

Bob Hardister
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Opening Essay
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The Ball and the Cross: Sacrament, Conversion, and Hospitality

The Ball and the Cross was written by Gilbert Keith Chesterton. The first eight chapters appeared serially in *The Commonwealth*, a weekly newspaper, from 1905 to 1906, with the remaining chapters completed and published in book form in 1909. Chesterton was a big, happy man, passionately devoted to his wife, Frances, for 35 years until his death in 1936. He wrote over 80 books, as well as numerous essays, short stories, poems, plays, and over 4,000 published articles. His writings spanned various genres and topics, including fiction, non-fiction, biographies, and more. Some of his notable works include the *Father Brown* series, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, *The Everlasting Man*, and the play *The Judgment of Dr. Johnson*. He was recognized in his own time and is still recognized today for his distinctive style and sagacious thought as an economic socialist, social traditionalist, and Christian apologist.

However, many today may consider Chesterton obsolete given the achievements of science and secular morality over the last 100 years. He has been negatively characterized as “an antediluvian reactionary seeking an ark whereon he might survive the flood of modernity, a comic curmudgeon vainly hoping to reinstate an idealized version of the Middle Ages.”¹

Quite to the contrary, Chesterton was an unrepentant champion of modernity’s chief

¹ Ralph C. Wood, “Hospitality as the Gift Greater than Tolerance: G. K. Chesterton’s *The Ball and the Cross*,” *Logos*, 12, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 158.

accomplishment, the liberal democracy. It is in this role that the book seeks to diagnose the malaise of liberal democracy and offer treatments. For Chesterton, the problem is an excessive separation and dysfunctional relationship between the realms of matter and spirit, earth and heaven, the ball and the cross. We are certainly able to see in our day the fracturing of our country and others into self-destructive and opposing forces. *The Ball and the Cross* seeks the way to heal, like a wound, this deadly separation.

Chesterton's treatments for this otherwise fatal condition are sacrament, conversion, and hospitality. He believes the world is matter and spirit; all things visible and invisible. He contests that the imposition of materialism pulls us into a hopeless isolation surrounded by an evil universe. As Professor Lucifer explains in chapter one, "the heavens are evil, the sky is evil, the stars are evil...more hopeless than any hell." "Chesterton came to understand the world as sacramental, that is, as a world in which material things signify the presence of divine realities—a world in which earth and heaven are inextricably entwined."² In *The Ball and the Cross*, whether it's the "secret and elvish things it is that broods over editors" (ch. 4) or the many descriptive passages of nature in extraordinarily beautiful and highly poetic terms, Chesterton is constantly portraying the connection between earthy and heavenly realities.

These thematic elements along with the structure of the novel serve to depict and bring about the conversion of the main characters, Evan MacIan and James Turnbull.

² Marisa Pierson, "Apocalyptic Conversion in a Sacramental World: The Meeting of Heaven and Earth in Chesterton's *The Ball and the Cross*," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought & Culture* 20, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 67.

Certainly, James' conversion to a belief in supernatural reality is an important and dramatic high point of the narrative. But it constitutes only a small portion of what Chesterton is saying about the conversion of James as well as Evan. Both James and Evan have issues, and their conversions over the course of the book consist of many distinct conversion events. The seven parleys serve to highlight these conversions and the changes wrought by each of them. Other characters play an instrumental role in balancing Evan and James' understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and material. For example, MacIan's fascination with Beatrice Drake heightening his awareness of the physical world (Ch. 9) and Turnbull's conversation with Madeline Durand awakening him to contradictions between his intuitive behavior towards the sacrament of the Eucharist and his principles.³ One of the many farcical elements of the story is that the happenings of Evan and James command the highest attention of the British nation. Yet, as shown in the conversation inside the asylum between James and the magistrate, Cumberland Vane, James and Evan are themselves archetypes of the material and spiritual realms, and it is in this context that their conversions become of such importance. In chapter 19, "The Last Parley," different dream sequences experienced by the protagonists show the critical aspect of each one's conversion. MacIan thus learns that Christian conversion must never entail coercion, just as Turnbull finds that he must guard his materialism against the degradation of human dignity to mere utilitarian and functional value. Chesterton is advocating conversion at personal and societal levels from an unhealthy separation of the material and spiritual to a balanced sacramental view of the world. How this

³ Marisa Pierson, "Apocalyptic Conversion in a Sacramental World," 75.

is to be enacted is shown by a third major theme of the book, hospitality. Here I quote at length from Ralph Wood's essay, *Hospitality as the Gift Greater than Tolerance: G. K. Chesterton's The Ball and the Cross*.

