



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

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Volume 30  
Number 1

Article 5

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10-15-2011

## Is a "Christian" Mystery Story Possible? Charles Williams's *War in Heaven* as a Generic Case Study

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### Recommended Citation

Higgins, Sørina (2011) "Is a "Christian" Mystery Story Possible? Charles Williams's *War in Heaven* as a Generic Case Study," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 30: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol30/iss1/5>

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### Is a "Christian" Mystery Story Possible? Charles Williams's *War in Heaven* as a Generic Case Study

#### Abstract

Examines *War in Heaven's* radical upsetting of the detective novel norms promised in its first few paragraphs and shows how Williams uses and subverts these conventions and leads us to contemplate, instead of a mystery and its solution, an insoluble Mystery with a capital M.

#### Additional Keywords

Christianity in mystery stories; Mystery fiction; Williams, Charles. *War in Heaven*



IS A "CHRISTIAN" MYSTERY STORY  
POSSIBLE? CHARLES WILLIAMS'S  
*WAR IN HEAVEN*  
AS A GENERIC CASE STUDY

SØRINA HIGGINS

*WAR IN HEAVEN*, WRITTEN BY THE UNJUSTLY OVERLOOKED INKLING, Charles Williams (1886-1945), was published in 1930. It begins with this glorious sentence: "The telephone bell was ringing wildly, but without result, since there was no one in the room but the corpse." After this auspicious opening, the book unravels into a fantastic tale of the Holy Graal, black magic, and devil worship. The standard murder mystery beginning gives way to an almost systematic reversal of the standard procedures of that genre. In *War in Heaven*, Williams departs from the rules that traditionally govern the murder mystery and manipulates the genre to serve his central purpose. This purpose is quite different from the *raison d'être* of the mystery story proper, and leads into a discussion of how, and to what extent, a mystery can incorporate Christian themes. An examination of this book, then, becomes an investigation of a fundamental premise about how Christians write, and read, mysteries. Ultimately, *War in Heaven* serves as a case study in the limitations—and possibilities—of truly Christian mysteries.

Critics of *War in Heaven* tend to repeat the same three arguments against the success of this book. First, the opening leads the reader into generic expectations that are overturned by subsequent developments. Second, the characters are not developed as are those in standard fiction. Third, both plot and characters are subordinated to philosophical concerns. Hillary Waugh wrote that "The mystery novel does not contain the equipment to carry messages. It is too frail a box to hold the human spirit" (75). At most, he suggests, a murder mystery can make an implicit statement about maintaining order or about the value of life. Williams goes far beyond this limit.

In order to convict or clear Williams of the charge of not playing fair with the reader, the conventions of the genre must be established. While the "mystery novel" goes by many names and has numerous relations, there are two major strands: the English detective mystery and the American hard-boiled detective novel. Williams, as a British writer of the 1930s and 40s, is an heir of the

English type, and the conventions discussed below relate to that side of the mystery family.

Edgar Allan Poe had presented the formula in his three C. Auguste Dupin tales (Nickerson 744, Panek 10), Arthur Conan Doyle had perfected it, Agatha Christie had begun involving the reader more fully in the search for the solution, and Dorothy L. Sayers was raising the genre to new literary heights (Kenney xi) when Charles Williams entered the scene. Aaron Marc Stein states the formula for a mystery tale succinctly:

The rules are simple. All the data must be presented to the reader. When he is confronted with the solution, he must be left with the conviction that if he had not failed to take notice of a piece of evidence when it was given to him, or if he had reasoned properly from the available data, he would have achieved the solution on his own. (43)

Any writer who tricks a reader into a false conclusion by withholding data "has violated the form" (43). The ending must feel impossible before it is reached and inevitable once it has arrived.

