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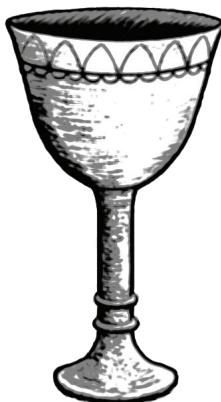
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# The Inklings and King Arthur

J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis,  
and Owen Barfield on the Matter of Britain

edited by Sørina Higgins



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## The Acts of Unity: The Eucharistic Theology of Charles Williams' Arthurian Poetry

Andrew C. Stout

The sacramental cast of Charles Williams' literary vision has been well attested.<sup>1</sup> The notion that human loves, human persons, and human bodies communicate the divine is the very foundation of his theology of romantic love. However, in addition to an inherent sacramentality, Williams' work also displays trenchant insights into the nature of the particular sacrament of the Eucharist. His unique contribution to eucharistic theology has been suggested by Gavin Ashenden in his excellent book *Charles Williams: Alchemy and Integration*. Commenting on *War in Heaven*, Ashenden observes that

Williams provides an extraordinary Eucharistic theology that transcends the conventional lines of argument that fall into categories of symbolism, real presence, or transubstantiation. Instead we are moved into an altogether wider dimension that incorporates time and space, spirit and matter, in a sense of the drawing together of all things into union with the godhead through, in this case, the Grail. (Ashenden 113)

I would like to pick up this suggestion and draw out the eucharistic theology in Williams' work, looking both to his explicit statements about the sacrament in his theological and literary essays and to his mythic depiction in the Arthurian poems. I will place Williams' positions in these works within a historical theological framework, with an eye toward their potential for ecumenism. These reflections will provide a picture of the Eucharist that avoids the pitfalls of so much of the Church's sacramental theology. Williams'

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Ridler observes: "One may consider Charles Williams as above all a great exponent of the Affirmative, the Sacramental, Way, in the canon of Christian writing; one of the few who have written of it with a full understanding of its relation to the Negative, or Mystical, Way" (ix). Also see McLaren and Ware.

unique metaphysical perspective offers a distinctive theory of Christ's presence at the altar, giving a robust account of the nature of that presence while avoiding overly narrow speculations on the mechanics of the transformation of the elements. He recognizes and gives full expression to the social and unitive character of the sacrament. As we shall see, Williams' contribution to the Church's reflection on the memorial of Christ flows from a life that centered itself on participation in the eucharistic mystery.

Another noted feature of Williams' work is the influence of the occult, particularly through his involvement with A. E. Waite's Rosicrucian group, the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross. Waite's *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal* (1909) was a major influence on Williams. Waite charts the literary history of the Grail romances and discusses the existence of a "Secret Church" that exists within the official Church. This Secret Church observes the rite of the Grail Mass, a rite that is "the declared pageant of the Eucharist .... its demonstration in the transcendent mode" (Waite 494). Waite does not view the Grail Mass as a replacement for the official Church's Eucharist, but he understands the doctrine of transubstantiation and the practice of the reservation of the host as "the nearest approaches to the idea of the arch-natural Eucharist" (637). Williams also sees transubstantiation as something of an approximation of a more fundamentally mysterious presence in the Eucharist. This structure of a mysterious rite that reveals the true nature of the eucharistic presence makes its way into Williams' Arthurian poems. In fact, "Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass," which I will discuss more thoroughly, is best understood as a kind of picture of the Grail Mass that Waite speaks of in cryptic terms.

While Waite's influence is undeniable, and the legitimacy of Williams' synthesis of occult and Christian themes and practices remains a significant area of research in Williams scholarship, it is equally clear that Williams works within the framework of orthodox Christian theological concepts. I hope to show that his appropriation of Grail imagery does not compromise his contribution to sacramental theology, but rather, that it imaginatively generates new possibilities for a thoroughly orthodox understanding of Christ's presence in the Eucharist.<sup>2</sup>

## Eucharistic Center

Because he was a devout Anglo-Catholic, it is natural that the Eucharist was the center of Williams' spiritual life. For Williams, that which is spiritual or supernatural encompasses all of life, allowing for no simple dichotomies between spirit/matter or natural/supernatural. Accordingly, the centrality of the Eucharist can be seen in the entire scope of Williams' life, including the details of his personal life and the themes of his writings. Alice Mary Hadfield, his friend and biographer, notes the sustained and practical devotion to the Eucharist that spilled over into his imaginative life: "Charles went almost every Sunday to the Eucharist. It was the centre of his thought and so of his life. He never tired of meditating on it" (212). She

