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### ***War in Heaven: The Archdeacon's Embodiment of Charles Williams' Coinherence***

Charles Williams published *War in Heaven* in 1930, the first of his seven supernatural novels. In *War in Heaven*, Archdeacon Julian Davenant of Castra Parvulorum is the unlikely hero who embodies calm goodness. *War in Heaven's* dramatic arc focuses on a struggle to control the legendary Holy Grail, the chalice that the characters believe Jesus used at the Last Supper, and brutal spiritual warfare. Amid a turning and twisting plot, Williams infuses the text with the theological concepts of coinherence, substitution, and exchange. In pivotal scenes, Williams imbues the Archdeacon's words and actions with his theological framework. In making the unworldly and unlikely Archdeacon its hero, *War in Heaven* articulates the complexities of Williams' theology and gives his audience a clear example of how one can live out coinherence.

Williams' characters in the novel represent a variety of liturgical traditions. The Archdeacon and the Rackstraws belong to the Church of England, while the Duke is a Roman Catholic. In liturgical Christian traditions, the church is both present and eternal, and the liturgy permeates the plot of Williams' novel with a profound significance that stretches beyond the characters' actions. Williams asserts that the liturgy "is much more a thing done than a thing said." Liturgy is where the Eucharist occurs on the altar, where believers unite as one body and one spirit with Christ (Coniaris 79). The term "liturgy" originates from the Greek word *leitourgia*, meaning "public service" or "work of the people." O'Donoghue describes the Eucharist as "a sign of unity" and a paschal banquet in which "a pledge of future glory is given to us" (75). Through his description of the Eucharist, O'Donoghue highlights the Eucharist's sacramental power of uniting believers and binding them together eternally and in the present. Williams' theology asserts that the Eucharist perpetuates the sacrifice of the Cross through the

ages until the Second Coming, entrusting the Church with a memorial of Christ's death and resurrection.

In *War in Heaven*, the character who embodies Christ-like qualities is the Archdeacon. The Archdeacon embodies calmness and encourages other characters to be calm. His calmness originates in his faith. The Archdeacon continuously mumbles words from the liturgy like “Oh, give thanks to the God of all gods” (73) and “Who alone doeth marvellous things; for his mercy endureth for ever” (38). The presence of the liturgy and the sacred word help him to maintain his calm demeanor. His reliance on sacred words highlights his understanding that although he is experiencing struggle, on an eternal timeline, he has already endured and prevailed through his struggle. Even amid chaos and turmoil, the Archdeacon is “secure in his serenity” (Lee 18). His security comes as an inevitable result of his faith.

The logic of Williams’ liturgical novels requires that characters like the Archdeacon perform Christ-like acts of sacrifice to save others (Manlove 163). The Archdeacon assumes the role of hero by safeguarding the Holy Grail. In liturgical traditions, the priest symbolizes Christ on earth, for Christ is also biblically called “The High Priest” who offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice for humanity (Hebrews 4:14-16). The Archdeacon is the most Christ-like, willing to exchange himself and the Grail for the lives of others as an act of peaceful sacrifice.

In “The Marriage of The Living and the Dead,” Gregory Persimmons has killed Kenneth Mornington, and has captured the Duke of North Ridings. Gregory makes a threat on their lives saying, “We have them in our power and we can slay them on the moment” (151). When Gregory threatens to kill the Duke and Kenneth, the Archdeacon chooses to go to the Chemist shop to save them, even though he knows that Gregory wants to use his body for his sacrilegious ritual. Upon arrival at the Chemist shop, the Greek asks him, “Do you know why you have come

here?,” and the Archdeacon responds, “I have come because God willed it” (154). His sacrificial attitude gives him a “provoking, overruling detachment” to his circumstances (153). The Archdeacon, lying stretched on the ground, bare breasted and with the blood-filled Grail on his chest, feels the darkness close over him as he cries desperately to God. He feels himself “sinking” as three shafts of directed power from the magicians point at him. He also sees the magicians calling out to the spirit of Pattison, the man Gregory killed in the beginning of the novel, and Pattison not wanting to come. Worst of all, he begins to feel the presence of God moving away from him, which feels to him like “absolute rejection” (155).

The Archdeacon’s actions echo the sacrificial offering of Christ highlighted in Williams’ theology. In the scene, Williams seems to be making an intentional allusion to two stories: the crucifixion and Abraham and Isaac. The Archdeacon’s feeling of God’s warmth departing from him alludes to Christ’s words on the cross: “My God, My God why have you forsaken me” (Matthew 27:46). Prester John also appears to the Archdeacon, and the room suddenly fills with light and trumpets. Although Prester John intervenes to end the satanic ritual, the Archdeacon was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for his friends, which is a key aspect of Williams’ concept of coinherence. While the Archdeacon’s sudden rescue by Prester John could be seen as *deus ex machina*, an abrupt resolution to a seemingly unsolvable problem, the rescue is supported by Williams’ theological framework.