A more historically relevant (albeit American) measure was released just two years before the publication of Williams's *War in Heaven*: S.S. Van Dine's "Twenty Rules of the Detective Story," published in *The American Magazine* in September of 1928. It is a rigorous set of strictures that even the most careful practitioners feel more free to break than to keep. It includes such items as "The detective novel must have a detective in it" (that rules out, for instance, Sayers's *The Documents in the Case*); "There must be no love interest" (out goes Lord Peter Wimsey); and "The detective himself, or one of the official investigators, should never turn out to be the culprit" (that eliminates—a famous work by Agatha Christie). Van Dine even included stylistic restrictions: "A detective novel should contain no long descriptive passages, no literary dallying with side-issues, no subtly worked-out character analyses, no 'atmospheric' preoccupations"; in other words, he seems to suggest, it must not be good writing. Perhaps these restrictive rules in the context of an enormous publishing boom explains why there were more bad mysteries than good ones written in the 1930s: "The rules, rigorously applied, made rotten fiction" (Panek 120-21, 123). As a result, "thwarting expectations is a convention as deeply ingrained as any other in this genre" (Nickerson 753). Writing in the genre while simultaneously parodying it is also common (Roth 25). The rules, then (to appropriate Hamlet), are perhaps "more honour'd in the breach than the observance."

It follows, then, that Williams is not breaking with tradition when he stretches the rules almost out of recognition. His plot does begin with a crime, but the murderer confesses on page twenty-six, and another complicated crime

altogether—in which protagonist and antagonist are dreadfully confused, at least from the point of view of the Law—soon eclipses it.

This is a good moment to pause and summarize the plot of *War in Heaven*. The story opens in a publishing house with the discovery of a body. The murder-interest is soon supplanted by an astonishing revelation: the Holy Graal resides in the quiet country parish of the unlikely hero, a dapper Anglican Archdeacon named Julian Davenant. Soon the murderer, Gregory Persimmons, hires a thug to whack the Archdeacon on the head and steal the Graal. Mr. Davenant calmly steals it back, gathering allies and enemies for a brief chase across the countryside into London. Meanwhile (besides using the Graal for a black mass and for spiritual domination), the villain has a side plan: the ravishing of a child's soul. While apparently safe in the home of a Roman Catholic Duke, the Graal suffers a metaphysical attack, which the Archdeacon fends off by a mighty feat of prayer. Persimmons blackmails the priest into exchanging the Graal for, apparently, a woman's salvation. At this point Prester John appears. The pace quickens as Persimmons and his cronies murder a young man trying to recover the Graal, lure the Archdeacon into their lair, and attempt to bind his body to a dead man's soul. The Power of God sets the little priest free, Persimmons surrenders to police, the child is out of danger, and the Archdeacon dies a sublime death during Prester John's celebration of the Eucharist.

While one bitter critic calls this "a simple and even familiar story" (Barclay 99), it is not an easy story to follow, much less to swallow. In addition to the sidelining of the murder, it has three questionable features: the two-dimensional characters, the introduction of the supernatural, and the unsatisfactory ending.

Williams's characterization requires examination in the light of generic expectations. The most obvious problem in this respect is that there is no detective proper, certainly no one in the Dupin or Holmes line. There are several minor characters who serve in official capacities of detection: Inspector Colquhoun, Chief Constable Colonel Conyers, and Constable Puttenham. More promising yet, there is the inimitable, Chestertonian Archdeacon (assisted by Mornington and the Duke of the North Ridings). The Archdeacon is blessed with intuition. He sees with the insight that only a person submitted fully to the will of God can possess.

However, the Archdeacon's "allies, Kenneth Mornington and the Duke of the North Ridings, are more briefly sketched [than he], as are all the lesser characters. [...] Williams portrays them with a few swift strokes" (Sibley 51), which infuriates some readers. Readers of mysteries expect "human engagements" and stories "brightly and vigorously peopled" (Sandoe xi). Barclay, a fierce detractor, raves that Williams suffers from "a total inability to write [...] credible dialogue; a total lack of interest in the depicting and

development of character" (99). Readers complain that there is not enough time spent on the people themselves and that the *dramatis personae* comprises none but two-dimensional characters. It is true that there is not a lot of time spent. Whether it is not enough time requires an answer to the question, "Enough time for what?"