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<sup>2</sup> A recent article by Roukema combs the rituals and meeting minutes of the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross to show how Williams' novels and poetry need to be reinterpreted as literary embodiments of the group's ceremonies. For more on the way that hermetic practices inform and shape Williams' thought and fiction, see Stout, "It Can Be Done."

interprets the concerns of his life from his earliest years to his death in terms of sacramental and Arthurian themes as she speaks of his confirmation in the Church of England:

Charles now entered the sacramental life, as the young men of Arthurian history entered the Castle of the Grail. They failed, one after another, to ask ‘What serves the Grail?’ or ‘What purpose does the Grail serve?’ because they were overcome by mystery, their own reactions, or inattention. Already to Charles, history and today, other worlds and himself, were all of one life, and he was concerned about its meaning. What was eating and drinking the bread and wine for? Why was it started? How did it work? How did it preserve your body, or your soul? This exploring mind worked in him all his life and the theme of the Eucharist was the subject of the book he was planning to write after *The Figure of Arthur*, left unfinished by his last illness in 1945. (Hadfield 11)

Hadfield articulates Williams' deferential attitude toward the gracious mystery of the sacrament and his understanding of the Eucharist in mythic terms. This conditions Williams' understanding of the sacrament and sets the trajectory for his expression of the purpose of the eucharistic celebration and of Christ's presence at the altar.

Williams saw himself primarily as a poet, and contemporary evaluation of his work has borne this out. Beyond the cult following of his novels, most critics who undertake a serious evaluation of his literary output acknowledge that his Arthurian poetry is his most significant contribution, both for the originality of his handling of the legends and for the skill and maturity of expression evidenced in their composition. All of his writings, whatever their genre, bear the mark of a poetic mind that sees form and beauty of expression as an essential component of accuracy and evaluation. He was a serious theologian, and this is never more evident than when he tackles the issue of the eucharistic presence in his theological writings like *The Descent of the Dove*. Yet even here, where historical and doctrinal accuracy are more explicit components of his agenda, the issue of the eucharistic presence is still spoken of in allusive and suggestive terms. Williams attempts to draw some explicit parameters for an original and innovative understanding of the Eucharist in his theological essays, and I will look at those shortly. But it is in *Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars* that we see his fullest depiction of the eucharistic mystery and the joining of the heavenly and earthly realms that manifests the presence of Christ to his Church. In this sense, Williams' poetry must be understood as a mode of serious theological engagement. To say that he makes a serious contribution to eucharistic theology is to acknowledge that Williams is, perhaps above all else, a eucharistic poet.

## An Anglican Context

Williams' eucharistic theology must be situated within the context of the Anglo-Catholic stream of the Church of England in the first half of the twentieth century. Williams offers a poetic vision of Christ's presence in the Eucharist that is unique and that goes a long way toward reconciling some of the tensions between traditional theories of the eucharistic presence. However, Williams' discomfort with the terminology of transubstantiation, his attempt to revive patristic ideas about the Eucharist, and his emphasis

on the irreducibly social character of the sacrament are all impulses that can be located within broader discussions of the Eucharist within the Anglican church of Williams' day.

With regard to transubstantiation, the 1938 report of the Commission on Christian Doctrine, entitled *Doctrine in the Church of England*, observes a current within Anglicanism among theologians who were influenced by the Oxford Movement, a nineteenth-century High Church movement lead by Edward Pusey and John Henry Newman that advocated for a fuller expression of apostolic traditions in the Church of England. They adhere to the objective nature of Christ's presence in the rite, but they maintain a certain ambivalence toward the terminology of transubstantiation: "Some of them are content with the use of traditional language to express [the real presence]; but others, especially in recent years, have felt the need for some restatement of it designed to remove traditional objections; and various suggestions for such restatement have been made."<sup>3</sup> Williams displays precisely this kind of ambivalence toward transubstantiation, alternatively making use of and dismissing the term. His particular approach to the Eucharist does not take the form of an explicitly defined position. However, taken as a whole, Williams' poetic rendering of the real presence might function as an alternative to transubstantiation.

