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Religious Belief in Recent Detective Fiction

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Detective fiction emerged as a result of the increasing secularisation of society. The certainties expounded by the Church are reenacted through the figure of the rational investigator whose perspicacity never fails to uncover the perpetrator and return the world to its pre-lapsarian tranquillity. Often the villain whose wicked deeds must be brought to book is the leader of an obscure mystical sect, but otherwise religion, particularly of the mainstream variety, is noticeably absent. This has, however, recently changed. The detective, once the acme of rational thought and deductive flair—incarnated in the figure of Sherlock Holmes, for example—has now been replaced, on occasions, by investigators with overt religious beliefs. The explanation for this apparently inconsistent development is tied to the evolution of crime fiction over recent decades, in which both the model of the traditional hard-boiled detective and the genre itself have been questioned and deconstructed by a new generation of crime writers.

Keywords: crime fiction; hard-boiled; religion; Christianity; postmodernism; genre

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La creencia religiosa en la ficción de detectives reciente

La ficción detectivesca apareció como resultado de la secularización de la sociedad. Las certezas antaño predicadas por la Iglesia se encarnaban ahora en la figura del investigador racional, cuya perspicacia conseguía sistemáticamente descubrir al criminal y devolver al mundo a su estado de paz prelapsario. A menudo, el villano cuyas maldades deben corregirse es el líder de alguna oscura secta, pero si este no es el caso, la religión, sobre todo las mayoritarias, permanece notablemente ausente de la narración. Sin embargo, esto ha cambiado en tiempos recientes. El detective, que se caracterizaba por su extrema racionalidad y capacidad de deducción, epitomizadas en la figura de Sherlock Holmes, por ejemplo, ha sido sustituido por investigadores que, en ocasiones, no esconden sus creencias religiosas. La explicación de este cambio, que puede parecer trivial, está relacionada con la evolución de la ficción criminal de las últimas décadas, donde tanto el modelo del detective tradicional como tipo duro, como el propio género, han sido cuestionados y deconstruidos por una nueva generación de escritores.

Palabras clave: ficción criminal; detective duro; religión; cristianismo; posmodernismo; género literario

Fictional detectives, particularly those of the hard-boiled kind, do not usually express religious convictions (obvious exceptions include detective stories with a historical setting such as Ellis Peters's Brother Cadfael series, or Umberto Eco's William of Baskerville in *The Name of the Rose*, in which a non-religious monk would simply be unconvincing). Over recent decades, however, both the genre of crime fiction and the tough-guy model of fictional detective which emerged in the United States in the 1920s have been challenged and deconstructed by a number of crime writers. This process has revealed that the hard-boiled detective, far from being, in Raymond Chandler's words, "the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world" (1964, 198), is instead plagued by vulnerabilities, failings and deep-seated prejudices. In other words, he has become as inadequate as the rest of society. This acceptance of the detective's fall from omnipotent self-sufficiency has led, in some cases, to recourse to religious faith, a development which implicitly recognises the detective's acceptance of his own limitations as agent of redemption.

The popularity of the fictional detective in Western literature coincides, argues Carole M. Cusack in "Scarlet and Black: Non-Mainstream Religion as 'Other' in Detective Fiction Authors," with the increasing secularisation of society: "As organized religion retreated, it became more difficult to believe the theologically-charged notion that good and evil do not go unpunished, and that human life is ultimately meaningful, even when random violence threatens to destabilize both individual and community" (2005, 161). The detective provides the rational replacement for the priest, a man capable of "ascribing meaning to the otherwise random *minutiae* of existence" (Cusack 2005, 161). Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is archetypal: rational, scientific, calculating and infallible. This is a view shared by Auden, who wrote in his essay "The Guilty Vicarage" that "the job of detective is to restore the state of grace in which the aesthetic and the ethical are as one" (1962, 254). In other words, as Brian Diemert comments, in the context of Auden's essay, "the garden is polluted by the crime of murder and the detective's work is redemptive" (2005, 168). Not that religion completely disappears, as G.K. Chesterton's fictional detective Father Brown—a Catholic priest—demonstrates, but it is significant that Chesterton, an enthusiastic convert to Catholicism, must make a detective of his priest if he is to be of any earthly use.