Admittedly, the characters are rather flat. However, this is not the result of "tremendous technical deficiencies of Williams' characterization" (Barclay 100); rather, his theological purpose led him to depict characters, in Platonic terms, as copies of absolute spiritual realities. In another of Williams's novels, *The Place of the Lion*, the Platonic forms become incarnate as huge animals and wreak havoc on the English countryside. Here, in *War in Heaven*, his characters are copies of absolute spiritual realities. Manasseh and Dmitri are "pure evil": they are earthly manifestations of the Form of Absolute Evil. Adrian is a terrestrial representation of Innocence; Mornington and the Duke are a shadow and copy of the Ideal of Friendship.

To be fair, not all readers find the characters flat. T.S. Eliot wrote that Williams's "personages have a reality, an existence in their own right, which differentiates them from the ordinary puppets of the usual adventure story" (xvii). Yet even he goes on to admit that "only as much of the reality of each character is given as is relevant" — which is not much compared to, for instance, those of Dickens, Austen, or J.K. Rowling. Williams structured the interactions of his characters to emphasize action, not persons. He sacrificed the psychological and emotional complexities of characters to the eternal realities or dramas they represent or in which they participate. He is interested in people not for themselves but for what they represent, or for the larger realities behind them. This subordination does not lessen their importance. Rather, it places them in right relationship to the cosmos and baptizes them with universal and eternal importance, lifting them from what would otherwise be a localized and particularized emotional or psychological interest.

This subordination of characters to actions is not unique to Williams. David Grossvogel, in *Mystery and Its Fictions*, writes: "The detective story requires characters only in sufficient numbers, and sufficiently fleshed out, to give its puzzle an anthropomorphic semblance and to preserve the reader from boredom for as long as the veil of its 'mystery' is drawn" (41). In addition, Joel Black reminds those readers who might feel pity for the murdered man that "the victim does not play much of a role in the tale of murder" (786). Indeed, in most murder mysteries, the victim is already dead when the story opens and serves merely as a foil for the detective's genius or the suspense of the action. The few stories in which the reader is led to empathize with the victim are all the more grotesque for a complication of feeling that detracts from the entertainment value of the book (Dorothy L. Sayers's *Whose Body?* might serve as an example).

This, of course, is rather the question under discussion: Is a mystery story only for entertainment? It is at least that, certainly. Is it anything more?

Some think not. Some think so. Joan Roberts comments that “Many commentators assume ideology to be absent or out of place in a work of fiction which is seen to be an entertainment consisting of the solution of the puzzle—as if the ‘restoration of order’ did not necessarily imply a certain kind of order, and ideology, which permeates the characters’ lives and narrative action” (qtd. in Nickerson 751). If there is an idea that is readily communicated through even the most escapist of murder mysteries, it is this concept of the necessity of order. This is one reason mysteries can be read for pleasure and relaxation: a reader can delight in “the surety of the novel’s progression from confusion to solution” (Nickerson 744). Agatha Christie promotes this concept: her flawless and high-class Styles Court “comes into being through a process of diluted logic that assumes, since mystery is given as an unfortunate condition that can, and should be, eliminated, that life without such unpleasantness must perforce be agreeable and desirable. [...] The pity of murder is that [...] murder spoils what was otherwise good” (Grossvogel 42-43). The most common messages communicated by murder mysteries, then, are the necessity of order and the value of human life.

This ideology is moral, even religious. According to John Ball,

[M]urder within the pages of the detective story is not done so that the readers may fulfill their lust for gore; murder is done because it is an ultimate crime, one which cannot be reversed and for which restitution cannot be made. [...] [W]hen the murderer has struck the deed is done and there is no calling it back this side of the Day of Judgment. (21)

This is an essentially religious way of looking at the world: materialism has no explanation, beyond the nervous system, for the value of life and the horror of its sudden, violent extinction. During an interview on the Mars Hill Audio Journal, Ken Meyers asked P.D. James how she, as a Christian, could justify writing about violent murders. She replied that writing about murder was an affirmation of life. Similarly, during an interview with *The Observer*, she said: “Murder is the unique crime; it’s the only one for which we can never make reparation to the victim.” Human life, in other words, is the most valuable possession we have because it is the only one that can never be restored.

