in fact just one particular way of looking at the world (Western, scientific, male, dominating and so on). ... All knowledge is embedded in time and space. Our knowledge always begins not with some universal foundation but “in the middle of things”. So now, the tools of deconstruction ... are no longer simply used against theology, but are turned back upon the secular rationalism that had attacked it.²⁸

A hundred years ago, when that ‘rationalist attempt’ was in full swing, Chesterton was already using ‘the tools of deconstruction’ to subvert the attacks of secular rationalism, and already pointing out the situatedness of all rationalities (see chapters three and four).

Looking back, he seems something of a pioneer in his joyful deconstruction of rationalism.

Overall, Chesterton’s role in the history of apologetics may have been undervalued. He developed a number of dimensions of the practice of apologetics, including the use of natural theology, the role and limitations of reason, the role of imagination, of communal and emotional knowledge, of paradox, of sacramental mysticism and of mystery, of narrative and worldview, of cultural engagement, and of tradition. In addition, he was innovative in: the contexts into which he introduced a Christian apologetic; his unusual models and forms of apologetics; his dextrous positioning of himself as neutral enquirer and sympathetic friend while also defender of the faith;²⁹ and in the many indirect forms of apologetics he was able to incorporate into his work across a number of different genres – fiction, poetry, biography, history, social and political criticism, and journalism. All these aspects of his work broadened the concept of apologetics and invite further study, as does the relationship between style and content in his writing, which I have only been able to touch on briefly.

²⁸ John Hughes, ‘Proofs and Arguments’ in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Andrew Davison (London: SCM, 2011), 3-11 (7-8).

²⁹ See further Pickering, ‘Chesterton, Apologetics, and the Art of Positioning,’ 37-51.

Another important contribution was his ingenuity in furthering the objectives of his apologetics by making associations and alliances. In chapter four, I have commented on his innovative use of the power of association in Christian apologetics, with reference to his efforts to associate Christianity with subversion and adventure, and to the associations implicit in the Father Brown stories. He also constructed a kind of rhetorical pincer movement against secular materialism by creating contrasting alliances, between Christianity and great thinkers, on the one hand, and between Christianity and the common man and woman, on the other, using the breadth of his natural theology to find common ground (see chapter four). He developed apologetics in ways that reached beyond simple argumentation, so that the distinctive nature of his work is seen not only in the way he constructed arguments, but also the way he constructed alliances, associations, and narratives.

Assessing Chesterton

The preceding paragraphs have illustrated some of the ways in which Chesterton's work prefigures aspects of twenty-first century apologetics; it is remarkable that one who could seem so wedded to the past should have anticipated so many future developments.³⁰ This suggests that one of the reasons Chesterton's work has been so hard for the academy to analyse is that the categories within which he worked were often not defined until after his death. 'Narrative theology', 'narrative apologetics', and 'worldview apologetics': all these concepts were formulated long after he wrote and criticism has been slow to apply them to his work, even though, to a considerable extent, he pioneered the substance of what these

³⁰ For examples of these developments, see *Imaginative Apologetics*. See also McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*.

terms describe. Had such categories been applied to his writing, it might have been more clearly understood. Now, in the twenty-first century, scholars and students have a much better conceptual apparatus with which to analyse his work.

The significance and creative potential of his natural theology has, perhaps, been somewhat neglected. So too, it might be said, have the ways he developed that natural theology in the context of cultural, social, and political dialogues. The depth and complexity of the natural theology which resulted may have been obscured by its usual expression in occasional pieces as part of his apologetics, and by the often disordered and uneven quality of his work. Yet, although it is often disorganized, fragmentary, and incomplete, and was never laid out in systematic form, I have endeavoured to argue that Chesterton's natural theology forms a substantial and coherent body of thought, with the potential to provide rich rewards for further research. For this, and for his development of the scope and the methods of apologetics, his work deserves reevaluation by the academy, in spite of its flaws; much of his writing may seem like sketches for paintings which were never finished, but those sketches remain innovative and, in parts, of lasting significance.

The alliances he made raise many questions which could provide avenues for future research. For example, how much common ground might Christian apologists today find with those not professing a Christian allegiance? What possibilities for dialogue could a Chestertonian approach reveal, amid the many acrimonious and polarized debates of our times? How far does his natural theology suggest a possible theological populism, which might in turn provide a basis for an alternative to some of the exclusive and xenophobic political populisms which characterise the early twenty-first century?

His work shows how a natural theology which claims no authority and demands no privileges can make a contribution to discussions across ideological divisions, introducing Christian ideas into the public square in terms accessible to those of other beliefs. Might

his natural theology and his development of alliances and associations reveal new possibilities for dialogue across philosophical and religious divides? In relation to literature and the other arts, might the close nexus he perceived between the artistic and the spiritual open up new inter-disciplinary discussions? These and other questions raised by Chesterton's work remain largely unexplored, in spite of the increasing interest in his writing shown since the millennium. The analysis of Chesterton's natural theology and apologetics in this thesis suggests numerous further paths for the study of his work and its potential as a rich resource for apologetics and other branches of theology today.³¹

³¹ See Rowan, *Scrappy Evangelist*, 479-571.

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