Cusack argues that the genre's secular, yet conservative, nature "frequently results in the demonization and punishment" (2005, 159) of minority religions. This is a view shared by Diemert who, in reference to cults and sects, argues that "the hard-boiled detective often scorns religious belief, and is frequently correct in suspecting those who claim supernatural or divine awareness" (2005, 171). While this may be true, the position of mainstream religion within the genre is left unresolved. This is problematic in that the rational detective, with the occasional exception of such figures as Father Brown—Cusack also refers to "Harry Kemelman's Rabbi David Small, Ellis Peters' Brother Cadfael, and Peter Tremayne's Sister Fidelma" (2005, 161)—is assumed to be not merely secular, but in direct opposition, albeit an unarticulated opposition, to the whole notion of religious belief, mainstream or not. Yet the genre is deeply conservative, the exegesis of bourgeois

fantasies of certainty, security and stability, and such conservatism would normally be expected to provide a privileged place for mainstream Christianity.

There is, then, an absence of mainstream religion in the works of writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Ross MacDonald and Robert B. Parker, though they may well, like Kathy Reichs, the writer used by Cusack to exemplify her thesis, pit their heroes—or heroines—against insidious sects (see, for example, Hammett's *The Dain Curse* [1930] and Parker's *Valediction* [1984]). "Indeed," claims Diemert, "the manipulative cult, the faked séance, the bogus church (or, relatedly, the bogus clinic), and the like have become so clichéd within the genre that we immediately suspect the tarot reader, crystal gazer, or spiritualistic medium of criminal behaviour or worse" (2005, 171). Nevertheless, the far more widespread presence of conventional Christianity is largely ignored despite the enormous possibilities for crime and corruption, jealousy and hatred that a religious setting might offer (a rare exception is Sara Paretsky's *Killing Orders*, published in 1985, in which a corrupt archbishop attempts to buy an insurance business in order to launder money proceeding from the recently collapsed Banco Ambrosiano). This situation has, however, recently changed. Two of the best-selling detective novelists of the 1990s and early twenty-first century, the Scotsman Ian Rankin, and the American writer James Lee Burke, have created openly Christian detectives who attend church and on occasion discuss their beliefs, while Jack Taylor, the self-destructive protagonist of Ken Bruen's *noir* novels set in Galway, Ireland, maintains an ambivalent yet ineluctable relationship with his childhood faith.

Ian Rankin's first Inspector Rebus novel, *Knots and Crosses*, was published in 1987. Based in Edinburgh, Rebus is, as Gill Plain explains, the very model of the hard-boiled detective: "dress him in a trench coat and you would have a very familiar figure: the Private Investigator as embodied by Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe" (2003, 56). Except that Rebus, as Plain fails to notice, is religious. In *Knots and Crosses*—its very title makes reference to Christianity—Rebus thinks of church-going:

> He hated congregational religion. He hated the smiles and the manners of the Sunday-dressed Scottish Protestant, the emphasis on a communion not with God but with your neighbours. He had tried seven churches of varying denominations in Edinburgh, and had found none to be to his liking. He had tried sitting for two hours at home of a Sunday, reading the Bible and saying a prayer, but somehow that did not work either. He was caught; a believer outwith [*sic*] his belief. Was a personal faith good enough for God? Perhaps, but not *his* personal faith, which seemed to depend upon guilt and his feelings of hypocrisy whenever he sinned, a guilt assuaged only by public show. (2000, 71)

