

Near Monism, Theodicy, and Church History in Charles Williams's *Descent of the Dove* (1939)

“Men had determined to know good as evil; there could be but one perfect remedy for that—to know the evil of the past itself as good, and to be free from the necessity of the knowledge of evil in the future; to find right knowledge and perfect freedom together; to know all things as occasions of love. . . . All is well; evil is ‘pardoned’—it is known after another manner; in an interchange of love, as a means of love, therefore as a means of good. *O felix culpa*—pardon is no longer an oblivion but an increased knowledge, a knowledge of all things in a perfection of joy.

“It is the name now given to the heavenly knowledge of the evil of earth; evil is known as an occasion of good, that is, of love. . . . What mankind could not do, manhood did, and a manhood which was at the disposal of all men and women. It was therefore possible now for mankind itself to know evil as an occasion of heavenly love. It was not inappropriate that the condition of such a pardon should be repentance, for repentance is no more than a passionate intention to know all things after the mode of heaven, and it is impossible to know evil as good if you insist on knowing it as evil. Pardon, as between any two beings, is a reidentification of love, and it is known so in the most tender and the most happy human relationships.” (*He Came Down from Heaven* 77-79)

Theological Background

Charles Williams was a monist, or a near monist, in that he saw the omnipotent God as the ultimate (though not necessarily immediate) author of evil. This is a theodician position for Williams. God as First Cause must take responsibility for the immense suffering of the world. But evil is not just the absence of the good; evil is the antagonistic yet ultimately complementary force that under God’s providential guidance will turn out to be good when seen correctly.

It is important to put the long passage above from *He Came Down from Heaven* in its larger train of thought. This is a chapter on the Incarnation (i.e. the manhood), and Williams clearly does not want to exalt human beings as divine upon their own merits. But it is characteristic of Williams’s thought to see the order of knowledge (maybe that is better term than being) become the center of his theodicy. For Williams, good and evil are matters of understanding. He moves beyond the Pauline assurance that “All things work together for good for those that love Him,” to Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man*, “All Discord, Harmony not understood;/ All partial Evil, universal Good:” (Ep I. X), and perhaps beyond that to a state in which the union of all things overrides any apparent division or dualism. In that sense, Williams employed a version of the *felix culpa* argument (i.e. the fortunate fall)—evil is ultimately part of God’s intended drama/pattern for the exhibition of love. Knowledge and love are intertwined.

This kind of emphasis in Williams leads to some particularly troubling tendencies: Repentance becomes knowledge, specifically the knowledge that all that is experienced as evil, if re-envisioned correctly, is love. Pardon, too, is a redefinition of persons, who, for Williams, are always each guilty parties in a kind of formula of correspondence, of division and reunion. So, while co-inherence in theory rejects self-dependence and individualism, it seems to fall into the very trap of cogito Williams claims to avoid. The technique of co-inherence acts as a magic, a manipulation of the world, rather than as true prayer, and the laws of exchange treat the world as obeying a set of magical principles that the correct (gnostic) knowledge can master or at least partially manipulate.

Certainly, Williams stresses Love as God's central action/movement, and this is commendable, especially in light of the violence of World War. But the question remains whether "love" in Williams's thought retains a character that is faithful and gifted, rather than finally controlling, and that even if idealized as pleasing relations of command and obedience. In part, because his view of knowledge (and salvation) seems to be so highly cognitive—evil results from viewing the good wrongly—the problem of evil is answered by a reconceptualization of the universe and history's design; even co-inherence is at its base a technique of reimagining the intersections of existence. Yet, in his defense, love can also exhibit sacrificial acts. What, then, to make of his argument for ecclesial history?

A Theodicy of Church History

Descent of the Dove is in one sense Chestertonian, the acknowledgement that the opposites of the Church hold it together, yet because *Descent* is also a theodicy, Williams risks what theodicians are sometimes accused of—a kind of Cartesian ego idolizing too assuredly its answers to the problem of evil. (And this in a book that Williams intends to be more about Dante than Descartes.) The book is an exercise in showing that the divisions and sinfulness of the Church have a larger purpose. In this it engages a real problem for the faith of many: why is there so much hypocrisy and corruption and division in the history of the Church? Does God have a higher purpose for what seems meaningless?

