Rome in the historical imagination of G. K. Chesterton’s Everlasting Man

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ABSTRACT
Roman civilization is at the heart of G.K. Chesterton’s historical imagination. Nowhere is this more evident than in his 1925 book The Everlasting Man, which challenged a materialist, evolutionary perspective on history and highlighted the distinctive place of the Christian Church in the development of civilization. By distinguishing between the ‘healthy heathenism’ of Rome and the ‘perverse paganism’ of Carthage, Chesterton shows how Rome became the setting for the Christmas story, which fulfills the natural religiosity of mankind and provides a center for the unified human story. Roman civilization as a chrysalis for Christianity is at the heart of Chesterton’s historical imagination.

Introduction

The centerpiece of Chesterton’s historical imagination is Rome – the history of Rome as a chrysalis for the coming of Christianity. For Chesterton, the entire history of Rome acts – so to speak – as a kind of stage setting for the Christmas story.

G. K Chesterton summed up his historical imagination in a pithy set of verses which expressed his idea that the Roman Republic and the Pax Romana represented all that natural man could achieve on his own. Chesterton believed that the ancient, classical world of the natural man had come to an end with the fall of Rome, and that the new age of Christian nations arose in its wake – a new civilization arisen from the ashes of the old.

For Chesterton, the world of the natural man had ended long ago, when Rome let go of ‘the ends of the world’ – of Spain, of England, of France. A new world of the Christian nations had arisen from the decline and fall of the old Roman classical civilization:

For the end of the world was long ago,
When the ends of the world waxed free,
When Rome was sunk in a waste of slaves,
And the sun drowned in the sea.

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When Caesar’s sun fell out of the sky
And whoso hearkened right
Could only hear the plunging
Of the nations in the night. (Chesterton [1911] 1994, Book 1)

G.K. Chesterton’s historical imagination might be summed up in these brief lines:

For the end of the world was long ago/when the ends of the world waxed free,
... When Rome was laid in a waste of slaves/and [Caesar’s] sun drowned in the sea.

Nevertheless, Chesterton does not dismiss ancient history as a mere prequel to the coming of Christ. Chesterton makes much of the classical history of Rome as a time of preparation for the Gospel. He tells a rollicking tale of an all-important struggle between what he calls ‘healthy heathenism’ and its threatening opponent in the ancient world – ‘perverse paganism’. For Chesterton, ‘healthy heathenism’ was symbolized by Rome while ‘perverse paganism’ was symbolized by Carthage. This gave weight to human history, even before the coming of Christ.

G. K. Chesterton, born in 1874 and a nationally and internationally renowned journalist by World War I (1914–1918), converted to Catholicism in 1922. Just after World War I, Chesterton ([1925] 1993) published an ambitious book, a history of Western Civilization entitled The Everlasting Man.¹ He clearly intended his book to counter H. G. Wells’s (1920) influential attempt at the same project of universal history, The Outline of History. H. G. Wells told a story in which Western Civilization progressed to the extent that it left religion behind. Wells deals with man as an evolutionary force, indistinguishable spiritually from material nature. Chesterton’s counter-narrative was bent on restoring the distinction between man as a spiritual creature and the material universe, as well as the distinction between the Christian Church as a supernatural institution from purely natural, human institutions.

Chesterton’s Everlasting Man was divided into two parts: section one, dealing with human history up to the coming of Christ, and section two, dealing with human history since the coming of Christ. The first section begins with the first evidence of man – the cave drawings – and is entitled ‘Man in the Cave’, while the second section begins with Christ’s birth in the stable in Bethlehem and is entitled God in the Cave’. In Part I, Chesterton refutes the idea that the human is indistinguishable from the rest of evolving nature. Against the nineteenth-century positivist social sciences of sociology, psychology, art history, and comparative religion – taking each social science discipline in turn, and chapter-by-chapter, Chesterton insistently argues that human development – human history – the human story – is a distinctive part of the past. In Part II, Chesterton makes a parallel argument that Christianity is not indistinguishable from other mystery religions, ethical philosophies, or humane and moral sects, but that the Christian Church stands out as a distinctive institutional, theological, and cultural force within the larger human story.

For Chesterton, the first part of Western Civilization was a preparation for the Gospel; the second part of Western Civilization is the story of the vicissitudes of the Christian Church in history.