Rebus is caught, as Rankin observes, but not only in the nature of his belief. He is also caught, or entangled, in the conventions of the genre: as a detective, can he compromise the rationality of his profession by acknowledging allegiance to the irrational? But concealing his belief behind the walls of his home, away from the cynical eye of his

colleagues, is not a solution, he discovers, since his faith requires public expression, and he finds himself trapped and confused, both as a Scottish Christian and as a literary detective. Twice more, in *Knots and Crosses*, Rebus seeks refuge in the *Good News Bible* and achieves a kind of solace, becoming at last "passive to the will of his malevolent creator" (2000, 149), a reference, not to God, perhaps, but to Rankin himself, who has embarked on the eccentric course of creating a religious hard-boiled detective. Rankin, or at least the novels' narratorial voice, suggests that Rebus's Christianity is tied to his identity as a Scot, a theme central to the novels, yet, uncharacteristically for the sectarian Scots, Rebus refuses to decide between Catholicism and Protestantism: "He had nothing against Catholics. The Protestant community might call them 'left-footers,' but Rebus himself kicked a ball with his left foot. He did, however, mistrust the shrine mentality. It made him uneasy: statues which wept or bled or moved. Sudden visions of the Virgin Mary. A face imprinted on a shroud" (2002a, 88-89). Despite his aversion for the miraculous, a consequence, perhaps, of his rationalist professional instincts, he finds himself dropping into a Catholic church in order to confess in *The Black Book* simply because it was "the first church he came to" (2003, 225). The priest—whose identity as Father Conor Leary is not revealed until the subsequent Rebus novel, *Mortal Causes*—is portrayed in rather clichéd fashion as a compassionate, down to earth Irishman, who claims to welcome Protestants, exhorting Rebus to "come back and talk to me again [because] I like to know what madness you Prods are thinking" (2002b, 227). The madness of Protestants, or more specifically Calvinists, is explained earlier when the priest claims to "know what you Calvinists think. You think you're doomed from the start, so why not raise some hell before you get there?" (2002b, 226-27). Certainly this seems to be Rebus's attitude to life in his role as a policeman, forever rebelling against the corrupt and obstructive authorities; he is an individualist, unable to play as a team member, and "operates as a PI within the police force" (Plain 2003, 58), a situation not uncommon in police detective fiction (see, for example, James Lee Burke's Robicheaux novels, discussed below, Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse, or R.D. Wingfield's Jack Frost). In Rebus's case this rebellious individuality is mirrored by his heterodox religious observance. Impatient with both Protestant and Catholic liturgy; uncomfortable attending church, yet unfulfilled by private worship, his relationship, or lack of it, with the ecclesiastical authorities serves as a spiritual backdrop to his adversarial position within the Edinburgh police force. His problems, as Diemert notes, are as much metaphysical as professional, a state of affairs that lends the earlier novels a depth not always found in crime fiction.

In *Mortal Causes*, Father Conor Leary, now something of a friend and mentor of Rebus's, asks him for help on a troublesome housing estate, "the roughest scheme in the city, maybe the country" (2002b, 18). "We're not around long enough to make any difference" (2002b, 17), complains Rebus, and the priest, together with the reader, assumes he is referring to his job as a policeman. Here, Sherlock Holmes would surely disagree: with every case logically solved the detective makes the world a better place. The fact that Rebus's doubts arise in the company of Leary merely underlines the incompatibility

of science and religion, and of policemen and priests, as Rebus himself tacitly confesses when, just before his death in *Dead Souls*, Father Leary asks Rebus to pray for him. Rebus is unable to accede to the dying priest's wishes: "[He h]adn't the heart to admit he'd stopped praying long ago" (1999, 179). By the final novel in the series, *Exit Music*, Rebus's colleague DS Clarke tells a younger officer that Rebus "used to be" religious, "in that he went to church . . . actually, he went to dozens of them, a different one every week" (2008, 118), to which the younger man—himself a committed Christian, and, it later emerges, one of the villains of the story—surmises "looking for something he couldn't find" (2008, 118). Rebus's flirtation with religion is not sustained, perhaps is unsustainable. Already in *Mortal Causes* we are told that "lately, [Rebus] didn't enjoy Father Leary's conversations so much. There was something proselytising about them" (2002b, 17). The hard-boiled detective, if he is to retain anything of the genre's characteristics, must go his own way. He is, as Raymond Chandler put it, "a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him" (1950, 198); he is not the kind of man who takes sermonising kindly.