But there is another, more profound, ideology that can be conveyed through a mystery story. It hinges on the inclusion of the supernatural in the plot devices. Critics are divided on this question. Stein writes that “A detective-story writer, of course, cannot permit himself a ghost. He must build his proof entirely on hard, physically verifiable fact without any recourse to supernatural assistance” (34). In this view, any introduction of paranormal elements would break the number one rule of playing fair with the reader. However, other

scholars differ. Robert E. Briney asserts that "From the earliest days mystery fiction has exhibited a thread—and often more than a thread—of the fanciful and fantastic" (235). These variant readings are more than readings of the genre itself; they are also readings of its origins, history, and development. LeRoy Lad Panek claims: "The way in which we define the detective story determines the history we create for it" (7). A history that reads the fantastic, supernatural element into the genre will find its origins not only in Enlightenment rationalism, the abolition of torture, and the capitalist-driven growth of inner-city crime (Stein, Mandel), but also in the Gothic. Catherine Nickerson takes this view: "When we look back at Poe [...] it is clear that his detective stories were not the opposite of his gothic stories, but a new formulation of them" (752-3). Indeed, perhaps the Gothic is as essential an ancestor as tales of true crime (Panek 7-8) and heroic folk stories (Mandel 1).

Williams's *War in Heaven* traces its ancestry to the Gothic side of the mystery family. Sanford Schwartz, in *C.S. Lewis on the Final Frontier*, maintains that one of the greatest lessons Lewis learned from Williams was how to transform the Gothic genre for Christian purposes:

What Williams offered to Lewis was a compelling generic formula [...] that employs the unsettling resources of Gothic tradition at once to stir up doubts about the naturalistic ethos of modern civilization and to reaffirm a traditional Christian conception of the supernatural [...] in a beatific sublimation of Gothic terror. (92-3)

There are "certain persistent features" of the Gothic that appealed to Williams' occult imagination, including "images of insanity, transgression, the supernatural, and excess" (Smith 4). With these elements, tantalizing to one of his taste, it is no wonder that Williams combined Gothic supernaturalism with elements of classic detective fiction. He readily took to the conventions of Gothic literature—"veiled ladies, disappearing corpses, intrusions of the supernatural, the dead returned to life" and "terrible evils practiced in private space" (Halttunen 116, 124)—in order to enhance the quantity of mystery he could pack into in that frail box.

Williams was sincerely interested in magic. For at least ten years, he was a member of The Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, A.E. Waite's Christian offshoot of the Order of the Golden Dawn (King 12; Gilbert 148; Ashenden 5-6). He served as Master of the Temple for two six-month periods (Gilbert 149). Among other rites and symbols, the Holy Graal was an essential representation used by Waite's order (Carpenter 82). The ideas and knowledge he gained there continued to influence his writing throughout his life. In particular, his reading of Waite's book *The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail* "enabled Williams to reinterpret the story of the Grail for his own contemporaries in *War in Heaven*" and in the



Arthurian poems (Brewer 55). The ideas and knowledge he gained by reading Waite's works, studying original occult sources such as the *Cabbala*, participating in Rosicrucian rituals, and pursuing independent investigations into the Tarot and other mystical systems continued to influence his writing throughout his life. The Arthurian poems are packed with such symbols, rituals, and images; *War in Heaven* is rife with them. Most obvious are the Black Sabbath, a marriage ceremony between a live man and a dead one, and the centrality of the Graal as a conduit of supernatural power. Agnes Sibley observes that "Williams has in this novel combined the suspense of the murder mystery with an interest in religion and the occult" (48). In other words, he has infused the literary form with his particularly Gothic Christianity.

All of this points ahead towards the ultimate purpose of his use of the structures of the mystery genre. First, however, it is necessary to address the other accusation of a flaw in his plot: the tidy appearance of a *deus ex machina* in the form of Prester John. Sibley addresses this in her introduction to Williams's work:

If the novel is read only for the surface story, Prester John may seem a flaw in the construction—too much a 'god from the machine,' someone brought in at the last moment to save the good people and punish the bad so that there will be a happy ending. But such a reading would ignore Williams's basic belief that, despite appearances to the contrary, the God who is love is in complete charge of the universe. The irresistible power of good is always at work, and Prester John, who comes and goes like the sunshine, is only an indication of that invisible power. (52-3)

Certainly, Prester John is an embodiment of goodness, providence, and order. Yet he is much more than that. Williams is purposefully straining the structure as far as it can go in order to pack into the fragile box of the mystery story as much real mystery, *mysterion*, as it can hold.