There is a certain sense in which Chesterton’s Everlasting Man is primarily a Christmas book. It asks and answers the question what difference to human history the
Incarnation of Jesus Christ made. The pivotal chapter – the piece-de-resistance of the entire book – is the chapter entitled ‘The God in the Cave’, which completes Part I and introduces Part II. The pivot of *Everlasting Man*, then, is Chesterton’s account of the nativity scene as the culmination or fulfillment of the good forces at work in ancient, classical culture. The marvelous chapter in part one, ‘Man and Mythologies’, prepares an introduction to the shepherds’ role in the Nativity story. The following chapter, ‘The Demons and the Philosophers’, prepares the way for a new look at the Magi and Herod’s massacre of the Innocents as parts of the Nativity story. The threads that Chesterton had carefully prepared and woven together in Part I, in the story of the rise of the Roman Republic through its conflict with Carthage and the fall of the Roman Empire through a mess of debauchery and philosophic detachment, come together in his delightful description of the Christmas scene.

It might seem a platitude to say that Chesterton’s historical imagination is dominated by the moment of transition from B.C. to A.D. – from Before Christ to Anno Domini. But for Chesterton, Christmas, placed squarely in the middle of the Roman Millenia, stretching roughly from 500 B.C. with the beginnings of the Republic, to 500 A.D. with the last of the Western Emperors, gives heart and meaning to it all.

What was it then about Roman history that contributed to shaping ‘the fullness of time’? For Chesterton, Rome’s defeat of Carthage was a watershed moment.

Chesterton literally refers to Rome’s annihilation of Carthage – following Cato’s dictum ‘*Cartago delenda est, Carthage must be destroyed*’—as ‘what really happened in the Mediterranean’ (142). The rise of the Roman republic through its struggle against Phoenician Carthage was crucial in Chesterton’s imagination to the creation of ‘the health in the heathen world’. This is a phrase Chesterton uses repeatedly in various forms – ‘the heathen health of the world’ – signifying the existence of a natural religiosity that became the good soil for the Gospel, the two-fold culture that formed the shepherds and the Magi who worship the Christ in the scene of Bethlehem. Similarly, the fall of the Roman empire was, in Chesterton’s imagination, like unto the very fall of Man; it was, as the chapter title that closes part one proclaims, ‘The End of the World’, the sign of the insufficiency of the natural and the need for supernatural rescue from outside of human history.

For Chesterton, the shepherds of the nativity scene represent the Roman peasant with pastoral, rural piety to the *genius loci* – the gods of field and grove, crossroads and boundaries; the *lares* and *penates* of hearth and home; the *imagines* of one’s ancestors. It is not too much, I think, to evoke the image of Bernini’s Pious Aeneas, as it stands in the Villa Borghese, to sum up Chesterton’s vision of the core of Roman religiosity: Aeneas is the embodiment of piety to god, father, and country as he holds his father Anchises on his broad shoulders, clutching the *lares* and *penates* of Troy, with his son Ascanius as his heels. This piety to the particularity of one’s own ancestors, city, and children is the exact opposite of modernity’s aspiration toward the abstract, the universal, the cosmopolitan, and the local. Chesterton, a Little Englander and opponent of the cosmopolitanism of London’s commercial elite, idealized this loyalty to the small, the intimate, and the local. For Chesterton, the shepherds are the mythmakers – those who have discovered that ‘the soul of a landscape is a story and the soul of a story is a person’ (Chesterton [1925] 1993, 174).
Part II. The health of the heathen world

As I have said, there is a certain sense in which Chesterton’s *Everlasting Man* is primarily a Christmas book. Chesterton had previously written beautiful essays on English Christmases, Dickensian Christmases, and the philosophy of the gift. In *Everlasting Man*, Chesterton does not just rest his view of the Nativity on the scriptural infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. Rather, Chesterton appeals to the entirety of the Christian tradition of celebrating the mystery of the Nativity throughout the ages. Chesterton appeals to ‘the democracy of the dead’, as he called it in *Orthodoxy* – to the way that the nativity story has been told and retold and the Christmas nativity scene depicted and re-depicted each Christmas. Chesterton was not just reading Luke’s Gospel or Mathew’s Gospel for the annunciation scenes, the story of the shepherds, the account of the coming of the Magi, but rather reading ‘the popular presentation of this popular story in so many miracle plays and carols’. What Chesterton is struck by is that the central paradox of Christmas – the extraordinary contrast between cosmic deity and little, local infancy – ‘has been repeated, reiterated, underlined, emphasised, exulted in, sung, shouted, roared, not to say howled, in a hundred thousand hymns, carols, rhymes, rituals, pictures, poems, and popular sermons’. Chesterton insists that Christmas is something new in human history, a combination of ideas which ‘has emphatically … altered human nature’. Christmas, Chesterton suggests, has created ‘a psychological difference which can outlast any theologies’ (175, 169–174). The story of the Incarnation, of the Nativity in Bethlehem, has had a lasting artistic, cultural, and psychological impact on human history:

