



Chesterton and Eliot: Prophets for Our Times

An evening of music, conversation and poetry

Speakers

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Thursday, December 16, 2010 at 7:00 pm
Pope Auditorium, Fordham University, NYC

Radius: Good evening, and welcome on behalf of Radius Club at Fordham. We could not have started our evening of conversation and poetry in a more beautiful way. So, let's thank again with a heartfelt applause the Choir of Communion and Liberation directed by Christopher Vath. We would also like to thank the co-sponsors of tonight's event, Crossroads Cultural Center and the G. K. Chesterton Institute for Faith and Culture.

At first sight, G.K. Chesterton and T.S. Eliot seem to represent two polar opposites, regarding both their personalities and their literary work. This is probably why their names seldom come up together in discussions of cultural history. However, at a closer inspection one cannot fail to notice that what they had in common was almost as significant as the things that made them so different. Both were converts, both became major figures in British literature, and above all both were deeply concerned with the relationship between faith and culture and with the place of Christians in a secular society. It is on this ground that a dialogue between them seems very interesting and even necessary. In particular, both Chesterton and Eliot had a deep sense of how Christian tradition is a living process, not a dead doctrine but the collective memory of a living organism that traverses the vicissitudes of history "forever building, and always decaying, and always being restored." This verse comes from Eliot's "Choruses from 'The Rock'," the dramatic reading of which will take place at this conference and which is a fitting preparation for Christmas. But first, there will be a conversation between Fr. Ian Boyd and Prof. Dermott Quinn, who are both outstanding scholars of both English literature and will guide us in understanding the relationship between these two great authors.

Dr. Quinn, I hand the floor over to you...

Quinn: G.K. Chesterton and T.S. Eliot are the great teachers of *this* time and *our* time. This time is Christmas when, as Chesterton said, "we walk bewildered in the light" hardly able to grasp "something too large for sight...too plain to say." This time is Christmas when, in Eliot's phrase, the "visible reminder of Invisible Light" has come among us. This time is Christmas when all our journeys, all our steps, are guided by a star in the darkening sky. Heaven has descended into the world of matter. A child is born in Bethlehem.

But our time, our age, struggles to see this truth. We are children of modernity clinging to our new gods. We are men suddenly awake from a long sleep. We are citizens of a new kingdom where science answers most questions and dismisses as insignificant those to which it has no response. Chesterton and Eliot speak to this world, too, because they once belonged to it themselves – Chesterton as a vague Unitarian who found his way

to orthodox Christianity and, eventually, the Roman Catholic Church; Eliot as an extreme Unitarian who discovered, once he abandoned New England for Old England, the Book of Common Prayer and High Anglicanism and Tory politics and the mysterious pleasures of the monarchy. Their answer to modernity seemed simply to be anti-modernity: a kind of fustian traditionalism in Eliot's case, a swaggering, slightly boozy Catholicism in Chesterton's. In fact, the two men were deeper – much deeper – thinkers than that caricature allows. They knew the loneliness, the misery, the fear, of a world without belief. They knew, from the inside, the hollow answers of a hollow time. Here is Chesterton: “The modern habit of saying, “Everyman has a different philosophy; this is my philosophy and it suits me”: the habit of saying this is mere weak-mindedness. A cosmic philosophy is not constructed to fit a man; a cosmic philosophy is constructed to fit a cosmos.” Eliot agreed. “Man is man,” he said, “because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them.” “Take away the supernatural,” Chesterton said, “and what remains is the unnatural... The man who cannot lift his eyes to the sky, or bend his knee to the earth, is crippled and caught in a network of negations... It is the whole aim of religion, of imagination, of poetry and the arts, to awaken that sense of something saved from nothing.” Eliot was moved by a similar sense, speaking as he did of “the vague jargon of our time, when we have a vocabulary for everything and exact ideas about nothing.” Here were two men with anything but vague answers to the intellectual challenges of their day.