Robert Peirano asserts that in a state of coinherence, “one will not hesitate to take up the burden of another through substitution or exchange.” Where coinherence is operant in Williams’ novels, there’s also the presence of substituted love because “Only through perfect love can Williams’ state of coinherence be achieved” (30). Coinherence, by nature, necessitates substitution and exchange. Individuals who have achieved this state are deeply connected to one

another. They are willing to take on the burdens of others and share in their sorrows because they see themselves as part of a larger whole. Because of their vast capacity to love others, those who have achieved coinherence cannot help but take up the burdens of others. Love is the driving force behind coinherence. Love becomes their ordinary response to the suffering around them.

In *The Grail Mass*, presided over by Prester John in “*Castra Parvulorum*,” Williams reveals that in addition to love, the liturgy serves as a conduit for the sacred word and coinherence. The interconnectedness that is so integral to coinherence in Williams’ framework, is best manifested through the liturgy. The Rackstraws, Adrian, the Archdeacon, the Duke, and Prester John meet in the chapel where coinherence manifests through the liturgical service. Physically, six people attend and are part of the “small and curiously drawn congregation,” but because of the sacrament of the Eucharist and coinherence, there are more people there, more languages, voices, instruments heard, and people both from the past and the future seen. In these moments, the Archdeacon “was part of the Act which far away issued in those faint words, “Let us make man” (162). Through the sacred words of the liturgy and coinherence, the physical boundaries of time and space dissolve. Madsen writes that time in Williams’ novels, “is as likely to be simultaneous as consecutive” (385).

The six characters hear the noise of a grandiose bell above them. There is also a movement about the church “as if a hundred watchers had stirred and drawn breath at the beginning of the Mysteries” (162). The Duke recognizes faces, some “in the great gallery of his ancestors,” some from the past, but others are foreign to him. Some are dressed in turbans, “outlandish robes, and the glint of many crowns,” their clothing indicating that they are from a different time. As for their voices, Barbara hears them clearly, but their specific words are hidden from her. She also hears multiple languages she cannot comprehend, like Latin, but she catches a

few phrases such as “to Whom all hearts be open, all desires known.” Williams reveals these elements of the liturgy at the end of the novel to convey that the characters’ experiences are not hallucinations, but actual experiences and manifestations of coinherence facilitated by the liturgy.

Coinherence, defined as a revelation of the eternal present into the constructed human idea of time, suggests that one’s life has work to do beyond itself. Through coinherence, “we, though many” are in the most literal sense, “one bread and one body” (1 Corinthians 10:17), connecting us to all the other humans that have existed. Through coinherence, the living and the dead are not as divided as human beings imagine, and a reciprocity of being occurs. In the last scene of the novel, six characters are present in the moment of the Eucharist, and they join a mystical union that extends far beyond the moment, backwards and forwards. The people they see in the church, while not physically there, represent the consecutive nature of the sacrament.

Williams’ theology holds the Body of Christ as living opposed to dead, ongoing and eternal, held together by the love of God. When the six characters stand in prayer in the chapel, they are part of the eternal body of Christ, and through coinherence, have moved beyond a human understanding of time. Coniaris discusses how each year the liturgical calendar “relives and makes present again the sacred events of our salvation,” stating that the past reaches out and joins the present. Thus, what is consecutively in the past, becomes simultaneous through the liturgy; the sacred events of Christian salvation are relived as though they were concurrent.

The Archdeacon’s actions during the Eucharist support Williams’ theology of coinherence. He trembles as he hears Prester John reciting the words of the liturgy: He “distinguished no longer word from act; he was in the presence, he was part of the Act.” (162). Williams’ capitalization of “Act” emphasizes the divine presence that enters the small and

curious chapel at the time of liturgy. The Archdeacon does not take new action, but rather because part of an act much greater than himself. Williams holds that “Christians are not members of a club,” but rather “members of the church.” Christians are members of a “living, Mystical Body” which necessitates turning general sympathy into something of “immediate and practical use” (Wendling 6). Wendling explains Williams’ belief that “it is in our bodies that the secrets exist” (5). The Archdeacon, by participating in the liturgy, reveals the secret of the sacred word that is simultaneously within his body, and resounding outside of it.

Through coinherence, Williams’ theology introduces a new way of considering our temporal and eternal placement in time. When the Archdeacon first reads that the Holy Grail might possibly be the chalice at his parish in *Castra Parvulorum*, he reflects that many people “put an altogether undue importance” on “exterior and material things” (29). The Archdeacon believes that although God’s creation is part of God, creation is not God. The Grail isn’t sacred because of its material existence, but because of what it represents. Like the liturgy, the physical manifestation of the Grail creates a vehicle for the sacred, but it is not the sacred. To accept Williams’ theology of coinherence, is to understand that one is already in the presence of the sacred. Through sacrificial love and liturgy, and in the fullness of eternal time, those who live in coinherence may grow more like the Archdeacon, for whom “delight was far too small a word for the peace in which the Archdeacon moved” (151).

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