

Original Sin in Agatha Christie

by Father Ian Boyd, C.S.B.

THE NATURE of Agatha Christie's religious faith is something about which it is difficult to comment. Her private life seems to have been very private, and the only event that is well known is concerned with the break-up of her first marriage. This event has never been explained. All that is known is that she disappeared for some days, and that she arranged for her own disappearance in such a way that the public authorities were left to believe that she might have been murdered. The story of her "murder" was reported in all the English newspapers of the day since, even in the early nineteen-twenties, she was already well known writer. Eventually she simply reappeared, without providing any explanation about where she had been or about why she had let the world imagine that she had been killed. At any rate, with her reappearance, the search for her "killer" ended: her hapless husband could no longer be suspected of having committed a crime that never happened. Whatever her motives for this bizarre behaviour—it seems to have been connected somehow to her distress about her husband's leaving her—the interesting fact is that, at a moment of personal crisis, she chose to express her anguish through a real-life enactment of one of her own fantastic stories: her life began to imitate her art. At a key moment in which she experience betrayal, she became briefly the protagonist in one of her own detective stories. By her behaviour, she seemed to be suggesting that the deepest truths about her own life and her own thought are to be found, not in her private letters and diaries, but in the plots of the carefully constructed detective stories which were to make her famous throughout the world.

The search for the religious significance of Agatha Christie's life and work must, therefore, begin with the most public and accessible part of her achievement: her detective stories. Eric Hobsbawm, the Marxist cultural historian, provides an explanation for the popularity of the puzzle detective story. He claims that these neat fictions represent the liberal bourgeois dream that evil can somehow be overcome by reason alone. This idea does throw an interesting light on the role of Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. At the end of every Agatha Christie short story and novel, the detective's rational analysis unmasks the hidden disorder that lies beneath the apparently orderly and always affluent surface of middle-class life. Once the evil is identified, it is easily cast out: the murderer is punished, and the little bourgeois community can return with relief to its trite and comfortable

routine of everyday consumerist life. It is as though the instability and emptiness of the liberal dream are sensed intuitively by the people who have uncritically accepted this dream. Such people need to be constantly reassured that the Enlightenment ideas are true. Detective stories provide that reassurance. And yet, their doubts are never completely exorcised, and they must read more and more detective stories in order to find reassurance.

In that sense, the typical Agatha Christie story serves the same function as all detective stories belonging to the golden age of detective fiction. They represent a yearning for a lost social stability as well as a hope that, in spite of all the sad historical experience to the contrary, justice can somehow be found in a modern world that no longer believes in the just judgment of God. Nevertheless, Agatha Christie's own stories also represent another and equally deep religious truth. In her enormously popular play, *The Mousetrap*, she expresses the profoundly Christian idea that when real evil comes to the life of an individual or of a community, it always comes from within. In the play (and in the short story on which the play is based), the self-righteous policeman who loves to punish turns out to be the real criminal: like Roger Ackroyd's killer, in another famous Agatha Christie story, the criminal cannot be recognized because he is too close to the reader to be seen. In a sense, he is the reader. He represents that hidden and pervasive sinfulness within every human being—the hidden criminality which theologians call “original sin”—and the matrix from which every human evil springs. Agatha Christie never makes this theological point directly, but her best detective stories imply this truth always.

A comparison between Agatha Christie and G.K. Chesterton is helpful in this regard. The two writers knew each other; Chesterton was the president of the famous Detection Club of which Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers were also members. Chesterton's approach to detective fiction is quite different from that of Agatha Christie. Chesterton's detective, Father Brown, represents the Catholic Church. Like the Church, Father Brown is ubiquitous or “catholic”: he is found in the most improbable places. In one story he will be in London, but in the next story he may be in Italy, or in South America, or in Chicago. Also, Father Brown has no interest in punishing criminals; he is more likely to minister to them. Completely indifferent to the physical clues that obsess a Sherlock Holmes or a Hercule Poirot, he is much more like Miss Marple, who relies on moral evidence and who understands that the sum total of human depravity can be found in ordinary village life. And yet, even here there is a difference between the essentially Protestant imagination of Agatha Christie and the profoundly Catholic imagination of Chesterton. Miss Marple can find a “village

parallel” for every crime because she shares a Puritan preoccupation with sin and guilt. Father Brown is concerned with finding the hidden good which exists within every human being redeemed by Christ; and as Chesterton once pointed out, although finding good is more difficult than finding evil, it is more rewarding, because everyone who finds good also finds God.

One of the most disturbing aspects of Agatha Christie’s detective fiction is her refusal to allow room in her characters for this mystery of goodness, a mystery that is far deeper than the mystery of evil. In *Curtain*, her final novel, a book that on her direction was published only after her death, Hercule Poirot himself becomes a murderer. He does so because neither he nor his “creator” seems to believe in a transcendent moral order in which alone truth justice can be found. In the end, the desire to punish and the desire to construct the image of a self-righteously perfect society proves to be too strong for Agatha Christie to resist. She forgets the Christian wisdom, that only God truly knows the devious human heart and that in spite of this knowledge—or is it because of this knowledge?—he is also merciful. In this strange final novel Agatha Christie’s best-known detective arrogates to himself a divine prerogative, with the result that the lovably rational Poirot who in earlier novels is often described as a “good Belgian Catholic” is now suddenly transformed into one of the few convincingly evil characters in Agatha Christie’s long list of somewhat unconvincing villains: when Poirot presents this terrifying and false image of an angry and avenging God, he reveals a great and frightening emptiness at the very heart of Agatha’s Christie’s fiction. ❧