Thus, *Descent* seeks to address many of the key issues that occupied Christian thinkers in regard to the meaning of history:

- Williams sought an explanatory pattern for Church history, especially Western Church history.
- He also sought an explanation for the secularization that had come to the West and what this might say about divine purposes.
- He engaged the question of freedom and necessity, especially in regards to the experience and action of love.
- *Descent* also sought to understand the meaning of human sinfulness in regard to salvation history, albeit in a heterodox version.
- And he sought some kind of response to Communism and Fascism.

Some have argued that *Descent* is less esoteric and hermitic and therefore more orthodox than many of his other works. Nevertheless, the book does exhibit some of the typical troubling aspects of Williams's thought:

1. The search for a unifying pattern that sees in the various apparent polarities a fertile union. There is a productive, even sympathetic place for skepticism and heresy in Church history. It is part of a pattern of division, interpenetration, and new birth.
2. Williams's desire for a language of mathematical accuracy and certitude is present in some places.
3. A usage of impersonal synecdoche that tends to subsume God's personal action under the language of power and force is also present in places, though more often the language of the Lordship of the Spirit is evident.

4. Williams's stress on Romantic theology acts in many places as a kind of semi-secret or forgotten practice of exchange that is traceable throughout Church history. Williams tends to reread various Christian confessions and actions as representative of this belief.
5. He also over-reads "My Eros is crucified" as a kind of semi-erotic expression of co-inherence and as the reconciliation of opposites within a community of exchange.

Thematic Notes on the Chapters

Preface

Williams's explication of *The Coronation of the Virgin* (1513) by Lodovico Brea maps out some of his typical theological notions, including:

- "The holy and glorious flesh" (i.e. Mary) as connected with the Church (as a community of adoring saints),
- "The consummate Flesh" (i.e. the body of Christ taken down from the cross),
- The Beatific Vision and the Harrowing Hell as outside the field of the painting,
- The Church as "travellers upon one or other of the Ways" (i.e. the Way of Affirmation of Images and the Way of Negation of Images) ["This also is Thou; neither is this Thou"],
- The "co-inherence of the whole redeemed City."

Chapter 1, The Definition of Christendom [New Testament Christianity (First Century)]

- The search for trigonometric certainty in human history, especially Church history (1).
- "It" --the Incarnate force with "a higher potential of power" who would cause "some other Power" (the Paraclete) to be made manifest in the Church (2-3) [c/c pages 61-62, 235].
- The three conditions of Jewish piety, Roman political order, and Greek culture and the Church's place for and against them (4).
- The early argument as to the Deity of Messiah, i.e. how heresy advances sacred meaning through necessity and freedom beyond necessity (6ff.).
- Paul and "the [providential] fact" of redemptive activity (8ff.).
- Simon Magus and Helen as "a polarization of the senses": Gnostic heresy as secret principle of creation and the so-called Christian attempt at deferred sexual friendship (11-14)
- The existential Now versus the Then of temporal development—the division within the City to be, i.e. the Church. "Time became the individual and catholic problem" (14-15).
- The ups and downs of Christian social isolation (16-20).
- The Romantic movement in early Christianity and its Gnostic philosophical extremes (21-25).
- The authority, organization and written texts of Christianity by the second century (26).

Chapter 2, The Reconciliation with Time [Ancient Christianity (Second Century through First Council of Nicaea, 325AD)]

- The confession of Felicitas during childbirth of the way of exchange (28).

- Montanism's schismatic actions, yet it was also being used to confess the deity of the Holy Spirit (34).
- The strict way of Tertullian and the relaxed way of Clement of Alexandria (35-36).
- Origen's influential role in Christian doctrine and culture and his need for dogmatic authority to curb his excesses (37-40).
- The Confessors practice the way of exchange for the Lapsed (43-44).
- Manicheanism opposed by the co-inherence of the Orthodox Church (45).
- The confession of Anthony the Great, "Your life and your death are with your neighbor," recalls Ignatius of Antioch's confession, "My Eros is crucified" with its complex of meanings including interchange and the City (46).
- The Edict of Milan and the changes under Constantine, including the semi-religious role afforded him (47-48).

