

Generation GK: Give Chestern to your friends of the MTV generation

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [July 18, 2001](#) issue

No doubt it is a peculiar vantage point from which to survey the religious habits of the current generation, but my vantage point is that of a religion teacher at a liberal arts college. Most of the young people I meet have turned away from Christianity, not in the muscular manner of atheisms past, but in a languorous way, as one might graduate from the familiar counsels of the Berenstain Bears to more bracing sources of spiritual advice. Two thousand years of doctrine and devotion recede from view under the haze of this apparent familiarity, and Christianity becomes, paradoxically, the most unknown of all religions.

To break through the fog of familiarity requires something more than ordinary apologetic skill. Fortunately, there is at least one man who can do it: not a theologian as we generally think of the breed but rather, in his own words, a “rollicking journalist” who saunters forth in his Inverness cloak and slouch hat, with his pince-nez and sword-stick, wobbling jowls and huge chivalrous heart, to rediscover for the modern world the romance of orthodox Christian faith.

I am thinking, of course, of G. K. Chesterton, who needs no introduction yet is always worth meeting again. Chesterton, you may recall, is the one whom C. S. Lewis during his atheist period considered “the most sensible man alive.” T. S. Eliot observed that Chesterton “did more . . . than any man of his time . . . to maintain the existence of the important minority in the modern world.” He did so not by sounding didactic alarums but by running riot with his pen, from which poured forth thousands of newspaper articles and over a hundred books in every genre, from the Father Brown detective stories to comic essays like “On Running After One’s Hat” and works of literary and social criticism.

Chesterton is one of few figures to whom the word “exuberant” attaches itself automatically even in the soberest of reference works. Whether he was arguing against eugenics, technocracy and the Boer War or in favor of small-scale economy

and human rights, Chesterton's exuberance, humor, humility and frankness made him best of friends with his enemies and favorite sparring partner with his friends. Above all, he was best of friends with his wife, Frances, with whom he fell in love at first sight (failing to have children, they opened their home to the children of friends and neighbors). Love of life and freedom from pomposity radiate from every page of his writing as from every ounce of his colossal frame.

"The age needs first and foremost to be taught the nature of wonder," Chesterton writes; this was the job of the historic faiths: "to provide that longest and strangest telescope—the telescope through which we could see the star on which we dwelt." Above all, Chesterton makes us realize, it is the gift of the strangest of all religions, Christianity, to reveal that our existence on this star is a chronic miracle, with further miracles in store.

Chesterton reannounces the gospel with lightning-fast analogies and paradoxes so vivid (and, when they are on the mark, so funny) that they restore its pristine clarity and enchantment:

It is quite unlike anything else. It is a thing final like the trump of doom though it is also a piece of good news; or news that seems too good to be true. It is nothing less than the loud assertion that this mysterious Maker of the world has visited His world in person. It declares that really and even recently, or right in the middle of historic times, there did walk into the world this original invisible being; about whom the thinkers make theories and the mythologists hand down myths; the Man who made the World (*The Everlasting Man*).

Perhaps you know someone who still subscribes to the view that Christianity is a system of priggish restraints; that weaker souls need such restraints in order to flourish, but bold spirits throw off the shackles and live more grandly. Give her Chesterton to read, and he will turn the tables. He shows that the stance of the "freethinker" is inherently narrow, while that of the believer is as wide as creation. Or perhaps you know someone to whom the word "heresy" has a delicious sound, while "orthodoxy" is a term of opprobrium. Give him Chesterton to read:

It is always easy to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one's own. It is always easy to be a modernist, as it is easy to be a snob.

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. . . . 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 (*Orthodoxy*).

Give Chesterton to your friends of the MTV generation, for with their shortened attention spans they may find that Chesterton's scintillating aphorisms enable him, as Maisie Ward puts it, to walk into their hearts without knocking. The only problem with reading Chesterton is that for a time afterwards almost any serious writer one reads comes across as a stuffed-shirt. But that's all right: there can be only one G. K. Chesterton, and every generation needs him.