It is no more inevitable to connect God with an infant that to connect gravitation with a kitten. It has been created in our minds by Christmas because we are Christians; because we are psychological Christians even when we are not theological ones. (170).

In some sense, Chesterton here claims that Christian culture is essentially Christmas culture; the human civilization that flows forth from Christianity’s Incarnational core. Chesterton is certainly correct that the proliferation of Madonna and Child images, which are part of the earliest Christian iconography on tombs, is an irreversible contribution to the world’s imagination.

For [the Christian] there will always be some savour of religion about the mere picture of a mother and baby; some hint of mercy and softening about the mere mention of the dreadful name of God. (170)

Chesterton here gives point to all those local struggles of Christians to ‘Keep Christ in Christmas’ or maintain public nativity scenes in neighborhoods and town halls. If Chesterton were ever to be made a doctor of the Church, he might be called the Doctor of Christmas for his effort to plumb the meaning of the centuries-long traditions of festivity. ‘Omnipotence and impotence, divinity and infancy, do definitely make a sort of epigram which a million repetitions cannot turn into a platitude’ (171).

What, for Chesterton, are the elements that make up this central scene in human history? Who are the Shepherds? Who are the Magi? Here I will focus on explaining Chesterton’s remarkable theory regarding the Shepherds.

For Chesterton, the Shepherds represent the mythmakers of classical antiquity. All those who sought to find some outlet through imagination for the human need and
desire to worship. Chesterton begins this argument immediately in the opening chapters of the book, when he is dealing with the earliest known human art. ‘The crux and crisis is that man found it natural to worship’ (112). In studying Greek mythologies, Chesterton suggests that ‘sometimes it would seem that the Greeks believed above all things in reverence, only they had nobody to revere’ (108). Chesterton surmises from the ubiquity of images of men kneeling in reverence or raising hands in supplication that the gesture of sacrifice and the impulse to libation expressed a natural human need and became everywhere in the ancient world ‘a normal and necessary action’ (112). Trying to connect the artistic and mythological evidence, Chesterton asserts: ‘The substance of all such paganism may be summarised thus: it is an attempt to reach the divine reality through the imagination’ (110). ‘Mythology sought God through the imagination; or sought truth by means of beauty’ (111). Chesterton does not dismiss mythology as a mere work of imagination. Rather, he affirms these imaginative efforts to express inchoate religious insights – and one of these religious insights was that the personal is a perfection:

The most simple people have the most subtle ideas … Ignorant as a child is, he knows more than he can say and feels not only atmospheres but fine shades … Nobody can understand it who has not had what can only be called the ache of the artist to find some sense and some story in the beautiful things he sees; his hunger for secrets and his anger at any tower or tree escaping with its tale untold. He feels that nothing is perfect unless it is personal. Without that the blind unconscious beauty of the world stands in its garden like a headless statue.

Chesterton suggests that trying to wrestle the personal element from even the seemingly impersonal, material world, is one of the elements of mythological art: ‘One need only be a very minor poet to have wrestled with the tower or the tree until it spoke like a titan or a dryad’. Chesterton goes further to resist dismissing this fascination with the personal as a mere projection of the human element onto nature, and to rather grasp how it was a search for the personal aspect of divine nature:

It is often said that pagan mythology was a personification of the powers of nature. The phrase is true in a sense, but it is very unsatisfactory; because it implies that the forces are abstractions and the personifications are artificial. Myths are not allegories … The impersonation is not of something impersonal … The imaginative does not mean imaginary … Every true artist does feel, consciously or unconsciously, that he is touching transcendentals truths; that his images are the shadows of things seen through a veil. In other words, the natural mystic does know that there is something there; something behind the clouds or within the trees; but he believes that the pursuit of beauty is the way to find it; that imagination is a sort of incantation that can call it up. (104–105)

