

CHESTERTON ON PROTESTANTISM

This is an extract from an essay by Gilbert Chesterton entitled *The Protestant Superstitions* directed primarily at William Ralph Inge, Dean of London's St Paul's Cathedral from 1911 to 1934. Dean Inge was a regular columnist for London's *Evening Standard* between 1921 and 1946 during which time he devoted much of his energy to attacking the Catholic Church.¹

"It is quite obvious that there are three or four philosophies or views of life possible to reasonable men; and to a great extent these are embodied in the great religions or in the wide field of irreligion. There is the atheist, the materialist or monist or whatever he calls himself, who believes that all is ultimately material, and all that is material is mechanical. That is emphatically a view of life; not a very bright or breezy view, but one into which it is quite possible to fit many facts of existence.

"Then 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, as remote from men as from microbes. That sort of theism is perfectly sane; and is really the ancient basis of the solid if somewhat stagnant sanity of Islam.

"There is again the man who feels the burden of life so bitterly that he wishes to renounce all desire and all division, and rejoin a sort of spiritual unity and peace from which (as he thinks) our separate selves should never have broken away. That is the mood answered by Buddhism and by many metaphysicians and mystics.

"Then there is a fourth sort of man, sometimes called a mystic and perhaps more properly to be called a poet; in practice he can very often be called a pagan. His position is this: it is a twilight world and we know not where it ends. If we do not know enough for monotheism, neither do we know enough for monism. There may be a borderland and a world beyond; but we can only catch hints of it as they come; we may meet a nymph in the forest; we may see the fairies on the mountains. We do not know enough about the natural to *deny* the preternatural. That was, in ancient times, the healthiest aspect of Paganism. That is, in modern times, the rational part of Spiritualism.

"All these are possible as general views of life; and there is a [fifth] that is at least equally possible, though certainly more positive. The whole point of this last might be expressed in the line of M. Cammaerts's beautiful little poem about bluebells; *le ciel est tombé par terre*. Heaven has *descended* into the world of matter; the supreme spiritual power is now operating by the machinery of matter, dealing miraculously with the bodies and the souls of men. It blesses the five senses; as the senses of the baby are blessed at a Catholic christening. It blesses even material gifts and keepsakes, as with relics or rosaries. It works through water or oil or bread or wine. Now that sort of mystical materialism may please or displease the Dean, or anybody else. But I cannot for the life of me understand why the Dean, or anybody else, does not see that the Incarnation is as much a part of that idea as the Mass; and that the Mass is as much a part of that idea as the Incarnation.

¹ The Protestant Superstitions, *The Thing*, London, 1929; my copy, by Unicorn Books, 1939, pp. 155-7. I have interpolated a number of paragraphs where Chesterton has only one to divide the text and make it more readable.

“A Puritan may think it blasphemous that God should become a wafer. A Moslem thinks it is blasphemous that God should become a workman in Galilee. And he is perfectly right, from his point of view; and given his primary principle. But if the Moslem has a principle, the Protestant has only a prejudice. That is, he has only a fragment; a relic; a superstition.

“If it be profane that the miraculous should descend to the plane of matter, then certainly Catholicism is profane; and Protestantism is profane; and Christianity is profane. Of all human creeds or concepts, in that sense, Christianity is the most utterly profane. But why a man should accept a Creator who was a carpenter, and then worry about holy water, why he should accept a local Protestant tradition that God was born in some particular place mentioned in the Bible, merely because the Bible had been left lying about in England, and then say it is incredible that a blessing should linger on the bones of a saint: why he should accept the first and most stupendous part of the story of Heaven on Earth, and then furiously deny a few small but obvious deductions from it—that is a thing I do not understand; I never could understand. I have come to the conclusion that I shall never understand. I can only attribute it to Superstition.”
