

Small g and big G

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 18 Jan 2003

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Nigel Price — 18 Jan 2003, 12:45

Greetings, Urthlings! The ArchD'Ikon Zibethicus, he say...

...in the juvenile Narnia fictions, he has Tash as a god in 'The Last Battle', a _real_ god as I read it - at any rate, he exterminates someone who has called on him in vain - but an evil god. My reading, anyway...perhaps the confusion here is between the terms 'god' and 'deity'? Should we define, Socratically, before proceeding further?

From my own reading of Lewis, I think I can say with reasonable confidence that he would have subscribed to the fairly traditional Christian acknowledgement that the universe contains supernatural and powerful beings who, relative to human beings, may seem like gods. But the orthodox Christian view is that these "gods" are created beings, made by God himself. That includes the Devil, who makes nothing but only warps things already made by God (a point which, incidentally, Tolkien repeatedly makes about Sauron). The Narnian Tash is a Devil-analogue. His power is real but limited and unlike Aslan, the Narnian incarnation of Christ, he is not immortal or truly God.

Finally! Someone who remembers that Williams was there! And this helps to make my point a little clearer; in 'The Place of the Lion', Williams has - more-or-less, and speaking very loosely - certain Jungian 'archetypes' (I'm starting to dislike that word) come to life, and examines their effect upon a community. Does this make Williams any less of a sincere Christian, although it is hardly orthodox theology? (We shall pass over his early membership of the Golden Dawn in judicious silence...)

Williams is such a wonderful but odd writer, isn't he? I confess to an intense love-hate relationship with his books.

If I may make so bold about such a complex and mystical book, can I suggest that the primary thing going on in "The Place of the Lion" is that the archetype of each of the nine orders of angels is let loose in the world. As a creation and agent of God, each of these archetypes represents an abstract aspect of God's character but is not actually God himself. The Lion, for example, is (I think!) God's almighty power, but without the other aspects of his character it actually represents, taken in isolation, a caricature and distortion of the true divine personality. It is, in a sense, a "god", but to worship it would be a sin and would bring about the worshipper's destruction. (As an aside, note how anxious the angel in Revelation is that John should not make the mistake of worshipping him - Rev 22.9) Which is what happens to one of the characters in the novel, if I recall.

The whole syncretistic business of how Neoplatonic thought became intertwined with Christian theology and cosmology in the Dark and Middle Ages is something that I used to know all about,

but that was in another lifetime (one of toil and blood). The point for us here is that the orders of angels were indeed enumerated as nine, each led by a chief angel who was further identified by some, as referred to above, with an archetypal aspect of God's character. God was seen in this scheme as the "archetype of archetypes". Oh yes, and each of the chief angels was also identified with a symbollic animal.

Remember that the heroine's thesis in "The Place of the Lion" is - if my memory serves me - on "Neoplatonism in the Court of Charlemagne". Archetypes were Platonic and then Neoplatonic commonplaces long before Jung reapplied the idea of psychology. Which is not to say that that idea may not also be present in Williams, but I really don't believe that it's primary.

As to what all this has to do with Wolfe, well, think of Tzadkiel and the other angelic beings in his writings and consider how much he may too have been playing with similar ideas to Williams. Interesting to see that he explicitly mentions reading Charles Williams in the interview which he did with Nutria.

Nigel