Brian Diemert's analysis of the Rebus novels, "Ian Rankin and the God of the Scots," although concentrating on their religiosity, tends towards the conclusion that they are as much gothic and gnostic as Christian—characteristics, he argues, which are particularly potent in the Scottish context. This is undoubtedly true, as indeed it is true of most detective novels to a greater or lesser extent. The dualities inherent to gnosticism are also shared by crime novels with their detectives and villains while Christianity itself is deeply indebted to neo-Platonist thought. This being the case, it hardly seems necessary for the detective himself to have religious beliefs: Rankin would surely be as free to demonstrate the gothic influences on his work, to display the depth of his philosophical learning, and its significance for Edinburgh in particular, and Scotland in general, without inflicting faith on his hero, especially as, towards the end of the series, Rebus's Christianity is explicitly abandoned. Indeed, as Brian Diemert demonstrates, an increasingly important theme in the series is the relationship between Rebus and Big Ger Cafferty, leader of Edinburgh's principal crime organisation. The antagonism and mutual attraction experienced by the two men replaces the detective's search for religious comfort in a complex psychological relationship drawing on Edinburgh's literary past, and specifically Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

To return to the earlier Rebus novels, I believe Rankin to be consciously using religion to interrogate the contradictions, weaknesses and inconsistencies in the hard-boiled model that the contemporary detective novel has revealed. By blatantly forcing Rebus to examine himself through the filter of Christanity—a round peg in a square hole—Rankin questions not only the shortcomings of Scottish Calvinism but also the redemptive powers of the traditional literary detective. If Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe is Rebus's literary progenitor and model, then he is also a God with feet of clay. Rebus, like Marlowe, drinks too much and leads a solitary life cooped up in a dingy flat. Virtually nothing of Marlowe's domestic life is known—Chandler probably assuming it to be of no interest. In

fact, the only time we know that he actually has a bed to sleep in is when he finds Carmen Sternwood tucked up in it in *The Big Sleep*.

Perhaps it is for this reason that Rebus sleeps, as often as not, in a chair, nursing a glass of whisky, and looking out of his window at the street, there being nothing inside either his home or himself that he cares, or dares, to examine or cultivate. The strong, silent certainty of Philip Marlowe's redemptive masculinity is a lie, as numerous crime writers have discovered, and as Rankin reveals through Rebus. His doomed attempts to grapple with religion, either personal or public, are on a par with his struggle with alcohol. Rebus, unlike Marlowe, is painfully self-aware. He knows that he drinks too much and at times makes attempts to give it up. Drinking is symptomatic of a deeper problem, the kind of weakness that the traditional hard-boiled detective could not acknowledge. The Church, or Chapel, or Bible are part of Rebus's recognition of his failings, and of his own flawed humanity, and they represent his ongoing efforts to save himself. That they fail is inevitable and would be utterly incompatible with Rebus's character: to have spent his career rebelling against hypocritical, self-serving authority is hardly an appropriate preparation for submission to the Church. More importantly, a novel in which a protagonist endowed with Rebus's cynical character converts wholeheartedly to Christianity (or any mainstream religion) would be absurd and quite possibly spell the end of its author's literary career for its very incongruity. Rebus's flirtation with religion is then, I believe, one of Rankin's techniques for undermining the conventional self-sufficiency and omnipotence of the fictional detective, as well as providing a useful context for his explorations of gnosticism and the gothic both in the detective fiction genre and in the city of Edinburgh.