Chesterton is insistent that ‘we do not know what we ourselves mean when we are moved’. To be touched or ‘moved’ by beautiful images or beautiful stories is a universal experience but one hard to fathom. ‘Very deep things in our nature’ are touched. Artistic ‘correspondences seem really to correspond to something in the soul’ – possibly, for example, ‘some dim sense of the dependence of great things upon small, some dark suggestion that the things nearest to us stretch far beyond our power, some sacramental feeling of the magic of material substances’ (105). ‘Beauty and terror are very real things and related to a real spiritual world; and to touch them at all, even in doubt or fancy, is to stir deep things in the soul’ (108).
Chesterton suggests that the gods and myths of the Latins or the Romans maintained somehow the essence of this spirit of mythology by remaining local – the gods of the hearth, the lares and penates of a particular family, which were continuously worshipped even alongside the Olympian pantheon. Chesterton posits that ‘imaginative impressions are often strictly local’, a reverence for a particular tree or grove, a particular mountain or spring (106). C. S. Lewis refers to this ethos as the Londoness of London or the Donegality of Donegal (Lewis 2013, 115); the spirit or ethos of a place with its seasons, memories, and character. Particular things touched the soul with a sense of mystery – ‘with doubts and fancies’ – but remained in that realm. These are what T. S. Eliot refers to in his Four Quartets as ‘hints and guesses, hints followed by guesses’ (Eliot 1943, stanza V.). ‘Pagan or primitive myths are infinitely suggestive’, Chesterton writes, ‘so long as we are wise enough not to inquire what they suggest’ (111). Pagan mythology satisfied some of the needs of the religious soul of man – for festivity in the seasons, and names to local habitations – a sense of the sacredness of place and of timpe, of here and of now – and for sacrifice: ‘the idea of surrendering something as the portion of the unknown powers’ (110).

This was what Chesterton called ‘the health of the heathen world’. These myth-makers were the shepherds, the pagans, the peasants, those attached to farm and locality, seasons and the rhythm of births and harvests.

These were present, in Chesterton’s telling, in Bethlehem:

Men of the people, like the shepherds, men of the popular tradition, had everywhere been the makers of mythologies. It was they who had felt most directly, with least check or chill from philosophy or the corrupt cults of civilization, the need we have already considered; the images that were the adventures of the imagination; the mythology that was a sort of search; the tempting and tantalizing hints of something half-human in nature; the dumb significance of seasons and special places. They had best understood that the soul of a landscape is a story and the soul of a story is a personality.

Chesterton goes on to suggest that right about the time of the coming of Christ, this ‘healthy heathenism’ was threatened by the philosophic scepticism and detachment that crept into Rome as it became more cosmopolitan.

But the rationalism had already begun to rot away these really irrational though imaginative treasures of the peasant; even as a systematic slavery had eaten the peasant out of house and home. Upon all such peasantry everywhere there was descending a dusk and a twilight of disappointment, in the hour when these few men discovered what they sought. Everywhere Arcadia was fading from the forest. Pan was dead and the shepherds scattered like sheep.

This marked, for Chesterton, the ‘fullness of time’, when the human had done as much as it possibly could, when the mythological quest had reached its limits:

And though no man knew it, the hour was near which was to end and to fulfil all things; and though no man heard it, there was one far-off cry in an unknown tongue upon the heaving wildness of the mountains. The shepherds had found their Shepherd. (174)

For Chesterton, this meeting point of an ending or a ‘finis’ within time and culmination or a ‘telos’ from beyond time is the fundamental structure of history.
Chesterton notes that the great medieval miracle plays dressed the shepherds and the landscape of Bethlehem in the garb of the English and European countryside. All peasants, all myth-making men of all times and places were present at the nativity in the person of the Shepherds. The encounter of this natural piety and natural artistry of man with Christ becomes a perpetual feature of Christian civilization. The great English Renaissance and Baroque poets 'turn their Bethlehem play into a Latin Eclogue', placing the nativity in a scene from the pastoral poetic tradition (175). Chesterton suggests that in doing so ‘they took up one of the most important links in human history’. He also suggests that ‘the Catholic Church has taken over with uproarious success the whole of this popular business of giving people local legends and lighter ceremonial movements’ (108). Christianity fulfills rather than destroys the natural religiosity of mankind.