The report looks back to the early centuries of the Church as an era when the mystery of the real presence was particularly valued. It discerns two major stages in the history of eucharistic doctrine. The first was a stage of grateful reception of the mysterious presence of Christ: "For about eight hundred years the attempt to understand and to express precisely how the Gift is given, and to provide an account of the Gift in its various relations, was quite subordinate to a thankful recognition of the reality of the Gift itself." This was followed by "a stage of definition and controversy, beginning in the ninth century, and marked by attempts at precision" (163). This stage included the definition of transubstantiation in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council, and it would come to fuller expression in Reformation debates about consubstantiation, spiritual presence, and Zwinglian memorialism. As a whole, the Anglican tradition has taken its cues from the former stage, and the report notes that

perhaps the strongest and most characteristic tradition of Anglicanism is to affirm such a real presence of Christ in the Eucharist as enables the faithful communicant both to receive His life as a spiritual gift and to acknowledge Him as the giver, while at the same time the affirmation is combined with a determination to avoid as far as possible all precise, scholastic definitions as to the manner of the giving. (170–71)

This impulse is characteristic of Williams' account of the development of the Eucharist. He also appeals to a time prior to scholastic definitions when the real presence was just as strongly maintained, but the mystery of that presence was also more pronounced.

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<sup>3</sup> *Doctrine in the Church of England* 169. Williams was familiar with this report and held it in high esteem. He included selections from it in *The Passion of Christ* and *The New Christian Year*, two volumes of devotional reading that he compiled.

The report is marked throughout by an emphasis on the social character of the eucharistic rite. Aside from questions of the mechanics of the real presence, it characterizes the Eucharist as “a corporate act of the Church toward God, wherein it is united with its Lord, victorious and triumphant, Himself both Priest and Victim in the Sacrifice of the Cross” (161–62). Similarly, Charles Gore, an important Anglo-Catholic theologian of the early twentieth century, draws out the essentially social and corporate nature of sacramental rites in *The Body of Christ*. After observing a Protestant tendency to oppose the idea of spiritual blessing being delivered by material means, Gore articulates a “sacramental presupposition” that must be in place to properly understand the doctrine of the real presence:

The communication of this spiritual life [of Christ's] to us by means of a material and social ceremony is quite analogous to the whole of what we know about the relation of the human spirit to bodily conditions, about the relation of the individual to the society, and about the principles of the pre-eminently human and social religion of the Son of Man. (47)

Williams certainly reflects this interest in the social character of the Eucharist. In his explicitly theological works, he views the Eucharist as a way of charting and enacting the history of Christendom.<sup>4</sup> In his Arthurian poems, the fate of Logres is tied up in the fate of the Grail, and he uses the Grail as a means to reveal the sacramental nature of the social order.

As these sources show, Williams is well situated within the sacramental context of the Church of England in the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Within that context, his intellectual and aesthetic orientation was consistently Anglo-Catholic. Williams' parish church, St. Silas the Martyr in Kentish Town, London, was and remains one of the most distinctly Anglo-Catholic parishes in the Church of England.<sup>6</sup> While Williams'

4 In a review of a book on “the Liturgy of the Church of England as it was received by the Anglican Divines of the seventeenth century,” Williams notes how the tradition has put the Eucharist at the center of its social theory, noting that “the sacred City could not be built by everyone raising his own little pile of bricks. Men were to be part of it, and so only it of them. The Eucharist, which was the centre and consummation of all the Rites, was the union of the City” (“The Liturgy” 122).

5 It has also been noted by Ralph that Williams displays a substantial understanding of the nuances of sixteenth-century eucharistic debates. Ralph cites some lines from the verse play *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* in which Williams compresses complex “theological argument into a few lines, with little context” (218).

6 Understanding the heavily Anglo-Catholic context of St. Silas the Martyr and the formative effect it must have had on Williams’ imagination is important for grasping the imagery of the mass in his Arthurian poems. An essay on the architect Ernest Charles Shearman offers some liturgical background:

That Shearman was working at St. Silas for Anglo-Catholic clients cannot be overstated, for that relationship directly shaped the overall form of the church and its sundry appointments. Broadly speaking, within the liturgies of the Anglo-Catholic branch of Anglicanism, there are two predominant sources of inspiration in liturgical matters. These sources govern a wide range of elements, from the inclusion or exclusion of genuflections at specified points in the liturgy to altar appointments, iconography, and vestiture. The two major sources are the pre-Reformation English medieval church on the one hand, and post-Reformation Rome on the other hand. At St. Silas, the source of inspiration is significantly drawn from the latter. (Row 351)

eucharistic views can be identified within the theological climate of his day, he contributes a distinct ontological rationale for the real presence.

## Real Presence and the Metaphysics of Co-inherence

Williams' theology of the Eucharist rests on a unique metaphysical perspective. The idea of co-inherence is the metaphysical basis for his understanding of Christ's presence and the Church's participation in the sacrament. What Williams is trying to maintain is a view of Christ's presence that holds to the reality of that presence but that also eschews the traditional language of transubstantiation to describe its mysterious quality. He is attempting to return to a patristic reticence to explain the eucharistic mystery. He achieves this through a reappropriation and development of the patristic term "co-inherence," to produce what I will call an "ontology of co-inherence."