Chapter 3, The Compensations of Success [Christian Rome; The Two Ways (325-430, 533AD)]

- The Arian controversy; Nicea I and Felicitas's confession—the Co-Inherence of the Godhead (51-53).
- The Desert Fathers, the Way of Negation, a confession of co-inherence (54-55).
- The Manichean assault on the body and defense of the goodness of Creation (56-57).
- The balance of the Affirmation and Negation (57-58).
- The Affirmative Way in the (so-called) Creed of Athanasius (59-60).
- The Negative Way in (Pseudo-)Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* (60-62). [Note: The "It" here is not the same as the reductive synecdoche, though Williams may see this as partial justification. c/w pages 2-3, 235.]
- Augustine's tendency towards the Way of Negation versus Pelagius's trust in a Way of Affirmation (64-68).
- Augustine's stress on predestination and the gift of grace (69-70).
- Augustine's theory of history (i.e. the Two Cities); the heavenly state as a "sphere of operation" and "a state of love." A renewal of the City, of "humility possible for all" (71-72).

Chapter 4, The War of the Frontiers [Late Classical Christianity through the Great Schism (Fifth Century – 1054AD)]

- The Byzantine Empire—the new sacerdotal role of the Emperor; the orthodoxy of the Latin Pontiff; the differences in Latin and Greek responses to later church councils (73-75).
- The ghastly image of the crucified Christ in worship (75-77).
- The rise of Christian reading, the interior state; literary Latin, the Vulgate, Latin Christian poets as the new Romantic movement of Christianity, yet its fundamental limits in declaring the theology of romance (78-80).
- Conversion of the barbarians and the rise of holy orders (81-82).
- The trouble with time for religion, especially given the Fact (i.e. Christ) (83).
- Mass conversions and the failure of Christendom to bring in the web of co-inherence (85-87)
- A kind of theory of early medieval Christian literature: Boethius—the outer affirmation of "Then all fortune is good" with the inner one of "My Eros is crucified," followed by a

Saxon Christianity looking backwards (*Beowulf*) and forwards (*Dream, of the Rood*) (88-89).

- The rise of Irish and Benedictine monasticism (90-91).
- The apocalyptic dream of the rise of Islam & the Islamic Revolution (91-93).
- The Iconoclastic Controversy, the Seventh Ecumenical Council, and the Restoration of the Images—all a kind of dialectic against the Negative “Unincarnate Alone” of Islam (93-95).
- Charlamagne becomes Emperor of the West (96-97).
- The increasing differences between Latin and Greek Christianity—the *filioque* clause; the Great Schism as terrible tragedy (1054AD) (98-100).

Chapter 5, The Imposition of Belief [High Medievalism (Eleventh to Thirteenth Centuries)]

- The joyous expectation of the Second Coming had given way to the threat of Judgment Day without joy (101).
- “The grand metaphysical civilization” organized around dogma and land: socially and economically, this involved land, tenure, and loyalty; ecclesiastically and poetically, this was another invitation to co-inherence, vision, and being a lover (102-103).
- The tensions between Emperor and Pope (104).
- The renewed dualist stress led to a greater place for the devil in practice and imagination (105).
- Heresy concerned with Super-Essential Love and the nature of co-inherence (106).
- Rise of the Inquisition, which has some roots in the good (107-108).
- Abelard, Anselm, and Bernard of Clairvaux’s attack on Abelard; the decision to protect academic inquiry (109-110).
- The Fourth Crusade and the Albigensian heresy (111-112).
- The debate over substance in the Eucharist and its relationship to “My Eros is crucified” (113-115).
- The Grail and the Wounded King; the mystical meaning of Lancelot, Elaine, and Galahad as the two Ways brought to fruition (115-116).
- Belief in co-inherence forced down by political will to dominance, yet arises again more fully in the Feast of Corpus Christi (117-119).
- The adoption of torture by the Inquisition and the resulting irony that clerics can shed no blood (120-121).
- The rise of the Franciscans and the Dominicans, and the resulting debate between Aquinas and Duns Scotus, as well as Siger of Brabant’s Averroist supposal of two modes of truth—poetic truth versus scholastic logic (121-123).
- Canon law and the control of weddings; persecution of the Knights Templar; and the Children’s Crusade—blasphemous turns of the imagination (123-127).