Part III. Healthy heathenism and perverse paganism

It is central to Chesterton’s story that this ‘saner heathenism’ had already been threatened by ‘the insane heathenism of human sacrifice’ and had come through victorious. Mankind won a significant victory in the dark night before the light of Christ dawned. That iconic victory, Chesterton says, was the victory of Rome over Carthage in the Punic Wars. Chesterton celebrates Rome in its near defeat, during the seventeen years that Hannibal successfully campaigned in central Italy, ravaging the territory and threatening Rome:

It was Moloch upon the mountain of the Latins, looking with his appalling face across the plain; it was Baal who trampled the vineyards with his feet of stone; it was the voice of Tanit the invisible, behind her trailing veils, whispering of the love that is more horrible than hate. The burning of Italian cornfields, the ruins of Italian vines, were something more than actual; they were allegorical. They were the destruction of domestic and fruitful things…

Again it is crucial for Chesterton that it is only when the forces of good have reached the limit of their natural strength that rescue appears and the tide turns. For all appearances, Hannibal’s seventeen year ravaging of the Italian peninsula, the great defeat at the battle of Cannae, signified a within history ‘finis’:

The household gods bowed low in darkness… The war of the gods and demons seemed already ended; and the gods were dead. (174)

For Chesterton, the Romans in the struggle against Hannibal of Carthage were one of the original lost causes. The miracle is that they maintained their resistance for as long as they did:

Nobody understands the romance of Rome, and why she rose afterwards to a representative leadership that seemed almost fated and fundamentally natural who does not keep in mind the agony of horror and humiliation through which she had continued to testify to the sanity that is the soul of Europe. (149)

Rome’s victory over Carthage has for Chesterton the character of ‘a miracle’, a rescue or ‘telos’ of the story not entirely explicable by natural forces.
It is crucial for Chesterton’s vision that the Carthaginians were a very advanced material and technological and commercial culture. Indeed, they were a merchant empire that could not comprehend the allegiance of Rome’s political allies and relied almost entirely on a mercenary army. It is crucial for Chesterton’s vision that the greatest general of the Carthaginians, Hannibal, was defeated because the leaders resisted the cost of sending him reinforcements. In Chesterton’s vision this highly commercial and practical culture, turned to a ‘realistic superstition’ – a superstition that was not at all like the mythological searching after the truth and mystery of things that he describes as ‘healthy heathenism’, but rather ‘another sort of superstition that does definitely look for results’, ‘the idea of employing the demons who get things done’ (117–118). For Chesterton, the Carthagianian practice of child sacrifice was a kind of deadly and efficient exchange, a tit for tat, ‘I give you this so that you give me that’. It was, Chesterton suggests, precisely the kind of religion a trading community would envision.

In his discussion of Carthage’s child sacrifice Chesterton returns to an idea that runs through much of his work. It is an idea that is especially apparent in the introductory chapters of his books about St. Francis and St. Thomas, when he talks about the need to purge the decadent classical culture of its addiction to sodomy. It is the idea of the all-too knowing commitment of evil. Chesterton has the idea that beyond the natural weaknesses and sins of human nature, there is a temptation to deliberately commit evil as a key to gaining power over dark forces. ‘With the appeal to lower spirits comes the horrible notion that the gesture must not only be very small but very low… Sooner or later a man deliberately sets himself to do the most disgusting thing he can think of. It is felt that the extreme of evil will extort a sort of attention or answer from the evil powers under the surface of the world’ (119). Perversion, the reversal of natural forces, ‘violence against instinct’, is seen as the key to power. Perversion is chosen, not out of weakness, but out of lust for dominion. ‘They are not doing it because they do not think it wrong, but precisely because they do think it wrong’ (119). Human sacrifice, cannibalism, sodomy are not the sins of weakness or the crimes of backward cultures. ‘They are refined and intelligent enough to indulge sometimes in a self-conscious diabolism’. ‘They are working backwards against their own nature and the nature of things’ (120).

Chesterton even goes so far as to see a parallelism between the ancient Hebrews and the Roman republicans. ‘Elijah raving above the slaughter of Carmel or Cato thundering against the amnesty of Africa … were at one in what they hated’ (123). The perverse paganism of human sacrifice ‘called up against it in simultaneous fury the servant of one God in Palestine and the guardians of the all the household gods in Rome’ (123).