Prester John is not a *deus ex machina*. Nor is he a poorly drawn character. He is richly allusive and elusive, with a complex historical and legendary past. While "the character of Prester John was inspired by a real person" (Valtrová 166), he drew around him a complex of connotations and topoi: exoticism, military prowess, political leverage, religious authority, mysticism, sacramentalism, eternal life, salvation, and—most importantly for Williams's mythopoetics—the Holy Grail. Each of these is relevant to *War in Heaven* and to Williams's work as a whole.

According to Matteo Salvatore, the first European contact with a putative Prester John, living near the Mongol kingdoms, came "In 1122 [when] a foreign visitor to Rome was audacious enough to introduce himself [...] as a representative of 'Patriarch John of India'" (596). Jana Valtrová relates that:

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a legend spread across Europe of an empire ruled by a mighty Christian king and priest named John and located somewhere in the East, close to paradise. An important source of the imagery associated with this mythical empire was a letter written in 1170, whose author was believed to be Prester John himself and which was addressed to the Byzantine emperor [...]. (165)

Prester John quickly became "the quintessential representative of a distant and largely unknown Christian might" (Salvadore 596), the emblem of "a remote Christian world, thought superior to a debased Western Christianity that was losing its confrontation with Islam both in Jerusalem and in Southern Europe" (596-97). As Islam took hold, "the figure of a distant and powerful Christian king became the main character of an inventive ploy meant to resolve the tension between the present and future conditions of Christianity in the face of a Muslim onslaught" (623).

Soon after this time, Marco Polo's travel narrative relates (in Volume I, Chapters XLVII-L) a great battle between Prester John and Gengis Kahn, in which Prester John carries a far different character than his more common image of sanctity. According to Marco Polo, Gengis Kahn asked to marry Prester John's daughter, but Prester John sent back a "brutal message" and the two met in pitched battle, during which Prester John was killed. Volume II of Marco Polo's travels includes another curious, unflattering story. It is a childish tale of Prester John dispatching seventeen men to feign loyalty to a rival, then kidnap this "Golden King" and bring him a prisoner back to Prester John's court (Chapter XXXIX).

In contrast, throughout *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, recounting that worthy's voyages of 1322, Prester John is the lord of great lands "of the country of Ind" (Chapter VI); indeed, he is "Emperor of Ind" (Chapter XX)—and yet, "He dwelleth commonly in the city of Susa" (Chapter XXX), which adds a Persian exoticism in the European ear. Mandeville praises this king highly:

This Prester John hath under him many kings and many isles and many diverse folk of diverse conditions. [...] This Emperor Prester John is Christian, and a great part of his country also. [...] This Emperor Prester John when he goeth into battle against any other lord, he hath no banners borne before him; but he hath three crosses of gold, fine, great and high, full of precious stones. (Chapter XXX)

He has a pope, archbishops, bishops, and abbots (as any good Christian ruler ought, to the European mind), and "In his land be many Christian men of good faith and of good law [...] and have commonly their priests, that sing the Mass,

and make the sacrament of the altar" (Chapter XXXII). In these terms, Mandeville contributed to the legend of this mysterious, admirable Christian king in the Far East.

By the fourteenth century, Prester John was one of many popular "extra-European icons of sanctity [...] a pious Christian sovereign who throughout the Middle Ages had been located in the Far East" (Salvadore 596). However, as European explorations penetrated the Mongol realms, it became clear that there was no space in Asia for such a fabulous Christian kingdom, and Prester John "soon found a new home in Africa, a continent that was still relatively unknown and mysterious to the European elites" (598). Thenceforward, he was an Ethiopian or Abyssinian ruler whose alliance was eagerly desired by European Christians.

There are other threads of this legend, as well. One persistent idea is that Prester John may be the Old Testament king Melchizedek, who lived on to become a keeper of the Grail (Fanthorpe and Fanthorpe 101; Swainson 19; this aspect of the legend also has a Tarot connection, see Matthews). His name suggests an identification with the Apostle John, since "the author of the Second and Third Epistles of John designates himself in the superscription of each by the name (*ho presbyteros*), 'the ancient,' 'the old'" (Fonck).