Co-inherence is a (perhaps *the*) governing principle of Williams' thought. It is a principle that is derived from the Christian faith, but that speaks of the interconnectedness of the created order in a way that is recognizable to anyone. The trinitarian definitions of the Church "declared not merely that the Father and the Son existed co-equally, but that they existed co-inherently—that is, that the Son existed *in* the Father and that the Father existed *in* the Son" ("The Way of Exchange" 149). This co-inherent life is extended to the Church: "The same preposition was used to define our Lord's relations with His Church: 'we in him and he in us'" (149). The pagans, however, also recognized the inevitable reliance of individuals on one another, and today our even more highly specialized divisions of labor reinforce this truth. We cannot escape the obvious truth that "The whole natural and social world depended, then as now, on some process of exchange" (149). If the trinitarian relationship of exchange and co-inherence is what lies behind and gives life to the created order, then we should expect to see these characteristics defining every part of the reality that we experience.

Though evidenced in our daily experience and established in the doctrines of the Church, co-inherence comes most clearly into view in the celebration of the Eucharist: "The great Rite of this (as of much else) within the Christian Church is the Eucharist, where the co-inherence is fully in action: 'He in us and we in Him'" (154). This is the angle at which Williams approaches the fraught question of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He employs co-inherence as a principle of the ontological makeup of the universe to explain how Christ is present in the sacrament. By doing this, Williams attempts to recapture something of the patristic sense of mystery that he claims surrounded the Eucharist prior to the Fourth Lateran Council and the climax of the medieval eucharistic controversies in the definition of transubstantiation.<sup>7</sup> Prior to this:

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<sup>7</sup> Stevenson notes the possible objection that an Anglican appeal to a patristic sense of mystery in formulations of the eucharistic presence could be a kind of cop-out. He defends the legitimacy of this appeal on the part of the Anglican divines, claiming that "Far from the intellectual bankruptcy of taking refuge in the idea of mystery, these men were asserting and affirming mystery as something irreducible in itself and the essential reality pervading the sacramental action and its effects—the *mystery of the Eucharist*" (McAdoo and Stevenson 19, emphasis original).

in those earlier centuries the central Mystery of Ritual, the Eucharist itself, had rather been accepted than discussed. From the days of St. Paul the holy celebrations had continued, and the presence of Messias been acknowledged. But argument had been small. The nature of the change had not been defined, nor had the means or moment of the change been settled. (*Dove* 113)

With this definition, the doctrine of the real presence was raised to the status of dogma, along with the triune nature of God and the dual nature of Christ, which Williams sees as a positive development. However, with this elevated status came the difficulty of formal definitions, and Williams is clearly not entirely comfortable with the terminology of transubstantiation. According to Williams' understanding, transubstantiation requires that the body of Christ displace the elements of bread and wine. He notes, "I'm a little inclined to agree that if there is nothing but He there, there is hardly a sacrament" (qtd. in Hadfield 212). By examining the sacrament as a rite that reveals, in a concentrated way, the co-inherent nature of the created order and of the Christian faith, Williams seeks to offer a subtler,<sup>8</sup> and ultimately a more broadly suggestive, account of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Williams' meditations on the co-inherent nature of the Eucharist reveal a number of different dimensions to the ritual meal. First, we see that Christ and the Church co-inhere in one another. As noted above, the act of the Eucharist reveals that the Church has been ushered into a participation with Christ that reflects the participation of the three members of the Godhead within each other. Christ draws his Body, the Church, into participation with Himself by both offering and constituting the sacramental meal: "There, visible but hidden, perfect under either species, were the subtlety, the glory, the agility, the impassibility. They were there for sacrifice and communion. The True Priest (hidden in wafer and in wine) offered them, and generously permitted the Church and City a participation in His Act" ("Figure" 204). It is Christ's act of atonement and substitution that affects the Church's reconciliation to God, but in the eucharistic meal the bread and wine become the means by which that atonement and substitution are accomplished in the Church. By reenacting the Last Supper, the Church participates in an act initiated by Christ. It was not enough that Christ, through his own actions on the cross, accomplish the reconciliation of humanity, but He continues that act into our own time and beyond by institutionalizing a ritual meal for us to participate in: "The whole act is Christ's and is imparted to those who are also His. But now, as he had commenced the Act, and indoctrinated the theology, He was said to have directed the ritual" ("Figure" 205).

