Book Review Supplement

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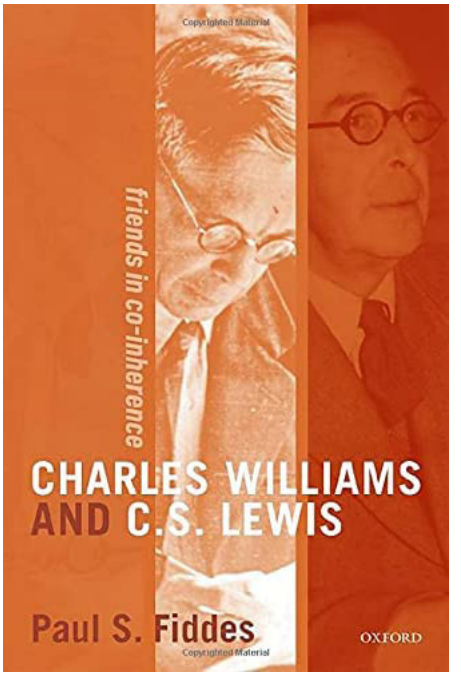
Paul S. Fiddes, *Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis: Friends in Co-inherence.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).



On the headstone of Charles Williams's grave in the cemetery next to the Church of St Cross in Oxford are carved the words: 'Poet Under the Mercy'. Throughout his life Charles Williams thought of himself as a poet and always insisted on the autonomy of poetry. While many have held him to be a theologian of startlingly original and visionary theology he, in rather resigned, weary tones, was wont to remark that theology should not try, and, indeed, could not, boss poetry around, and towards the end of the prefatory chapter to his book, *The English Poetic Mind,* (1932) he made this uncompromising assertion: '. . . poetry is a thing *sui genesis.* It explains itself by existing. There has been a great deal too much talking of what poets mean' (vii). Would he have approved this present undertaking by the theologian, Paul S. Fiddes, in which a good deal of intellectual effort is devoted to discovering what Williams's poetry means?

There is an inescapable problem for those working in a serious academic way in the interface between religion and the arts. How does one balance or integrate the two disciplines of theology and aesthetics? The problem is not confined to literature; it is just as true of painting or music. And it becomes even more acute when the subject matter of the art works are overtly religious—as in the verse of the Metaphysical poets, the paintings of Caravaggio, or the Passions of J.S. Bach. The world of Dante scholarship, perhaps more than any other, is replete with examples which illustrate the difficulty. On the one hand there are those scholars whose primary interest is the language of the poet, his linguistic brilliance, and poetic achievement, but who pay little attention to the profound theological schema which sustains the work.

On the other hand there are those who seem to think that the great work of art which is *The Divine Comedy* should be regarded as an ingenious versification of medieval theology. Charles Williams's own work on Dante in *The Figure of Beatrice* shows an intelligence highly sensitive to the problems of Dante interpretation.

The author of *Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis: Friends in Co-inherence* is no stranger to this borderland between religion and the arts, specifically between theology and literature. He is the author of *Freedom and Limit: A Dialogue Between Literature and Christian Doctrine* (1991) and *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (2000). Knowing this, I should have been more alert. I was puzzled, initially, in reading this present volume, that in the chapter on Williams's mature poetry—the two Arthurian cycles, *Taliessin Through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*—not once was the question: 'Does this work—as poetry?' seriously considered. Meaning is all. Similarly, in the detailed discussion of C.S. Lewis's novels, in particular, *Perelandra*, nowhere is there any discussion as to whether these extraordinary books are effective as fiction. True, one is perfectly aware that *Friends in Co-inherence* is a book by a theologian, and that it is a book of theology not literary criticism—and this is not, in any way, to call into question the intellectual rigour with which the analyses are carried out. Nonetheless in Williams's poetry and Lewis's novels, we are dealing with works of art, so perhaps there is some justification in experiencing some disquiet that the aesthetic dimension receives so little attention.

It only gradually dawned on me that *Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis: Friends in Co-inherence* is not primarily about Williams and Lewis but about co-inherence. Of course they, their writings, and their relationship, are at the centre of the picture, but they are there as a means, not an end. The depiction of their relationship as friends and, more importantly, the detailed study of their texts, is the way Paul Fiddes has chosen to discover the meaning and explore the depths of this mysterious concept.