Williams brought all of these threads together in his novel for particular effect. His Prester John claims to be both king and priest, both the Graal and the Keeper of the Graal. He is a catalyst of self-revelation, the savior of the Archdeacon, and officiant at the final Eucharist. In this climactic/anticlimactic scene, Prester John draws together Roman Catholic, Protestant, and skeptic; past, present, and future; creation and recreation; meaning and mystery. He is John, the Graal, the Keeper of the Graal, the Eucharist, and Christ, all in one, inexplicably: he is Mystery with a capital M.

This mysterious character calls to the Archdeacon, and the Archdeacon calmly walks up the length of the sanctuary—to his death. The novel ends abruptly, without grief, with the Archdeacon taken away as suddenly, quietly, and naturally as a gust of wind blowing itself out. This off-handed ending bothers some readers with its casual treatment of death. Yet Williams is, again, taking a revelatory approach to the mysteries of life, affirming: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord" (Rev. 14:13).

Death may be the ultimate mystery. Some say that the mystery story is a round-about, self-deceitful way of dealing with this essential human fear: the fear of that which is beyond understanding. It shifts the unknown into the realm of the knowable, thus enabling a sense of security. Its fantastical nature aids this kind of denial: "The detective story does not propose to be 'real': it proposes only, and as a game, that the mystery is located on this side of the unknown. [...] It redefines mystery by counterstating it; by assuming that mystery can be

overcome, it allows the reader to play at being a god" (Grossvogel 40). A reader closes the book and can go to sleep secure in the knowledge that the murderer is behind bars.

Not so with Charles Williams. As Thomas Howard has said, "Williams' fiction does not make for a quiet evening by the fire" (20). At the end of *War in Heaven*, several murderers are still at large, but even more disturbingly, Williams has set loose enormous forces compared to which a mere human murderer is a petty and puny thing. He has unleashed upon his unsuspecting reader the devil, destruction, damnation, and—even more unsettling in his treatment—God and eternal salvation.

This is why perhaps it is wiser to call Williams's fiction "metaphysical thrillers" (Howard 17), rather than novels or mysteries; C.S. Lewis refers to them as "spiritual shockers" (Lewis viii), and T.S. Eliot classes them with the "supernatural thriller" (Eliot xiv). *War in Heaven*, then, was crafted as a tool to communicate doctrine, not (primarily) as a mystery to entertain.

Now, Williams was well aware of how he was fooling the reader, using a genre against itself: "In 1930 Williams was writing many reviews of thrillers, so it is not surprising that his second novel beings like a detective story, with a dead body lying in a publishing house" (Sibley 47). Between 1930 and 1935 he reviewed 290 mysteries, including stories by John Dickson Carr, Ellery Queen, S.S. Van Dine, and Agatha Christie (see the volume edited by Jared Lobdell). He was also friends with Golden Dawn member "Sax Rohmer" (the pseudonym of A.H. Ward), creator of Fu Manchu (Carpenter 83) and, of course, with Dorothy L. Sayers. It is clear that he knew what he was doing. He was far too well read, learned, and intelligent as both a reader of mysteries and as a literary critic not to know. In other words, he did not fail to follow the rules because he did not know any better. He knew much better.

Williams was never one to trot out easy works or to cater to readers' mental weaknesses. Nor was he one to bow to the anxiety of influence. He was always experimenting, in his poetry and in his prose. Furthermore, his works were always extremely profound. This profundity has cost him many a reader. The final accusation he faces is that this book is "too intellectual," or that he evinces a "complete failure to appreciate the amount of esoteric philosophy that even an unusually thoughtful reader of occult fiction is likely to be in a mood to appreciate" (Barclay 99). Perhaps the reader is not such a fool.

Many Christian mystery writers do communicate messages. There is a growing scholarly interest at the moment, as a sub-field of studies in popular culture, in taking detective fiction seriously. This approach examines how, and to what extent, each Christian author manages to write a good mystery that is also a strong enough box to hold the human spirit and divine spirituality. Sayers,

Chesterton, and P.D. James show the triumph of virtue, the important of reason, and the value of human life.