8 Williams claims that "Only the most subtle theologians can adequately discuss the Nature of that Presence." He certainly counted Aquinas in this group, and yet, with reference to St. Thomas, maintained that a sufficient account of the eucharistic presence has yet to be offered: "The answers are lofty and sublime, but we yet await the genius who can make those high speculations vivid" (*Dove* 113–14). Williams' Grail poetry can rightly be seen as his own attempt to make the speculative "vivid."

Second, we see in the Eucharist that matter and deity can co-inhere in one another.<sup>9</sup> Williams notes that in the early centuries of the Church, the Eucharist “was used, as well it might be, as an argument against the Gnostic doctrines of the unreality of matter and of the evil of the flesh” (“Figure” 197). As the conviction that Christ both offered and was offered in this act grew, so did the conviction that the elements contained or offered Christ’s real body. Following the definition of transubstantiation in the Fourth Lateran Council, the feast of Corpus Christi was established in 1264:

The co-inherence of matter and Deity as a presence became as liturgically glorious as it was intellectually splendid, and the performance of the dramatic Mysteries and Miracles celebrated in many places through a long summer’s day the Act in the present sacrament as well as in history and in the soul. It was organized and exhibited. (*Dove* 119)

It is part and parcel of Chalcedonian orthodoxy that both divine and human natures are united in the person of Christ. By acknowledging that God, who is a spirit, can co-inhere with the matter of bread and wine, the dogma of the divine and human natures of Christ is defended and continually reenacted.

Finally, and most crucially, the Eucharist reveals the co-inherence of time with eternity.<sup>10</sup> Though the Incarnation brought together humanity and divinity in the person of Christ, the healing of the rift between the heavenly and earthly realms was yet to be fully manifested. Temporal history continued after the ascension of Christ, and the early Church therefore had to come to grips with the fact that Christ’s heavenly session did not usher in the end of that history. Time had to be reconciled with eternity. According to Williams, the early Church “had been fixed on the elements which, being the veil, were in some sense rather the mystery beyond … the great Rite soared to its climax in the eternal, and yet communicated the eternal to time” (*Dove* 114). Williams quotes Gregory the Great, who says that in the sacrifice of the Eucharist “things lowest are brought into communion with the highest, things earthly are united with the heavenly, and the things that are seen and those which are unseen become one” (114). The Eucharist became the means by which the Church experienced and participated in the reality of heaven. Christ took His human status with Him into the presence of the Father existing in eternity, and through continuing to celebrate

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<sup>9</sup> Horne draws out the importance of co-inherence to Williams’ Christology. In doing so, he also notes the source through which Williams identifies co-inherence as a patristic concept:

While this vocabulary of substitution and exchange, emphatically used by Williams, might suggest a more immediate union between the natures than was propounded at Chalcedon, which would lead in the direction of the confusion of natures, monophysitism is avoided by the use of the complementary concept of co-inherence. The divine and human natures of the incarnate Lord do not merge into one another, are not confused, they co-inhere. Williams had been very impressed by G. L. Prestige’s essay on co-inherence that concluded his study *God in Patristic Thought*; Williams found his own theological sensibility confirmed by that work. (Horne 117)

<sup>10</sup> In a chapter on Williams’ Arthurian poems, Cavaliero states that “The co-inherence of time and eternity is of the essence of his poetic vision; and its systematic exploration is the matter of his theology. As Williams practised them, the two disciplines are complementary” (*Poet* 125).

the meal that Christ shared with His disciples, the Church is drawn up into the presence of the ascended Christ. History had not yet come to a close, but the eternal was made present to the Church in the midst of history as Christ is presented in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, Christ, ascended to eternity, co-inheres with the temporal congregation of the Church.

This presence of Christ through the Eucharist is no mere mental remembrance on the part of the Church. The view that the meal is simply a commemoration of Christ's work is associated with the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli—this is far from Williams' position. As mentioned above, he is pleased with the fact that Christ's real presence has been raised to the level of dogma with the doctrine of transubstantiation, but he is not satisfied with the Aristotelian terms in which transubstantiation has been defined. Christ is present physically in the Supper, yes, but it is the mysterious ability of the eternal to co-inhere with the temporal that accounts for this physical presence. This constitutes a new ontological basis on which to begin thinking about how Christ is truly present in the Eucharist. In his Arthurian poetry, Williams begins to give expression to what this presence might look like.

