

Permanent Things: Toward the Recovery of a More Human Scale at the End of the Twentieth Century

Andrew A. Tadie and Michael H. Macdonald, eds.

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The essays in this collection were presented at a 1990 conference hosted jointly by Seattle University (a Jesuit institution) and Seattle Pacific University (Free Methodist) and sponsored by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. The book is dedicated to the memory of Russell Kirk who died April 29, 1994 and who wrote the lead essay. This conference was the third in a series, the second of which produced the volume *C. S. Lewis and G. K. Chesterton: The Riddle of Joy*.

The essays cover a wide range of topics—literary criticism, political thought, the scientific method, the university core curriculum, and the conversion of the West—bound together by the broad theme of “the Permanent Things” and grounded in the works of G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Evelyn Waugh, T. S. Eliot, and Dorothy Sayers. The “Permanent Things” (a term attributed to T.S. Eliot) is more or less synonymous with the natural law, or what Etienne Gilson refers to as “the perennial philosophy,” or C.S. Lewis calls the “Tao.” Definitions or meanings supplied by the essayists include “that eternal wisdom by which, in all the great civilizations, human lives have been ordered and ennobled” (Ian Crowther, p. xiii), “recurring attributes of nature” (Andrew Tadie, p. ix), “that eternal wisdom by which, in all the great civilizations, human lives have been ordered and ennobled” (Ian Crowther, p. xiii), “the enduring standards that in times past constituted the essence of our Western civilization” (John A. Sims, p. 222), and “the good, the true, the beautiful, the honorable... [all of which] are grounded in reality itself. They are simply true” (David Whalen, pp. 31–32).

REVIEWER

Bruce G. Webb is Professor of Economics, Gordon College (MA).

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I doubt that there are many in our association who will want to read this book from cover to cover, since many of the essays deal with topics far beyond the scope of economics (e.g. literary criticism) and assume a certain familiarity with the works of Chesterton *et al.* For example, John Peterson's essay, "Father Brown's War on the Impermanent Things," will be of limited interest and make little sense to those who have not read Chesterton's Father Brown mysteries. The same holds true for Gregory Wolfe's essay on "Evelyn Waugh's Comic Irony" and Thomas Howard's "Perplexity in the Edgeware Road" on T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Some who attempt this book might be lured into reading the original works which, I suspect, would greatly please the essayists. And with few exceptions (noted below) I strongly urge readers of this review to do just that.

Only one essay is written by an economist, about economics: former ACE president William Campbell's "G. K. Chesterton and the Science of Economics." According to Campbell, "[Chesterton's] thought is extremely pertinent to an assessment of the modern science of economics," especially "the basic assumptions of our discipline" (p. 118). He notes Chesterton's views on private property which provide an alternative to the libertarian view: "Property is cherished for its potentiality in providing creativity to ordinary persons; it is cherished for nurturing character" (p. 134). Also noteworthy are Chesterton's critique of modern economics' "subjectivization of utility," its "tautological definition of efficiency," and the tendency of the social sciences "to collectivize the individual sense of sin and guilt." While the language of modern economists is "expediency: utility, temporary contract, and agreement of wills," Chesterton, by contrast, uses the language of "substantive morality, obligation, and eternity." This is the language of the Permanent Things.

Once again, I recommend that interested Christian economists sample the

works of Chesterton himself, especially *The Outline of Sanity* and *What's Wrong with the World*, both part of *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* published by Ignatius Press. Other essays on Chesterton's economic views can be found in *The Chesterton Review*. Similar themes are developed in the writings of economist Wilhelm Roepke, especially in *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, which I reviewed for this *Bulletin* a few years ago.

Another essay which I found interesting was Peter Kreeft's "Darkness at Noon: The Eclipse of the Permanent Things," which those familiar with Kreeft's writings will recognize as "vintage Kreeft." Economists will be intrigued by his speculative question, "Is there such a thing as material progress at all?" to which he gives the provocative and tentative answer, "that there is not and cannot be any such thing as purely material progress; that only spirit can progress" (p. 212). Evan K. Gibson's essay "'There Are No 'Trees' ... Only This Elm": C. S. Lewis on the Scientific Method," while mainly about the natural sciences, will nonetheless prove interesting to economists and other social scientists. Gibson notes Lewis's warning about the danger of abstraction, where we classify things according to their similarities. In Gibson's words, "...to generalize and classify is to do some damage to the discrete individuality of a thing. Lumping it with other things because of observed likenesses tends to blur the sharp lines of identity and give a false or diminished impression of the reality of the individual" (p. 247). Macroeconomists might want to contemplate the significance of this essay (and the writings of Lewis on which it is based) for their work. And Kent Hill, writing on Chesterton, reminds us that while democracy is not one of the permanent things, it is, properly understood, "consistent with and sustained by eternal values and truths. Apart from them, it will not, indeed, cannot long endure" (p. 117).

In these essays we are made aware of the extent to which Western culture has drifted away from the "Permanent

Things." There are important implications here, often implicit, for Christian economists, not the least of which is that the chief end of man is not a larger GDP. Those who have a special interest in

Chesterton and Lewis will want to add this book to their collection. Others should urge their library to purchase the book so that they can read selected chapters. ■