What, if anything, is it that makes the human uniquely human? This, in part, is the question that G.K. Chesterton starts with in this classic exploration of human history. Responding to the evolutionary materialism of his contemporary (and antagonist) H.G. Wells, Chesterton in this work affirms human uniqueness and the unique message of the Christian faith. Writing in a time when social Darwinism was rampant, Chesterton instead argued that the idea that society has been steadily progressing from a state of primitivism and barbarity towards civilization is simply and flatly inaccurate. Barbarism and civilization were not successive stages in the progress of the world, he affirms, with arguments drawn from the histories of both Egypt and Babylon. As always with Chesterton, there is in this analysis something (as he said of Blake) very plain and emphatic. He sees in Christianity a rare blending of philosophy and mythology, or reason and story, which satisfies both the mind and the heart. On both levels it rings true. As he puts it, in answer to the historical query of why it was accepted, and is accepted, I answer for millions of others in my reply; because it fits the lock; because it is like life. Here, as so often in Chesterton, we sense a lived, awakened faith. All that he writes derives from a keen intellect guided by the hearts own knowledge. --Doug Thorpe

My Personal Review:
Everlasting Man had a decisive role in one of the most important conversions of the this century. C.S. Lewis described reading it in 1925 when he was still an atheist:
Then I read Chestertons Everlasting Man and for the first time saw the whole Christian outline of history set out in a form that seemed to me to make sense . . . I already thought Chesterton the most sensible man alive apart from his Christianity. Now, I veritably believe, I thought that Christianity itself was very sensible apart from its Christianity. (Surprised by Joy p.223)
When asked what Christian writers had helped him, Lewis remarked in 1963, six months before he died, The contemporary book that has helped me the most is Chesterton's The Everlasting Man. (God in the Dock p.260.) The book has two parts. The first is titled On the Creature called Man. It uses the available evidence from paleontology, ancient history, comparative religions, etc. but brings it together in remarkable ways. The questions he asks (and to some extent, answers) are the ones we continue to brood over: How is man different from other animals? Why are there so many religions? How do we make some sense out of our long and tumultuous human history?

The questions raised in the first part receive a more definitive answer in the second: On the Man called Christ. It is not that Jesus gives a step by step response to each of the queries. Rather he begins by throwing us into an even more perplexing quandary. Chesterton asks what it would really be like to read the Gospel free of all preconceptions. The effect would not be gentle Jesus, meek and mild, but rather someone who jars our sensibilities. As Chesterton points out, the most honest response might be stark staring incredulity. Did he really do that? How could he say something so preposterous?

Chesterton's genius is to help us face the paradox, the seeming contradiction. Really there are only two possible responses to the riddle of the Gospel. Either Jesus is a blasphemer (as Caiphas charged) or he is who he claimed to be--and the apostles professed him to be. In that claim Jesus is unique. Mohamet did not suggest equality with Allah. Moses was never placed on a par with Yahweh. Buddha, Zoroaster, Confucius never made assertions of divinity. Those who did were megalomaniacs like Caligula or the unfortunate people we confine to insane asylums. Yet few consider that Jesus was that kind of person. Chesterton, like C.S. Lewis after him, helps us confront the incredible implications of this greatest of all paradoxes.

He then asks the next logical question. Is the Church a continuation of Jesus or a breaking away from him? The first might seem hard to accept, but the second involves even greater difficulties. As a help to making the correct choice, Chesterton asks us to reflect on the analogy of a key. Its truth depends on whether it fits the lock! You wont get very far analyzing its seemingly odd shape. What you have to is see if it opens the door.

In reflecting on the key (the creed) Chesterton uses what he calls the witness of the heretics. Each one tried to reshape the key. The church has constantly resisted that. As Chesterton brilliantly illustrates, only if the key retains its shape will it unlock the door.

In the final chapter Chesterton gives one of the most remarkable arguments for the truth of faith: the five deaths of the Church. We are not the first ones to live in an age which has concluded the church was moribund, passé. But it has experienced some remarkable resurrections like a phoenix rising from its own ashes. Chesterton analyzes five times when that happened and offers his reflection on what that means for us today.

I say today because even tho Everlasting Man was written almost 75 years ago, it addresses many concerns which are still current: evolution,
feminism, historicism, cultural relativism, economic and social determinism, etc. It is salutary to see that back in the 20s these issues were already old stuff. TV programs and magazine articles meant to be bold or shocking all of a sudden seem hackneyed.

In addition to its other merits, this book has the value of being immensely entertaining. Not that it is an easy read. In fact it requires a lot of concentration. Chesterton sometimes piles paradox upon paradox in a way that one can feel dazzled and conclude he does not have substance behind his words. But that is a hasty conclusion. To read Chesterton requires a patience which is perhaps more difficult in our age. Yet to read him slowly and meditatively will bring great rewards.

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