In America, the situation is different. James Lee Burke's Louisiana detective Dave Robicheaux, who makes his first appearance in *The Neon Rain* in 1987, is more consistently religious than Rebus. Indeed, his faith is identified from the beginning as one of his virtues: "You're a good man, you've got courage, you've never been on a pad, you go to Mass on Sundays, you treat the street people decently, and you put away a lot of the bad guys" (2000, 84), declares a US treasury official, in an accurate, if incomplete, summation of Robicheaux's character. He fails to mention the detective's alcoholism, semi-successfully held in check by regular Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, or his enormous capacity for violence, which is rarely restrained, only fleetingly condemned, and swiftly forgiven.

Attendance at Mass, however, is regularly reported: "I went to Mass at the university chapel in Lafayette, then ate deep-fried crawfish at Foti's in St. Martinville" (2007a, 289), we are told in *Pegasus Descending*, the kind of comment that may be found scattered throughout any of the long series of Dave Robicheaux novels. Mass is clearly as much a part of Robicheaux's life as eating, and equally problem-free. Although Robicheaux's faith is taken as read throughout the series, it is rarely interrogated in the troubled manner favoured by Ian Rankin. Partly this is because Robicheaux's relationship with the church is presented as being as much political and social as specifically religious. Despite his visit to the university chapel in Lafayette, his preferred venues for worship are humbler, such

as the church in St. Mary Parish where, as we are told in *Crusader's Cross*, "most of the parishioners were people of color and desperately poor" (2006, 42). For Robicheaux, the church is about the marginalised, the dispossessed and the vulnerable (though to the European ear it also sounds patronising), and it is in *Crusader's Cross* that he meets the woman who is to become his third wife, the previous two having been violently murdered in earlier novels. Molly Boyle is a nun when Robicheaux meets her, and he says,

> her attitudes and manner reminded me of other nuns I had known over the years, particularly those who had gone to jail for their political beliefs or been exposed to the risk of martyrdom in Central America. They seem to have no fear, or at least none that I could see. As a consequence, they didn't argue or defend, and the church to which they belonged was one they carried silently inside themselves. (2006, 192)

Molly Boyle is a woman of action rather than contemplation. Her proselytism, if it exists, is furthered through example rather than debate, and her many undoubted good works (we assume) are surely of greater benefit to humanity than any number of hours anguishing over her relationship with the almighty and his representatives on Earth. This is precisely the kind of church, and religion, that Robicheaux claims to believe in: "I think you've done a lot for poor people in this area, Sister Molly. I think you and your friends are what the Church is all about" (2006, 95), he tells her. Few people, Christians in particular, would disagree, yet enormous inconsistencies pervade the novels, as they do in many apparently religious societies. Robicheaux, like Rebus, is representative of the country that gave birth to him. Both are countries with a tradition of religiosity, of science, of culture and a ferocious work ethic, but they are also countries bedevilled by inequality, injustice, poverty and hypocrisy. Burke does not shy away from this, indeed the contradictions inherent in Robicheaux's character are analysed, at times with uncomfortable honesty. In *The Tin Roof Blowdown*, a novel specifically written to condemn the US government's failure to help the people of New Orleans during and after the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Katrina, Robicheaux muses,

> Supposedly we are a Christian society, or at least one founded by Christians. According to our self-manufactured mythos, we revere Jesus and Mother Teresa and Saint Francis of Assisi. But I think the truth is otherwise. When we feel collectively threatened, or when we are collectively injured, we want the Earp brothers and Doc Holliday on the job and we want the bad guys smoked, fried, and plowed under with bulldozers.
>
> For that reason, I no longer feel guilt and shame over my own inclinations. (2007b, 245)

Robicheaux (or Burke), then, reconciles his religion to his flaws and remains untroubled by its failure to provide satisfactory answers: "I never figured out any of the great mysteries: why the innocent suffer, why wars and pestilence seem to be our lot, why evil men prosper and go unpunished while the poor and downtrodden are oppressed," he confesses in *The*