## Real Presence through Co-inherence in the Arthurian Poems

### *The Grail at the Center*

Williams' two volumes of Arthurian poetry, *Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*, are unique and important contributions to the development of the Arthurian myths. Their most distinctive feature is the central role that the quest for the Grail plays, both thematically and organizationally. The organization of the Arthurian myths around the central theme of the Grail was a conscious strategy on Williams' part. Though he drew inspiration from both Malory and Tennyson, he claimed that "the great and awful myth of the Grail had not been treated adequately in English verse" ("The Making of *Taliessin*" 180). He understood such an emphasis to be a recovery of a medieval sensibility. As Williams states the primary tension of the story, "The problem is simple—is the king to be there for the sake of the Grail or not. It was so the Middle ages left it; but since then it has been taken the other way. The Grail has been an episode" ("Figure" 267). To recognize the Grail's centrality is to recover the central theme of the mythology: "Logres then must be meant for the Grail .... This indeed must be the pure glory of Arthur and Logres .... It is the central Matter of Britain. We may, if we choose, reasonably and properly refuse it, but we can hardly doubt that if we do we shall have no doubt a consistent, but a much smaller myth" ("Figure" 267). By making the Grail central, Williams revealed that the Arthurian stories are not simply cultural artifacts, but that they form a complete mythology with broad social and theological application.

The central place of the Grail is well attested to in the literature that discusses Williams' handling of the Arthuriad. While earlier versions of the myths focused on Arthur's kingship or the romance of Lancelot and Guinevere, Williams brought the quest for the Grail and its spiritual power to the forefront. Elizabeth Brewer notes that Williams, like Malory before him, does not simply retell a series of stories; rather, he absorbs and reshapes the existing tradition. "The Grail is of course Charles Williams' real subject, though for Malory it was only incidental .... Naturally, therefore, the selection of characters and the parts that they

play in Williams' cycle were controlled by the focus on the Grail" (Brewer 102). McClatchey connects the central place that the Eucharist played in Williams' life to the place of the Grail in his writing. He notes that "the artistic center of Charles Williams' imaginative writings is the Mysteries of the Holy Eucharist, that is, the Bread and Cup of the Lord's Supper or Communion ... he has presented the world with a new Grail hero from the very nature of his poetic development of the tradition."<sup>11</sup> The Eucharist and the Arthurian myths are entwined in Williams' imagination, creating a unique emphasis on the spiritual power and determinative role of the Grail in the story of Logres.

With the Grail at the center, Williams shapes the Arthurian myths in such a way as to draw out their social and political implications.<sup>12,13</sup> Williams conceives of Logres, or Britain, as the western-most outpost of the Byzantine Empire. The various parts of the Empire, the "organic body," are laid out early in *Taliessin through Logres* in the poem "The Vision of the Empire," and those parts of the organic body are mapped out and overlaid with the figure of a female body in the book's frontispiece. Logres is the head of the Empire, Gaul or France the breasts, Rome the hands, Byzantium the navel, and Jerusalem the loins.<sup>14</sup> As the head, Logres has the potential to establish the full unity of the Empire through Arthur's reign. He is to bring order to Logres by establishing a court at Camelot that embodies the principals of co-inherence and exchange. Williams, commenting on Robert de Boron's thirteenth-century version of the myth, notes how the developing myth of the Grail took on a closer association with the Eucharist:

The first table ... had been established by Christ himself; the Second by Joseph of Arimathea, at the bidding of Christ himself; the Third was to be by Uther, at the bidding of Merlin. This alternation gives the myth a new stress, for the idea of a spiritual relationship is immediately present, circles of sanctity. The Apostolic company is the first institution; the company of true believers the second; the third is the chivalry of the Table ... Logres and the Grail are to come together, and the king is to preside at the union.<sup>15</sup> ("Figure" 258)

<sup>11</sup> McClatchey 51. For more on the way that Williams' Arthuriad differs from another major Arthurian writer (Tennyson), see Schneider.

<sup>12</sup> The City is a major theme in Williams' work. See his essays "The Image of the City in English Verse," and "The Redeemed City" in *Image* (92–102, 102–10). David Llewellyn Dodds notes: "Williams set himself to show the proper relation of 'the Republic' and the Grail. As suggested above, there is no radical opposition in the poetry between earthly and heavenly. Instead, the universe and especially human society, reflect in their interrelatedness the co-inherent 'community' of the Persons of the Trinity" (Introduction 11).