Chapter 6, Consummation and Schism [Late Medievalism (Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries)]

- The end of the Medieval period still possessed a bounty of wide symbolism at both the macrocosmic and microcosmic levels, yet did not encourage the discipline of disbelief; it also began to suffer from divisions among nations, classes, and eventually churches (128-129).

- The Church's defense of marriage on grounds of justice rather than *caritas/eros* (130-131).
- Dante as the archetypal vision of the Affirmative Way—beatitude in the contemplative love of Beatrice; the second theophany in the Lady at the Window (132-134).
- The three loves of *The Divine Comedy*: Paolo and Francesca (love turned to greed); Casella (the interchange of love); and Piccarda and/or Beatrice (love contented in necessity) (135-138).
- The attempt to downplay Dante's beatitude through Beatrice (139).
- *The Cloud of Unknowing* as archetypal vision of the Negative Way; Marjory Kempe and Julian of Norwich as practicing this way (140-144).
- The rise of the Black Death; the failed relations of *caritas* and *justitia* (145-146).
- The Great Schism, the Conciliar Movement; the Withdrawals and Renewals of Obedience, John Wycliffe, the Councils of Constance and Pisa—how all this prepared a generation for the Reformation (146-154).

Chapter 7, The Renewal of Contrition [The Renaissance and Reformation (Sixteenth Century)]

- A statement of the problem: “the effort of converting disobedience through obedience to a love of Reconciliation in obedience had failed, and the effort of compelling obedience by the force of the mere organized means of Reconciliation had failed” (155).
- The Renaissance as “a scream of color”: the myth of Alexander VI and the necessary apocalyptic imagination; the abandonment of “the idea of that universal Circumstance” (156-158).
- Erasmus, Leonardo de Vinci, and Machiavelli as possibilities within Christianity; failure to take on “a second series of acts” [i.e. the way of exchange] (159-161).
- The creation of indulgences as a means of exchange (162-164).
- Luther's discovery of faith and rejection of indulgences (165-168).
- The struggle with defining the practice of love; the parallel convictions of faith and works (168-170).
- The Babylonian Captivity, the Diet of Worms—“I can no other” (171-172).
- Ignatius of Loyola, John Calvin, and the Wars of Religion—“it pleased our Lord the Spirit violently to convulse these souls with himself.” Freedom and necessity meeting in the cross and in the way of discipline (172-175).
- The energy of the spoken and sung Word; the violence of souls leading to political violence—another loss of co-inherent love (176-177).

Chapter 8, The Quality of Disbelief [The English Reformation, Early Modernity (Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries)]

- The “great experiment of salvation” failed each time that the conditions of its success were imposed; the repulsion that a sense of heresy brings (178-179).
- John of the Cross as the consummate negative mystic; his transmuted flesh (178-181).
- Blood, charity, and tolerance—the past and present compared (182).
- Henry VIII's self-focused convictions; the cost to Thomas More; and examination of Thomas Cranmer and the calculus of the English Church (183-185).
- Rare passage that stresses not confusing the necessity of Primary Cause with human choices as secondary causes (185b) [Compare with quotation from *Witchcraft* below.]

- The parallel psychologies of Elizabeth I and Catherine de Medici (186-187).
- The Thirty Years War and Treaties of 1648; the secular begins to forget metaphysics (188-189).
- The quality of belief-in-disbelief defined, e.g. Lorenza Valla, Montaigne's "double man"; faith as a hypothesis versus violent certitude (189-194).
- English Deism versus English Pietism, especially the late mysticism of Williams Law (194).
- The Pelagian noble savage versus the passionate rhetoric of Pascal's necessity and reasons of the heart, along with the French quietists; the Jesuit rule of probabilism versus the Jansenist insistence upon certainty (195-200).
- The French Enlightenment and Voltaire's death to the Infamy, i.e. the Calas case (201-203).
- The Third Rome of Moscow and the partition of Poland: ironic end to the period (203-204).