Glass Rainbow (2010, 514). Unlike Rankin, Burke is able, within the context of modern American society, to create and sustain a hero who is both rebellious and devout and who, although somewhat sentimental and melodramatic, is neither inconsistent nor intellectually dishonest. Perhaps this may be partly explained away by the difference between an inflexible and unforgiving Calvinism on the one hand and an accommodating and worldly Catholicism on the other; it certainly seems to represent a difference in how religion is perceived on either side of the Atlantic. Robicheaux, although unquestionably Catholic, is, as we have seen, religious on his own terms. He is happy to leave the finer points of doctrine to others; for him it is the people he chooses to share his worship with, and the good deeds rather than fine words of practising Christians such as Molly, that he values most. He is also, if necessary, prepared to abandon, at least temporarily, Christian ideas such as the turning of the other cheek, if this should prove expedient. He reflects, therefore, in the words of Greil and Davidman, "the tendency of people [in contemporary American society] to pick and choose what they will and will not practice and believe within a religious tradition" (2007, 557). Robicheaux enjoys an extraordinary flexibility in his religious beliefs that Rebus, ultimately, cannot reconcile himself to. If, as Greil and Davidman report, "contemporary Americans [are] religious seekers through which they enact their freely chosen religious commitments and identities" (2007, 557), then Robicheaux has sought, and to a large extent found, those elements of Catholicism that are congenial to him, while simply ignoring or rejecting those which are not. Ironically, Rebus consciously sets out on the same journey of discovery—that of seeking those elements of Christianity acceptable to him—but he does so without Robicheaux's doctrinal flexibility. For Rebus, his faith must be all or nothing, consistent, complete and unfailing, or it is not worth having. Interestingly, Greil and Davidman conclude their study of religion and identity with a comment on the reconciliation of incongruous identities, and their use of language is instructive. They speak of "struggle" and "attempts to balance" (2007, 560) incompatibilities without specifying how successful this might be. In Rebus's case it is not: his identity as a detective is incompatible with religion, however hard he might try to shoehorn the latter into place.

A third religious detective is Ken Bruen's Jack Taylor. Not, however, that he is officially a member of the profession, a characteristic shared by a number of fictional, private eyes of recent years such as James Sallis's Lew Griffin, Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins and George Pelecanos's Nick Stefanos. Taylor began as a policeman, a member of the Irish *Garda Síochána*, but was dismissed for hitting a politician and, being obliged to change careers, goes private (as, indeed, does Dave Robicheaux for a while). His unofficial status is explained, perhaps with tongue in cheek, at the beginning of *The Guards*, the first novel in the series, where he explains that "there are no private eyes in Ireland. The Irish wouldn't wear it. The concept brushes perilously close to the hated 'informer.' You can get away with most anything except 'telling'" (2010, 11). Taylor's refusal to accept the title of detective, or private eye, contributes to Bruen's general policy of interrogating and subverting the traditional hard-boiled detective model, along with his chronic alcoholism and drug

abuse, his failure to maintain a relationship with friends and lovers, his lack of a code of chivalric behaviour and his inability to solve his cases.

Taylor's relationship with God and Catholicism is ambivalent, often contradictory and frequently confrontational. He has a particular dislike for priests who are representatives of an oppressive and authoritarian institution, while the Roman Catholic church is an object of scandal and international opprobrium, which Bruen deals with directly: *Priest* and *The Magdalen Murders*, for example, investigate, respectively, the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests, and the real life scandal of the Church's exploitation and cruelty towards unmarried mothers in a Galway laundry.

