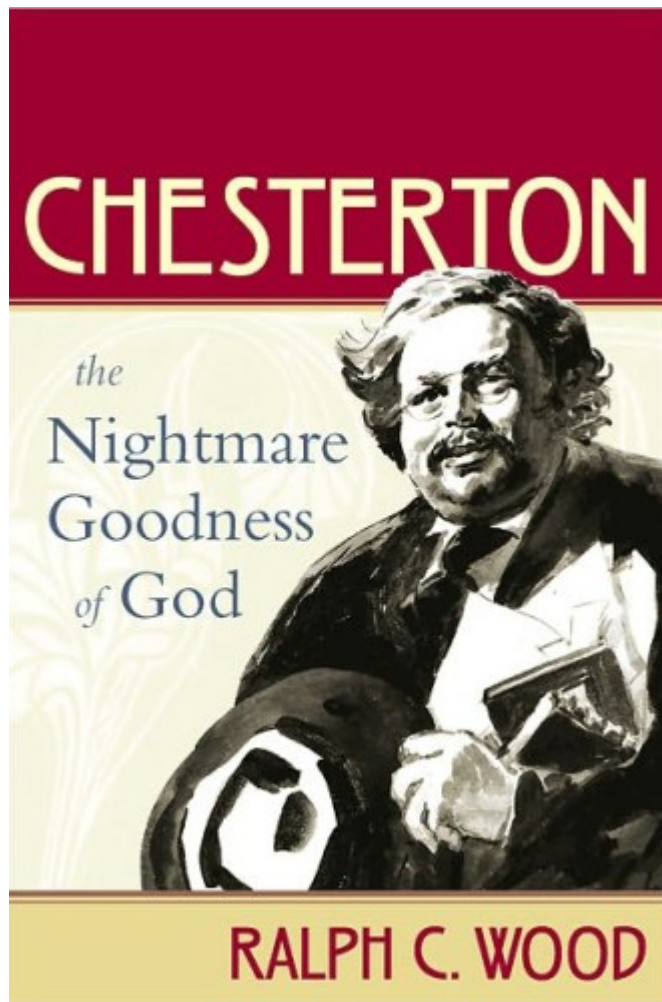


Chesterton, by Ralph C. Wood

reviewed by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 21, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Chesterton

By Ralph C. Wood
Baylor University Press

For the better part of a century, Gilbert Keith Chesterton has been many Christian writers' go-to source for apt quotations. Now eclipsed in popularity or challenged by other quote masters like C. S. Lewis, Yogi Berra and Groucho Marx, the British

convert to Catholicism still entertains, informs or enrages many. As a novelist, journalist and epigrammatist G. K. C. provided spiritually profound, frequently funny and often frustrating commentary on faith and culture. Though he was not a theologian, he dealt in theological themes, beginning with his now century-old book *Orthodoxy*, while he also enjoyed a large readership through his career as a novelist, which climaxed in the enigmatic *The Man Who Was Thursday*.

Ralph Wood, who calls himself a Bapto-Catholic, is certainly qualified to write on the militant Catholic Chesterton, who seldom withheld his fire and fury except when he settled for expressing disdain for Protestantism and other "unorthodox" versions of Christianity. Chesterton was the kind of convert that philosopher Max Scheler would call an apostate: one "engaged in a continuous chain of acts of revenge against his own spiritual past," as Scheler puts it. For Chesterton, unorthodox versions of Christianity included Anglicanism, mediocre Protestantism and whatever else he found un- or anti-Catholic.

Although G. K. C. liked to portray Catholicism as a robust, rambunctious and sometimes culturally ribald faith, it did not provide him the serenity that was supposed to have been the upside of the faith. The word *nightmare* belongs in the subtitle of Wood's book. He found the word 15 times in Chesterton's *Autobiography*, and he employs it as an all-purpose metaphor that is fitting for events throughout G. K. C.'s life.

If we expect that true faith in the true God through the gift of the true church will bring daylight in which to bask, use of the word *nightmare* may seem paradoxical. It is: Wood links it jarringly with *goodness*.

A scholar who is at home at Baylor University, a Baptist school, Wood is not an intellectual alien at Catholic sites such as Providence College, where he enjoyed—take that word seriously—a recent sabbatical. He has dealt at book length with Flannery O'Connor, who could as well have subtitled her fiction "A Nightmare," as Chesterton did with *The Man Who Was Thursday*. That word "effectively ensures," writes Wood, that the work "is likely to be disjointed, that it may violate conventional canons of time and space, indeed, that it will have a phantasmagoric and hallucinatory quality." Wood favors faith-oriented writers who are nightmarish themselves and expounds on them with a mix of appreciation and critical intelligence.