Chapter 9, The Return of the Manhood [The Long Nineteenth Century; The Period between the Wars (1770-ca.1930s)]

- John Wesley (Protestant Evangelical) and Alphonsus Liguori (Roman Catholic) as two sources of revival (205-207).
- The Spirit's movement for the *Anthropos*—global Missions, Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery in England; the French Revolution (208-211).
- Kierkegaard's call for contrition and the delay in his message being heard [until the 20th century] (212-214).
- The Oxford Movement and Lamennais's awareness of the poor (214-215).
- The Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception versus the call for liberty (215-216).
- Supernatural freedom being higher than natural freedom; the tensions between grace and liberty; the primacy of the greater co-inherent freedom (216-218).
- The anxiety of the pious as to new views of time and space; the higher criticism and the historical Jesus; various views of skepticism (218-221).
- The rise of new populist Christian movements in both Protestantism and Catholicism; the declaration of Papal Infallibility (221-222).
- Relativity and the rise of comparative religion (222-223).
- The question of social justice and the perception of Christianity as the tool of the propertied classes; *Rerum Novarum* (223-226).
- The Marxist conception of dialectical materialism; the Russian Revolution; oppression of the Russian Church (226-230).
- The rise of German racial fascism (230-231).
- The call for confession and the coming judgment (i.e. the Descent of the Dove) on the Church, i.e. the coming World War (232-233).

Postscript

Williams summarizes aspects of his doctrine of co-inherence and exchange and calls for an Order of the Co-Inherence:

- The man and woman, impregnation, gestation, and birth of the child as physical acts of substitution, co-inherence, and fruition.

- Baptism as supernatural birth; as a higher co-inherence.
- The declaration of the Incarnation: reconciling natural and supernatural worlds; a combination of “sensuality with substance.”
- The ladder of co-inherences.
- The Trinity as the highest co-inherence of “It” i.e. the Alone.
- Nature and grace within and without Christendom as of primary concern.
- The call for an Order of Co-Inherence to meditate/practice acts of exchange and substitution: a deep necessity in the present world (i.e. beginning of WWII)

General Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with Williams that Church history is a dilemma that needs solving? Why and/or why not?
2. How does Williams see the Affirmative and Negative Way as two forces that interpenetrate and shape Christian history over the centuries?
3. How does Williams see antagonism and/or heresy as advancing Church history?
4. Do Williams’s heterodox ideas fatally undercut his observations about the past? Explain.
5. Glen Cavaliero has called *Descent of the Dove* his “masterpiece” because it combines a synthetic vision with a swift and interesting narrative. Would you agree?
6. What makes the book one leading into WWII?

“The use of the word supernatural has been rebuked, and indeed it is a little unfortunate. It did not imply then, nor should it ever have implied since, any derogation from the natural order. But it did imply that that order was part of and reposed on a substance which was invisible and which operated by laws greater than, if not in opposition to, those which were apparent in the visible world. Substance was love, and love was substance. And the substance of love was disposed by conscious and controlling Will, which had yet limited itself, by its own choice, as to leave the wills of men and women free to assent or not to assent to its own. The nature of that final and supernatural Will was not at all clearly imagined or defined by the passionate thinkers and orators of the early Church, except in two or three points. It was absolute; it created all things; and in that historic being Jesus it had set itself in a special relationship of love to mankind. It had, by a sacrifice of what was more and more beginning to seem itself, operated to restore to men a state of goodness and glory of which they had miserably deprived themselves. It intensely and individually desired the salvation of all men. The one thing necessary, besides its own sacrifice, was the will of the creature to accept and unite itself with that sacrifice. And the death of Jesus, called Christ, had been that sacrifice.”--*Witchcraft* 14



The Coronation of the Virgin (1513), Lodovico Brea (ca. 1450-1532)

[88.3 x 50.4 cm. (34.8 x 19.8 in.)]