<sup>13</sup> For more on Williams' doctrine of the City, see Benjamin Utter's chapter in this volume, "What Does the Line along the Rivers Define?" (12) and Andrew Rasmussen's, "Beatrice and Byzantium" (14). [Editor's note]

<sup>14</sup> Williams lays out the rationale for interpreting earthly and geographical realities according to the image of the human body in "The Index of the Body," in *Image* (80–87). As Williams explains in the essay, part of the rational is the sacramental unity of the spiritual and physical realms.

<sup>15</sup> Even here, in recounting the development of the medieval Grail romances, Williams' own understanding of the Eucharist's centrality is shaping his interpretation. Barber notes this of the Grail romances: "If the Grail owes much to the popular devotion to the Eucharist, and to the debates and images surrounding it,

Williams discerns a sort of eucharistic typology that informs the developing Grail narrative. Christ's celebration of the Last Supper sets the pattern for proper table fellowship and for rightly ordered social relationships. Williams incorporates this typology into his own cycle of poems, creating a Logres that is intended, through a demonstration of a social order defined by co-inherence, to bring unity to the Empire.

That task, however, is marred from the beginning, as the knight Balin, in an attempt to protect himself, wounds King Pelles, the keeper of the Grail, with another relic: the spear that pierced the side of Christ. This Dolorous Blow brings division to Logres and will eventually result in a civil war between Arthur and Mordred. This division can be healed only by the Grail itself. Galahad therefore, the champion of the Grail, takes on a greater importance in the myth. In Williams' imagination, Galahad "is not exactly Christ, but rather man's capacity for Christ, or—to avoid dogma—let us say, for divine things" ("Notes on the Arthurian Myth" 176). The restoration of the divided kingdom is envisioned as "Galahad comes to Camelot, and the Sacred Graal, i.e. the reunion of all things, is seen in a vision" (177). As Karl Heinz Göller expresses it:

The centre of the entire myth, and therewith the *raison d'être* of Williams' work, is clearly the Grail. The poet sees the union of the world of Arthur with that of the Grail less as a legendary or historical phenomenon, and far more as a complex symbol of the union of Empire and Christendom, that is to say as a symbol of the Ultimate Epiphany, the Second Advent of Christ. (Göller 465)

For Williams, the Arthurian myth is a symbol of Christendom. It gives mythic form to the situation of the Church in the time between Christ's first and second advents. By placing the Grail at the center of that mythic structure, and by emphasizing the role that it plays in reconstituting the lost unity of the social order, Williams imbues the Grail with an explicitly eucharistic function. Arthur fails to serve the Grail and to embody co-inherence, destroying the fellowship of his Round Table, and ultimately Logres, by his self-absorption. The Grail can only finally be achieved by Galahad, who is willing to ask: "What serves the Grail?" His quest is characterized by co-inherence and substitution, and this allows him to achieve the Grail and to participate in the co-inherent universe that it creates.

Williams' focus on the Grail and its significance for the social order is an essential part of what sets his Arthuriad apart from those of other major Arthurian writers. This emphasis is a product of the fact that his image of the Grail is informed by a eucharistic typology grounded in the practice of Christ, the historical development of the Eucharist, and the development of the Arthurian myths. His emphasis on the Grail's shaping of the social order also reflects the specific concerns of the Anglican church of his day.

We will turn now to see how these particular concerns are reflected in the eucharistic imagery of two particular poems in Williams' Arthuriad. The final poems of each cycle, "Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass" and

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Grail and Eucharist are by no means one and the same. The Grail is both more and less than the central icon of the Mass, beginning as a mysterious container for the Host, and ending as a transcendent vehicle for the highest of all visions" (147). The Grail and the Eucharist are not identical for Williams either, but the symbolism has coalesced. The grail represents the ultimate union of heaven and earth in Christ's *Parousia*, while the Eucharist is the ritual meal that mediates a partial fulfillment of that union in history.

“The Prayers of the Pope,” depict celebrations of the Mass. While there are eucharistic allusions throughout the cycles, these poems are particularly rich with imagery that combines Williams’ distinct ontology of co-inherence with his inherently social understanding of the Eucharist. From this basis, Williams is able to offer a perspective on Christ’s presence in the eucharistic rite that avoids the pitfalls of the traditional theories of the eucharistic presence.