But Williams does none of these things. When our hero, the archdeacon, first hears about the murder, he hopes that it did not interrupt the day's business too much and shrugs, "Murders or mice, the principle's the same" (*War in Heaven* 21). When Mornington, a fascinating scornful Christian, ponders the killing, he thinks, "that the shock which he undoubtedly had felt was the result of not expecting people to murder other people. 'Whereas naturally they do,' he said to himself" (19-20). This is a particularly blatant example of Williams's daring orthodoxy. It is often more astonishing than outright heresy would be. Like Hopkins, who claimed that "Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men's faces," Williams looks squarely at the destructive reality and power of Satan, at Christ's identification with material reality and with people, and at the pervasive nature of original sin with such unflinching light that ordinary pew-Christians squirm.

If his point is not to reaffirm the value of human life, neither is it to super-praise material objects, such as relics. Towards the end, the Archdeacon is ready to surrender the Holy Graal to the forces of darkness merely "to save anyone an hour's neuralgia" (184). And yet Williams's Archdeacon had clearly stated that "it is conceivable that the Graal absorbed, as material things will, something of the high intensity of the moment when it was used, and of its adventures through the centuries" (37). The Archdeacon hears music when he is near it. It is clearly more than, and no more than, any ordinary cup. "Neither is this Thou [...] Yet this also is Thou" (137) prays the Archdeacon. This is the crux. Williams was a man of enormous soul and enormous mind. He was able to hold, simultaneously, orthodoxy and magic, natural and supernatural. One of his friends wrote about him that "I have never met any human being in whom the divisions between body and spirit, natural and supernatural, temporal and eternal were so non-existent, nor any writer who so consciously took their non-existence for granted" (Browne 101). It would have been impossible for him to write a mystery story in which a merely human problem were solved. He had to bring the supernatural into the purely natural, for he could hardly see the difference between them.

Grossvogel claims that if some "literature is an attempt to come to terms with the mystery of what lies beyond the reach of consciousness, then the mode of the detective story is to create a mystery for the sole purpose of effecting its effortless dissipation" (15). This is not universally true. Williams chose to use and abuse this genre precisely to create a mystery for the sole purpose of effecting the revelation of more mystery.

Williams pulls aside the veil on three enormous mysteries, not to clear them up, but to impress the reader with their very irreducibility. First, there is Prester John. It is clear, in the last scene of the book, that he somehow becomes or is replaced by Christ. This is the Mystery of a Christian's identification with his Lord.

Second, when the Archdeacon prays that God would sustain the universe, and particularly that piece of material reality called the Graal, "he held the cup no longer as a priest, but as if he set his hands on that which was itself at once the Mystery and the Master of the Mystery" (*War in Heaven* 141). This is the Mystery of Christ's revelation in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is Bread and Body, Wine and Blood; Christ is Man and God at once; the Trinity is Three and One. Williams does nothing to reduce these unsolvables.

As if it is not challenging enough to leave the appalling mystery of God unsolved, Williams has one of his profoundly evil characters, Manasseh, say that the devil "is the last mystery [...] and all destruction is his own destroying of himself" (188). He does not solve the Problem of Evil, either. Indeed, the Archdeacon quotes (or misquotes) Amos 3:6: "Shall there be evil in the City and I the Lord have not done it?" (180). The Mystery of the origin and teleology of evil lies gaping open at the end of the book, even while the radiance of goodness flares out through the back cover.

Williams's purpose, then, is to replace the superficial puzzle-mystery with sacramental, theological, capital-M Mysteries. He does not follow the conventional rules of a plot dominated by detection, characters of cozy human interest, and comfortably small ideas tidied away at the end. Rather, he lets the terror of theology run rampant. He pushes the merely human murder mystery into a corner so that the *mysterion* of Incarnation, Salvation, Trinity, Evil, and Sacrament can dance across center stage. That, then, is the extent to which a mystery can incorporate Christian themes. It can incorporate them all; it can embody them all. In order to do so, however, a deeper mystery must remain unsolved. How delightfully postmodern.



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