"Modern toleration is really a tyranny," declares G. K. Chesterton. "It is a tyranny because it is a silence. To say that I must not deny my opponent's faith is to say I must not discuss it."⁴ [More recently,] tolerance is usually advocated by those who have already attained such power that they can afford to 'tolerate' their opponents. How, then, are those who hold to radically opposing construals of reality to deal with each other, if not by a polite tolerance that obscures the power arrangements underwriting it? Chesterton's *The Ball and the Cross* suggests that hospitality is a more excellent way. Hospitality does not entail a smiling kind of niceness, a prim-and-proper etiquette, nor even a gracious capacity for party giving. The word derives from *hostis*, a Latin locution, originally meaning not only "host" (as in "welcoming and providing for") but also "stranger" and even "enemy." Hospitality thus becomes a practice and discipline, a fundamental responsibility regarding those who are alien and perhaps even antagonistic toward us. **It requires, among other things, the willingness to welcome the gift that others represent**—not the gift that we expect or desire from them, but their often surprising and troubling gift, especially when others have convictions that are fundamentally hostile to ours... Tolerance declares that we will "put up with" others, even when their views and habits are noxious to us. Hospitality, by contrast, offers to "put them up" in the old-fashioned sense: we will make even our enemies our guests and thus our potential friends.

Hospitality must not be romanticized and idealized as a simple or easy practice. It does not mean, for example, that we draw no distinctions among competing truth claims as the proponents of tolerance often profess to do... As Chesterton was fond of saying, "Morality is very much like art: it consists of drawing a line somewhere." Christian hospitality is willing to draw a line but not to raise a bar that cannot be crossed. On the contrary, it is willing to hazard two radical risks regarding opponents. On the one hand, it must take them so seriously that not only can they recognize themselves in our representation of their own most basic convictions but also that we ourselves must be susceptible of conversion to their faith. Yet on the other hand, we are also called to demonstrate the case for Christianity so persuasively, in both act and argument, that we help create the possibility of their conversion as well. In either case, we will not have merely tolerated each other: we will have exhibited the hospitality that eagerly engages the other.⁵

⁴ Ralph C. Wood, "Hospitality as the Gift Greater than Tolerance," 158.

⁵ Ralph C. Wood, 163-165.

In *The Ball and the Cross*, Chesterton shows that Christians and atheists are capable of true friendship, respect and hospitality for each other. In chapter 6, “The Other Philosopher,” Evan recognizes and acknowledges the gift that Turnbull is to their relationship when he tells him, “you are a great chief, and it is good to go to war behind you,” implying Evan’s acknowledgement that in an important sense, they are already on the same side. Turnbull, in chapter 12, “The Desert Island,” exhibits true hospitality when speaking to Evan he says, “You will permit me two liberties, my dear sir, . . . the first is to break open this box and light one of Mr. Wilkinson's excellent cigars, which will, I am sure, assist my meditations; the second is to offer a penny for your thoughts, . . .” and shortly after, “that it is damned silly to waste all that champagne.” These and many other passages illustrate the honesty and dignity of the authentic hospitality that Evan and James have towards each other. However, the climax of their hospitality and cementing of their friendship comes not in sharing the best of themselves with each other, but in confessing their mistakes and faults to each other. By coming to see, each through his dream, his own sins, upon their next meeting, “the two men came slowly towards each other, and found the same expression on each other's faces. Then, for the first time in all their acquaintance, they shook hands.” Later in the same chapter, Turnbull, speaking earnestly to MacIan says, “Has it occurred to you that since - since those two dreams, or whatever they were . . . we have never even looked for our swords.”

They have discovered the truth of Chesterton’s crisp dictum: “It is not bigotry to be certain we are right; but it is bigotry to be unable to imagine how we might possibly have gone wrong.” Having been shown how dreadfully they might have gone wrong,

MacIan and Turnbull are no longer bent on mutual slaughter—either by swords or squabble. On the contrary, they have become fast friends.⁶

One final point on style, again quoting Wood's essay.

Why would Chesterton resort to a patently unserious genre such as farce, with its virtually impossible situations, its extravagant occurrences, its frantic pace and above all, its wildly improbable conclusions? In a world becoming immune to the Gospel, Chesterton believed that only those art forms that have the destabilizing power of farce and mime and even melodrama can capture the Gospel's outrageousness, its fantastic eccentricity, its scandalously joyful claim that God himself has entered the human fray in Jesus Christ and his Church.⁷

I conclude noting that Chesterton and other intellectuals even prior to the world wars and the atomic bomb expressed serious concerns for the future of Western civilization. For Chesterton, and in *The Ball and the Cross*, a core threat to our civilization is the excessive and dysfunctional separation of the material and spiritual realms. Perhaps it is only his optimistic and happy personality that could lead to his creation of this wild farcical story. A story of return to the world of enchantment, hospitality, and the reconstitution of a harmonious relationship between the ball and the cross.

⁶ Ralph C. Wood, 173.

⁷ Ralph C. Wood, 166.

Bibliography

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