As I read Wood, it seems he finds that Chesterton's instinct was to be never uninteresting, always provocative and simply outrageous. It is hard to read a Chesterton essay without becoming unsettled about what one might have thought was settled, but also becoming settled about paradoxes that had threatened to unsettle one with nightmarish visions. There is a stimulus to the imagination on almost every page of Chesterton and of Wood's *Chesterton*.

Wood's Chesterton is anything but a mere wisecracker and taunter. He can be spiritually profound, as when he deals with Christ on Calvary: "When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God." G. K. C. challenges atheists to choose a god: "They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation, only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist." This choice nightmare quotation is so unrelieved that Wood has to join Chesterton in an act of retrieval and restoration. He finds an awakening from nightmare in festivals as Josef Pieper described them: "To celebrate a festival means to live out, for some special occasion and in an uncommon manner, the universal assent to the world as a whole." Grace and gratitude and goodness serve the believer. Affirmation abounds, despite and in the midst of the nightmare vision.

The chapter titles in this book indicate the range of Chesterton's and Wood's Christian imagination. Samples: "Man as Holy Monster," "The Bane and Blessing of Civilization," "Tyrannical Tolerance and Ferocious Hospitality." Chesterton wanted to offend. He did and he does. "The Waning of the West and the Threat of Islam" shows him fueling the furies of those who reduce Islam to jihadist terror without meanwhile seeing Christian texts and historic actions that match such terror. Two more: "Patriotism and the True *Patria*" sets one up for a most disturbing Chesterton theme: "Militarism and the Church Militant."

Wood probes Chesterton's radical, idolatrous devotion to, if not worship of, the "Western," particularly the English, side against "the Hun" in World War I. He cites Charles Williams's analysis of Chesterton's anthropology in action during that war. In Chesterton's poetry as nowhere else in English verse, Williams concludes, "man is a fighting animal who must be either a hero or a coward." Wood responds with a question: "What shall we make of so pugnacious a poet who is so Christian at the core?" He answers: "At his worst," G. K. C. was "an advocate of holy war. He believed that Christians must do armed battle—not only against heretics in defense of property and territory, of doctrines and beliefs but also against other Christians

who support allegedly heretical regimes."

Chesterton points out that Jesus was utterly mute about the annihilating character of war; in his sayings there is "not a word about the wickedness of war, the wastefulness of war, the appalling scale of slaughter in war and all the rest of the familiar frenzy; indeed not a word about war at all." Wood says that Chesterton's "argument from silence is so outrageous that it must be addressed." He addresses it with a few lines about Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's "Christian Realism" concerning politics and war and contends that—ouch!—"in this attraction to the metaphor of the sword, Chesterton was thoroughly biblical." Wood reminds us that the sword "appears more than four hundred times in the Bible." On the other hand, "the term 'holy war' does not appear in the Old Testament; . . . it is borrowed from the Arabic *jihad*."

It is hard to read one of Wood's sections: "Chesterton as Apologist for the Deadliest of Wars." G. K. C. was a passionate defender of all things English in the Great War, which to monocausal Chesterton was simply "a barbarian Prussian attack on Christian civilization." He had to ignore what the countries that he called "the West" did to help bring on the war and its atrocities. What saved England and France against what Wood calls the "atavistic embodiment of teutonic tribalism and Protestant imperialism" were, according to Chesterton, "the civilizing effects of Latinate Christianity." Chesterton uttered this while he ignored the 700,000 killed and injured in the nine-month battle at Verdun, along with such "dreadful data . . . as the total of ten million dead and twenty million seriously wounded, leaving five million widows, nine million orphans and ten million refugees." Chesterton even praised "the beauty of sudden death" in one of his poems. He never showed "the slightest regret about the rightness of the Great War, even though it mainly entailed the killing of Christians by other Christians," writes Wood.

It seems unfair to Chesterton and perhaps to Wood to end a review of a balanced book with this sample of the nightmare vision, but Wood bought trouble when he chose that disturbing word for his own subtitle and sustained his attention to it throughout the book. He was simply being honest about evidence of traumas from which we are not awakening. But grace, gratitude and goodness do serve as promises along the disturbing nightmare way.