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# G.K.Chesterton. The Entertaining Dogma. Concepts of Faith as Categories of Discovery (1986)

***(Abstract meiner Dissertation: G.K. Chesterton - Das unterhaltsame Dogma. Übersetzt von Gwyn Dolben. In: English and American Studies in German 1985. Summaries of Theses and Monographs. A Supplement to Anglia. Tübingen 1986. S.87-89)***

Since the mid-seventies, academic interest in Chesterton has shown a marked revival in the English-speaking countries, fostered particularly by the 'Chesterton Review', which was first published in Canada in 1974. In Germany, however, Chesterton has remained shamefully neglected. Between 1937 and 1984, only six theses appeared on him, the last dating back to 1964.

The present work sets out to point out a major gap in research and to help remedy this deficiency. It is intended as a theological rather than a literary thesis, but is also of literary interest in approaching literature from a theological perspective. The premise underlying the work is that only a theological approach to Chesterton can fully bring out his literary and philosophical meaning. Such an approach is likewise essential for biographical research. Only an understanding of the relationship between biography, theology, and literature can provide a cogent interpretation of Chesterton's life and work.

The problems of assessing Chesterton are exemplified by the conflicting opinions of his contemporaries. George Bernard Shaw saw him as an ingenious charlatan who had struck the pose of the believer. Others (such as H. G. Wells) criticized him as being a Catholic reactionary imprisoned in the Middle Ages. In Anglican and Catholic circles, on the other hand, Chesterton was revered as the defender of faith against the attacks of a godless age.

Consequently, two main streams of thought can be identified in the secondary literature on Chesterton, which is discussed extensively and critically in the present work. Either Chesterton the writer is admired while his theological position is ignored, or else he is regarded as a 'saint', while his theology again remains largely undiscussed.

Very few appraisals have succeeded in identifying the internal relationship between literature and theology as the key problem in Chesterton's work and in defining this relationship to any great extent (M. Mason, H. Kenner, T.N. Hart). Even these works, however, lack theological understanding, a fact particularly reflected in a failure to use the concept of 'dogma' appropriately.

If dogma is taken for what it is, namely a concept of life, the divide in Chesterton research can be bridged. For Chesterton, dogma became a view of his own life which brought about his conversion and motivated the literary expression of the Christian philosophy which characterizes his work.

After a brief biographical and bibliographical survey, the first main part of the book demonstrates that experience and dogma do not contradict one another in Chesterton, but are complementary. His conversion is a liberating discovery of the world and reality through dogma, which opens up a new perspective on life. In the philosophical pluralism of Edwardian England, this conversion enabled Chesterton to establish opinions of his own and defend them publicly as a journalist. The recognition that dogma is a basis for living determines both the structure of his 'Autobiography', in which he describes his life in the light of his philosophy, and the concept of orthodoxy, in which he portrays his philosophy against the background of his life. Chesterton's early writings ('Notebooks'), autobiographical essays such as 'The Diabolist', and letters all underline the relationship between biography and dogma in his literature.

This investigation of the autobiographical dimension of Chesterton's work is followed by a discussion of his philosophical and theological writings, concentrating particularly on 'Heretics', 'Orthodoxy', and 'The Everlasting Man'. Whereas in 'Heretics' and 'Orthodoxy', the Apostles' Creed is described in its relevance for Chesterton himself, 'The Everlasting Man' deals with the historical and political importance of dogma. Here, Chesterton contrasts the naive historical optimism of H. G. Wells in 'The Outline of History' with a Christian interpretation of history. To Chesterton, dogma does not appear to be an intellectual distraction, but rather the basis of concrete human decisions to act in accordance with the Christian view of the world. In Chesterton's opinion, such decisions have made their mark on history and will determine its future course.

The third main section of the book, entitled "The Concept of Faith and Literature: A Theory of Discovery", deals with the narrative work of Chesterton. The major emphasis is laid on an interpretation of 'The Man Who Was Thursday', 'Manalive', and 'The Poet and the Lunatics', and on a critique of the 'Father Brown Stories'. Here, Chesterton demonstrates the entertaining nature of dogma, entertaining because it provides understanding which helps life along. Through an amusing (criminal) study, he leads the reader to joy at his own understanding. Chesterton's view of the function of literature as "conscious buffoonery", which depends on the aptness of the entertainment and the entertaining nature of experience, highlights the similarities between his own literary theory and that of Brecht. Like Brecht, Chesterton interprets philosophical theory as a view of practice which is entertaining if it is relevant to life.

In conclusion, the achievement of this work is to build up a comprehensive picture of Chesterton's life in the context of his age by combining biography, theology, and literature. The autobiographical, biographical, journalistic, essayistic, lyrical, and narrative work is interpreted from a theological standpoint and with reference to the existing secondary literature. Under the slogan of "conscious buffoonery", Chesterton is found to represent a committed literature which seeks a wide audience. Mason was indeed right in once calling him the "Charlie Chaplin of theology and the Walt Disney of the religious parable".

To brand Chesterton as a Catholic propagandist fails completely to do justice to the genius of the man. His work has a philosophical, theological, and literary topicality which calls for more detailed study. As Gary Wills said, "Chesterton is so far 'out' he is constantly in danger of becoming 'in'".