And yet, in some ways, they make an unlikely pair. However critical of the modern age, however insistent on the claims of tradition – not because it was old but because it was true - one might almost think that these two men did not much like each other; certainly that the Anglophile American did not much care for the America-admiring Englishman. To the extent that the early Eliot spoke of Chesterton at all, it was condescendingly. “Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc sing the same tune together,” he wrote in *The Criterion* in 1927. “I cannot admit that either of these writers writes well. The former's *Outline of Sanity* is the work of a brilliant but sporadic essay writer, scoring points at the cost of lucidity and cumulative effect. Mr. Chesterton is an inheritor of the older generation of Victorian prophets, with a touch, in fact rather too many touches, of Arnold's irony. In essays such as *Orthodoxy*, *Heretics*, or *The Defendant*, his style is admirable for his purpose; he often has unique perceptions; but his mind is not equipped for sustained argument.” This is, of course, the Eliot style: authoritative, apodictic, a little too declarative for its own good. Eliot was a brilliant maker of aphorisms and Chesterton was on the receiving end of some of them. “Mr. Chesterton's brain swarms with ideas,” he said. “I see no evidence that it thinks.” It is a good line – until you realize that Eliot thought it so good that he used it of others, writing of Henry James, for example, that “he has a mind so fine no idea can violate it.” You see a phrase-maker at work, a man in love with the cleverness of the statement more than its truth. So, Chestertonians need not be too offended. Withholding or dispensing praise like a provincial schoolmaster, Eliot's epigrams were a way of keeping genius at bay. Condemning GKC for being unsystematic is like criticizing Saint Paul for not keeping his travel receipts.

Besides, Eliot came to appreciate Chesterton more and more as he grew older, eventually writing a warm and sympathetic obituary of him in *The Tablet* which seems to atone for his earlier acerbities:

To judge Chesterton on his contributions to literature... would be to apply the wrong standards of measurements. It is in other matters that he was importantly and consistently on the side of the angels. Even if Chesterton's social and economic ideas appear to be totally without effect, even if they should be demonstrated to be wrong... they were *the* ideas for his time that were fundamentally Christian and Catholic. He did more, I think, than any man of his time... to maintain the existence of the important minority in the modern world.

That does scant justice, I think, to Chesterton's literary gifts but it acknowledges, at least, the sheer power and necessity of his orthodox Christianity in a world otherwise inhospitable to it. “What matters here,” Eliot wrote in his own journal, *The Criterion*, “is his lonely moral battle against his age, his courage, and his bold combination of genuine conservatism, genuine liberalism, and genuine radicalism.” That is not a bad

description, at least as far as conservatism and radicalism go, of Eliot himself. In fact, in some ways, it is a rather *better* description of Eliot than Chesterton. It was *Eliot* who enjoyed being the lonely seer, the voice crying in the wilderness, the weary critic of an itself weary modernity. Chesterton, by contrast, was hardly lonely at all.

Still, it was good that Eliot modified his earlier criticism. And Chesterton, for his part, returned the compliment. In 1935, the year before his death, he dedicated *The Well and The Shallows* to Eliot, penning a graceful introduction in which he apologized for a minor confusion he made between Eliot and another critic. “It would be adding impudence to injury to dedicate a book to an author merely on the ground of having misquoted him; but I should be proud to dedicate this book to T.S. Eliot and the return of true logic and a luminous tradition to the world.”

That is handsome and, I think, accurate. Eliot was the spokesman, in his time, of a luminous tradition. And so, in a different manner, was Chesterton. Russell Kirk put it well a few years ago. “They stood up manfully, if scarcely shoulder to shoulder, for revealed truth, old loyalties, and the moral imagination. Defying the spirit of their age, these two offer us that communication of the dead, tongued with fire, which exceeds the language of the living.” In that sense, they were the most important sacramental writers of their age, proposing that eternal realities are manifested in earthly settings and that (as Hopkins put it more poetically) “the world is charged with the grandeur of God.”

They understood that grandeur differently, of course. There is absence as well as presence in the work of both men, more so in Eliot whose imagination is bleaker, more saturnine, more conscious of endings, perhaps, than beginnings. But always, with each of them, there is a reaching out to the transcendent, which, as Chesterton remarked, may be closer than we know. That is why it is good to remember them tonight. They are, the two of them, modern Magi, guiding us, as they were themselves guided, to a Child lying in a manger. Of them, it may be said, as was said by Karl Rahner of the first Magi, that “these men, who have disappeared from our horizon, had royal hearts”:

If their real journey continued on to the invisible, eternal light – indeed if it only began when they returned to their own country – then such royal hearts found their definitive home. And that is why we want to call them by that joyous name of days gone by: the holy kings of the East... Throw down your defenses! The star is shining! Whether or not you make it the lode-star of your journey, it stands in your sky, and even your defiance and your weakness do not extinguish it. Why shouldn't we, then, believe and go on the journey? Why shouldn't we look to the star in the firmament of our hearts? Why not follow the light?