Despite this, Taylor retains his faith in the almighty. Of churches, he explains in *The Guards* that "the ritual, the smell of incense, the Latin intonations are a comfort beyond articulation" (2010, 53). He frequently attends Mass, though, like Rebus, he has no regular place of worship and lights candles for the dead, the number of his family and friends who have died, like the number of candles he lights, steadily increasing as the series goes on. Candles, however, are not what they were, and Taylor complains on a number of occasions about the substitution of wax candles for automated electric ones which light up when a coin is dropped in a box. Bruen deliberately juxtaposes this disappointment in the Church—its obsession with money, its tawdriness, its dishonesty, its failure to provide comfort—with an unexpected meeting, on the steps of the church, with an old friend, Janet, who "uttered the closest thing to an Irish benediction. 'Let me have a look at you.' Centuries of care in that. And *look* they do, but with tenderness, concern." The friend, whose "face lit up, much like the top row of candles," is able to give Taylor precisely what the church fails to do. It is in his dealings with people that Taylor finds his God. It is, after all, Janet who provides "the closest thing to a benediction" (2007, 67).

In *Cross*, Taylor once again goes to church because "you're Catholic, you're reared to believe that there is sanctuary there" (2008b, 304). However, "with all the recent scandals, it was less a place of refuge than the belly of the beast" (2008b, 305). Why then, does Taylor remain a believer and continue going to church? In a number of the novels he finds himself reacting simply from childhood indoctrination, particularly with regard to blessing himself. In *The Guards* he tells us that "some rituals just surface without beckoning" (2010, 233), while in *The Dramatist*, "as the bus pulled off, from old habit, I blessed myself" (2008a, 128). Taylor's faith is not, then, either intellectual, or even particularly spiritual, it is ascriptional, a result of habit and upbringing. As he explains in *Priest*, "Priests and I hadn't exactly a good history, but you grow up Catholic, they have you. Deny all you like, they own your arse" (2007, 44). Taylor's relationship with his religion is one of conscious helplessness. He disapproves of almost all of its earthly manifestations, particularly its ministers, yet retains a childlike faith in the mystery of God from which he cannot, nor wishes to, escape.

Taylor and Robicheaux, unlike Rebus, do not for a moment consider changing to another denomination, and neither makes much attempt to justify or rationalise his beliefs—for the most part they are simply what they grew up with, although neither

hesitates to abandon or ignore those aspects of their faith that they find particularly incongenial. It is not, then, any coincidence that Bruen's and Burke's novels also include the devil as antagonist. Virtually all of Burke's books insist on the evil nature of criminals, particularly those who become the object of Robicheaux's investigations (this is also true of Burke's novels about Texas attorney, Billy Bob Holland). Typical are the villains of Burke's 2010 novel, *The Glass Rainbow*, on whose evil Robicheaux briefly, if dismissively ponders: "I didn't care to dwell on the psychological complexities of evil men. Whether their kind possesses the wingspread of a Lucifer or a moth is a question better left to theologians" (2010, 518). Evil, then, is taken for granted as existing, and neither the sociological nor the theological implications merit analysis. Earlier in the novel, and discussing the same men, Robicheaux refuses to accept that their malevolence should have been caused by childhood trauma, poverty or deprivation: "none of the aforementioned seems to offer an adequate explanation for their behaviour" (2010, 95), he insists, preferring to place the blame squarely on the devil. Ken Bruen, meanwhile, devotes an entire novel—*The Devil* (2010)—to Satan, in which Jack Taylor is pitted against Lucifer—or someone remarkably like him—finally seeing him off by sending him across the Irish Sea to England. Burke's treatment of evil is quite clearly intended to be taken seriously, while with Bruen there is room for scepticism, or even mockery. However, the use of concepts such as evil and the devil as explanations for criminal behaviour are significant; we have come full circle. If the infallible Sherlock Holmes's task was to reveal the often mundane motives for crime, Dave Robicheaux's response is to hold the supernatural responsible for events that he cannot comprehend, and in doing so he relinquishes his responsibility even to attempt to understand them. For Rankin this would be intellectually dishonest and, as has been observed, the emphasis in his novels slowly moves away from religion to concentrate instead on the troubled and troubling relationship between Rebus and crime kingpin Big Ger Cafferty. In other words, the contradictions and ambivalences of human behaviour take centre stage as the role of religion is written out of the play.