He brings notable gifts to his endeavour: clarity of thought, analytic precision, range and depth of theological scholarship. All are on display here. But he brings something else too, at least to the study of Charles Williams: insights gathered from the extensive use of unpublished material in the Wade collection, namely, the lecture notes made by a pupil and friend of Williams who attended many of his lectures in the 1930s (Fiddes describes him as 'Williams's most faithful listener') Raymond Hunt. It is a large body of material which is, as Fiddes remarks in his Preface, a series of texts that 'has been curiously neglected, even ignored' (xi). This enables Fiddes to place Williams in a much wider context than is usually the case, for Williams himself ranged widely in his teaching in these years and seemed almost to have been given carte blanche by the institutions that employed him. Whatever interested him, he talked about to his pupils. And the faithful Raymond

Hunt was there to take notes. With these notes in hand, so to speak, Fiddes takes us into hitherto relatively neglected territory: chapters on Charles Williams and William Blake, and, more unexpectedly, Charles Williams and Karl Barth. It is especially in these two chapters that I find new light being cast on the thinking of Charles Williams, all in the service of gaining a better understanding of the concept of co-inherence.

Much more has been written about Lewis than about Williams and there is no cache of notes or letters for Fiddes to discover and make use of, but, in his pursuit of the notion of co-inherence in Lewis's thought, he does effectively demonstrate that the concept was perhaps far more important to Lewis than has often been imagined. This is most dramatically illustrated by his detailed explication of the Great Dance at the end of *Perelandra.* References to this dance are scattered throughout the text of *Friends in Co-inherence* and so important does Fiddes consider this extraordinary scene to be that he devotes an entire chapter to teasing out its implications for the development of Lewis's own understanding of the concept. He convincingly portrays this as an extended metaphor for co-inherence and, in doing so, he also demonstrates how different from Williams is Lewis's use of the image of the dance and, perhaps, of co-inherence. (It is precisely here, in this context, that questions of style—the ways in which the creative imagination realises itself—become pertinent.) The direct connection, of course, is with the dance of the Tarot figures in Williams's novel, *The Greater Trumps*, which had appeared several years before in 1932, and many commentators on Williams and Lewis have drawn attention to the probable influence of that earlier novel on the dance in *Perelandra,* encouraged by Lewis's own 'over-generous' declaration to Williams: 'That is all yours' (qtd. in Fiddes 145). However, although there are obvious similarities, there are also significant differences, as Fiddes acknowledges at the close of his discussion. I draw attention to this because it illustrates my own contention that the influence of the one friend upon the other is both more subtle and also less significant than many would believe. Close they certainly were, and loving friends, but in temperament and intellect they could hardly have been more different.

But we need to return to the underlying theme of this book: co-inherence. Nearly everyone who has written about Williams has stressed the centrality of this concept to his theology and whole view of life, but, as Fiddes points out, although the doctrines of exchange and substitution had been pervasive motifs throughout Williams's life and thought, and necessarily contain within them the implication of co-inherence, the word itself does not appear in print until the publication of *The Descent of the Dove* in 1939. (Though it is used by Williams in a note from him to Hunt two years earlier.) That it should appear at this point, Fiddes argues, is the result of Williams's encounter with an extremely influential book by the patristic scholar G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought,* which had been published in 1936. That

work concludes with an account of the emergence of the notion of co-inherence in the early church. Here Fiddes provides not only a persuasive argument for Williams's response to Prestige's book but also an incisive reading of the work of Prestige himself.

Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis: Friends in Co-inherence is a rich and informative study which will not only become a significant contribution to the literature of commentary on these two remarkable men, their friendship, and their work, but will also increase our understanding of the concept of co-inherence itself which, in some form or other, stands at the heart of Christian life and faith.

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Erratum

In this review, Brian Horne states, in a parenthesis, that Charles Williams sent a note to Raymond Hunt including the word 'co-inherence' two years before 1939. He now wishes to make clear that this statement arose from a misreading of a page in Grevel Lindop's biography of Williams where Lindop records that Williams sent Hunt such a note on 21 April 1939 (Charles Williams: The Third Inkling 291). He is happy to affirm that the author's thesis about the evolution of the concept of co-inherence in Williams' writings remains firm.

Work Cited

Williams, Charles. *The English Poetic Mind*. The Clarendon Press, 1932.