One hundred years after G.K. Chesterton and H.G. Wells crossed swords over the meaning of history and the meaning of the Roman destruction of Carthage, the debate still rages (Schwartz et al. 2010; Xella et al. 2013). One group of scholars insists, like H. G. Wells, that this was merely a geo-political, economic rivalry, the replacing of one superpower in the Mediterranean with another, that the spoils of war fought for were amphora of olives and wine, that the so-called ‘tophit’ of Carthage was a mere child cemetery, that tales of human sacrifice were part of a Black Legend invented as a hate smear campaign by Roman writers. The other group of equally talented and
credentialled scholars insists that the archeological, epigraphical, and literary sources are overwhelmingly in favor of the real existence of child sacrifice in Carthage, as in Tyre and Sidon, as in Peru. Chesterton choses to accept the story as told to us by the ancient sources, in which the Carthaginians are portrayed as a degenerate cultural power, capable of the worst offenses – dabbling in diabolism.

Conclusion

What does Chesterton contribute to the current state of historical reflection, particularly historical reflection on Western Civilization? We all know that the teaching of Western Civilization courses in universities has been largely abandoned as politically incorrect, not inclusive, culturally hegemonic and hubristic, etc. (Allardyce 1982). And even when the teaching of Western Civilization holds on in certain enclaves it tends to be taught with textbooks which cannot escape the materialist, evolutionary, progressive narrative, which books such as H.G. Wells’s Outline of History pioneered at the very beginnings of the modern, professionalized, academic discipline of history in the 1880s and the creation of Civ courses in the 1920s. Simon Schama’s new post-modern Civilizations (plural) series for BBC, which aims to displace the BBC’s 1969 Civilisation (singular) series that Sir Kenneth Clark made for the Greatest Generation of the World War II era, is evidence of the extreme difficulty that moderns have with finding a center to the story of civilization.

For example, Simon Schama’s episode entitled ‘Radiance’ disintegrates into a celebration of color, color, and nothing but color – whether it is the colors of the stained glass windows of Amiens and Chartres, or the colors of a Japanese print, or the colors of the Hindu spring festival. Color, Schama tells us, is one of the values of Civilizations (plural). And he stands in awe of it.

Without a definition of the nature of man or a theory of human action derived from philosophical anthropology, or a coherent understanding of what a just social order would look like derived from political philosophy, ‘Civilization’ as a historical subject disintegrates into meaningless and contradictory affirmations. The story has no center.

Both Benedict XVI and Josef Pieper have neatly diagnosed the modern impasse with regard to how we pass on our own history to the next generation.

In his historical essay, ‘The Spiritual Roots of Europe’ Benedict XVI contrasts the historical imagination of Oswald Spengler to that of Arnold Toynbee. Spengler envisions history in terms of a natural, and inevitable life cycle of civilizations. For Spengler, all apparent progress – all increasing industrial and technological innovation – merely speeds the sapping of vital energy of a culture. Decline and fall is inevitable for every civilization (Ratzinger 2006, 67). For Toynbee, on the other hand – and clearly Benedict sides with Toynbee in this debate – history is not subject to inevitable cycles in the same way that the material universe is. Toynbee insists on the possibility of the injection of a spiritual principle that can revitalize a civilization from its roots. ‘Rather than a biologicist vision, he offers a voluntaristic one focused on the energy of creative minorities and exceptional individuals’ (Ratzinger 2006, 67–68).

What Ratzinger/Benedict XVI was pointing out was that one either believed, like Spengler, that human civilization is multiple – plural – and that Western Civilization,
or Christendom, is one culture among many, that has had its rise, and will have its fall – may indeed have already experienced its fall – and this is the natural, inevitable, and irreversible life cycle of civilizations, or you surmise with Toynbee – and Chesterton – that there is in fact one unified human story, that that story runs through Rome and Christianity, that Christian culture is sui generis, that there is ‘something solid in the solitary and unique character’ of human history that sets it apart from natural and animal evolution, as well as ‘something solid in the solitary and unique character’ about Europe’s history, Christianity’s history, that sets it apart from the cyclical rise-and-fall of other cultures and cults. As Remi Brague has put it, Western culture has been subject to renaissances (Brague 2009). As Chesterton more colloquially put it, Western culture ‘has the jumps’ (Chesterton [1908] 1995).