The representation of religion in some contemporary detective novels may, in the end, merely be a reflection of the heterogeneous and diverse nature of religious belief in Western society: President George Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair were reported as having prayed together, although the latter denied it (*Guardian*, "Tony Blair Denies Praying with George Bush," 25 July, 2012), something unthinkable even between arch-conservative allies and fellow Christians Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, who would have kept such things to themselves. There is, however, another explanation for this change in the hard-boiled model. The hard drinking, invincible, solitary detective favoured by authors such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Mickey Spillane has long been exposed as a sexist, racist, homophobic alcoholic, incapable of maintaining any kind of meaningful relationship with his fellow man or woman—indeed, in the case of Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, he might fairly be described as a psychopath. Authors such as Sara Paretsky, Joseph Hansen or James Sallis—whose detectives are, respectively,

women, gay, and black—have questioned the sexism, homophobia and racism of their literary predecessors, but in doing so they also question the model's invincibility. Sara Paretsky's detective, V.I. Warshawski, for example, is more frequently the victim, rather than the dispenser of violence. James Sallis's Lew Griffin is a hopeless alcoholic, as is George Pelecanos's detective Nick Stefanos. These detectives, together with Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins and Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, among others, depict a detective no longer sure of him, or herself, vulnerable, often the victims of violence and frequently unable to resolve their cases satisfactorily.

According to Auden, whose interest in detective fiction centred on the traditional English country house murder mystery, "the interest in the detective story is the dialectic of innocence and guilt" (1962, 147) and culminates in a restoration "to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence" (1962, 158). Such a world—the world also of P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster—never existed: as Auden acknowledges, it is a fantasy, but it was not so fantastic that the reader could not imagine him or herself soothed in its gentle embrace. But, just as the detective stories of the early twentieth century responded to a loss of religious faith by substituting God, Jesus or the priesthood for a temporal, redemptive equivalent, contemporary readers (and writers) have in turn lost faith in the upright, omniscient investigator. Innocence and guilt have become blurred and the existence of the Garden, either now or in the distant past, doubtful. This is not, however, to be lamented. The false, although comforting, illusion that truth and justice will prevail thanks to the sturdy efforts of a few incorruptible parsons and policemen is hardly the mark of a mature society. The imperfect, yet still sympathetic postmodern detective surely represents a step forward, and if he becomes religious, well this is simply a cry for help, an acknowledgement of his failure to be self-sufficient, as is his recourse to the bottle, to violence, and the occasional one night stand.

It is within this context that Rebus, Robicheaux and Taylor turn to religion, which both explains and mitigates their failings. For Rebus, the contradiction between what he is, and what he believes the church should be, is ultimately too great, but for Robicheaux, who comes from a religious tradition long practised in accommodating itself to, or forgiving of—whichever one prefers—violence, injustice and hypocrisy, there is no difficulty in reconciling his hard-boiled detective identity to his beliefs. His hard-drinking is recognised for what it is—alcoholism—and is pardoned. His violence, within the limitations imposed by a violent genre, is both celebrated and deplored, and then forgiven. Taylor, meanwhile, unlike Rebus, has no expectations that the church can save him, or even help him. Nor does he assume, as Robicheaux does, that his sins will be forgiven. Jack Taylor, even more than John Rebus and Dave Robicheaux, is particularly representative of much recent detective fiction. No longer rational nor infallible, the fictional detective turns to the Church without even really knowing why—perhaps out of instinct, sentiment, loyalty or hopelessness. He has no answers to offer, neither explanations nor solutions, and religion, with its emphasis on mystery, dependence, salvation—and the existence of evil—makes its return.

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