To put the politically incorrect point bluntly: once upon a Spenglerian time there was shifting mirage of cultures subject to the rise-and-fall cycle – the Minoans, Myceneans, Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, Carthaginians, Greeks, Mayans, Incas, Aztecs, etc…. But one civilization rose – Rome – and at its peak, before its fall, became the chrysalis of a new Christian culture, the locus of an encounter between natural man and the supernatural that is now a recurring feature of human civilization. This encounter is the point and heart of the human story.

The end of Rome was the end of a world, the end of the rise-and-fall of cultures plural, perpetually destroyed like galaxies crashing in the night. Both Benedict XVI and G. K. Chesterton point us towards ‘the creative minorities and extraordinary individuals’ who prepare the way for the next encounter, the next renaissance, the next resurrection of civilization. In Chesterton’s story, the shepherds and the Magi stand as layers of the ‘heathen health of the world’ that were able to receive the impulse when it came.

Josef Pieper, describes ‘the Christian view of history’ as having a ‘tense, and at the same time, extremely spacious structure’. The Christian view of history is tense because ‘the current present is construed as the era more or less immediately preceding the dominion of the Antichrist’ and the ‘end of time [is] explicitly conceived as catastrophic’. On the other hand, the Christian view of history is spacious in that Rome is seen as ‘the last’ empire, and we have been living in this last era for quite some time and have shown an ‘incomparable power of building and founding’ (Pieper 1999, 84–85).

The tension in the Christian view of history arises from a distinction between ‘the intra-historical and extra-temporal end-situations’. The end of history can be viewed as both the finish in the sense of the mere cessation of time and the fulfillment or culmination of all the forces of history. The end can be conceived as both finis and telos. Christians accept ‘the catastrophic character of the intra-historical end, upon which, as a deliverance, the extra-temporal end ensues’. For the Christian, the finish within time has a manifestly catastrophic character, the character of an Armageddon, characterized by rule by the Antichrist, persecution and martyrdom. Yet, the extra-temporal end – the creation of a new heaven and a new earth, the consummation of all things in Christ and the transfiguring of all good works into their effective completion in the Kingdom of God, the governance of the saints in glory – is equally affirmed.

Pieper affirms that the ‘highly intricate structure of this conception of history … answers to the intricate, indeed mysterious, structure of historical reality’.
Pieper contrasts this Christian view of history with the absence of tension in the progressive view launched by Kant and the absence of spaciousness in the existential-nihilistic view of Nietzsche. The tense-yet-spacious Christian view of history ‘dissolves’ into the mere optimism of the progressive modern historical narrative or the mere pessimism of the nihilistic, post-modern rejection of all coherent historical narrative.

Pieper’s notion of the tense-yet-spacious Christian view of history, like Benedict XVI’s, leaves room for ‘creative minorities and extraordinary individuals’ who remain good soil for the encounter with the supernatural, who prepare the way for renaissance and rescue from outside of history, those for whom catastrophe is fulfillment.

As we have argued in this paper, taking Everlasting Man as Chesterton’s central contribution to the study of the history of civilization, Chesterton’s historical imagination centers on the Christmas scene. He finds there the perennial elements that make for the movement of history towards catastrophic finis and outside-of-time telos. He finds the creative minority of the Shepherds and the extraordinary individuals of the Magi whose embrace of the God-child constitutes the very fulfillment of human history, despite the catastrophic massacre of the Innocents by Herod. For Chesterton, Christmas story acts as a key to human action, revealing that at every moment of history one can discern this paradoxical structure, both tense and spacious: a little, local, hidden culture of life receiving immortal confirmation, while a culture of death seems manifestly triumphant.

Many American tourists visit Rome because of their fascination with political antiquity, seeking the lessons of ancient republicanism. Christians of course visit Rome as the Seat of Peter and the site of the struggle of the early Christian martyrs and apostles. G. K. Chesterton reminds us that every human heart is touched by the need to worship – like Pious Aeneas – the gods of hearth and home. It was not just the Roman roads, the Roman universal language, the Roman peace that benefited the spread of the Christian Gospel. The natural religiosity of Roman people – its ‘healthy heathenism’ – made Rome, even under the corruption of Empire, a good soil for the Gospel of the Incarnate God – the cosmic deity who had a little local birthplace on earth.

Notes
1. After this, all page number references refer to this work unless otherwise specified.
2. For further exploration of the centrality of localism to Chesterton’s historical thinking, see McCleary’s (2009) book.

Disclosure statement
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