### “*Taliessin at Lancelot’s Mass*”

As *Taliessin through Logres* comes to a close, it has become clear that Logres has failed to fulfill its role as the unifying head of the Empire. Mordred has rebelled against Arthur and broken the unity of the Round Table and of Camelot. Though Arthur has failed to put the Grail at the center of his kingship, Galahad, along with Percivale and Bors, has entered the castle of Carbonek, achieved the Grail, and sailed to the heavenly city of Sarras. Galahad’s service to the Grail has achieved some measure of healing in Logres in the aftermath of the rebellion and the Grail quest, as seen in the ending of “The Last Voyage”:

In Logres the king’s friend landed, Lancelot of Gaul.  
 Taliessin at Canterbury met him with the news  
 of Arthur’s death and the overthrow of Mordred.  
 At the hour of the healing of Pelles  
 the two kings were one, by exchange of death and healing.  
 Logres was withdrawn to Carbonek; it became Britain. (120–25)<sup>16</sup>

Though Arthur failed to bring union to the Empire in his life, his death has a substitutionary quality, making possible the healing of Pelles and restoring a degree of peace to the land. However, with the transference of Galahad and the Grail, the union of Sarras and Camelot has not been achieved. The mythic kingdom of Logres is now simply historic Britain.

In “*Taliessin at Lancelot’s Mass*,” Taliessin, the king’s poet, encounters Lancelot at Carbonek, the castle where the Grail had been housed:

I came to the altar when dew was bright on the grass;  
 he—he was not sworn of the priesthood—began the Mass.  
 The altar was an ancient stone laid upon stones;  
 Carbonek’s arch, Camelot’s wall, frame of Bors’ bones. (1–4)

Lancelot begins to conduct his Mass on the site that connects Sarras and Byzantium, heaven and earth. Still clad in armor and dappled with blood, but with his weapons laid down, Lancelot’s “hands were bare as Lateran’s to the work of our Lord” (8). As he conducts the ritual, the recently shattered unity of the Round Table begins to be spiritually reconstituted as “In the ritual before the altar Lancelot began to pass; / all

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<sup>16</sup> All quotations from the poems come from *Arthurian Poets: Charles Williams*, edited by David Llewellyn Dodds.

the dead lords of the Table were drawn from their graves to the Mass" (9–10). This reconciliation begins to take place among all the broken figures of Camelot. Even the slain Arthur, through the substitution of Guinevere in exile, becomes present at the Mass, demonstrating a sacrificial deference that he failed to demonstrate during his life:

Out of the queen's substitution the wounded and dead king  
entered into salvation to serve the holy Thing;  
singly seen in the Mass, owning the double Crown,  
going to the altar Pelles, and Arthur moving down. (17–20)<sup>17</sup>

At Lancelot's Mass, the living and the dead relate to one another through acts of exchange and substitution. The realms of spirit and matter co-inhere, and in this way, the union that failed in Camelot is now made manifest as an arch-natural reality through the Mass.

Taliessin and his Company are present at this Mass, and they observe the coalescence of living and dead. The Company joins in the arch-natural chorus at the Epiclesis, the invoking of the Holy Spirit that transforms the eucharistic elements:

Then the Byzantine ritual, the Epiclesis, began;  
then their voices in Ours invoked the making of man;  
petal on petal floated out of the blossom of the Host,  
and all ways the Theotokos conceived by the Holy Ghost. (33–36)<sup>18</sup>

At the point of the transformation of the Host, the ultimate co-inherent mystery is enacted—deity and humanity co-inhering in the person of Christ. As the Incarnation is celebrated, the constellation of events that made this co-inherent mystery possible is also celebrated. The combined voices of the dead lords of the Round Table and the members of Taliessin's Company invoke the creation of man. The Virgin Mary is honored in her role as *Theotokos*, or God-bearer. The petals that float out of the Host at the moment of transformation—and this is where the obscurity of Williams' poetry makes interpretation difficult—seem to

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<sup>17</sup> Scarf writes about the nature of kingship in Williams' writing, and he notes the way that the Eucharist redeems Arthur's failed kingship: "Williams believes that, because of the Fall, King Arthur cannot emulate Christ as king. Through the benefits of the passion remembered in the Eucharist, anamnesis, the king is able to be reconciled to God, and redeemed from the failure that the Fall inevitably brought about and enter, like Christ into his royal Glory" (32).

<sup>18</sup> This poem displays a sacramental character, not only in its conceptual content, but in its form and execution. Commenting on this stanza, Bradbury notes that these poems create "the experience of seeing the Arthurian world in brief flashes, rather than as a sustained panorama .... These flashes allow for the realisation of aspects of reality which lie beyond the reach of normal language. The more of the poetry one reads, the more these images coalesce around referents beyond the world of sensation" (43). For more on the sacramental nature of Williams' Arthurian poetry, see Cavaliero's "Charles Williams and the *Arthuriad*: Poetry as Sacrament."

allude to Christological and Marian rose symbolism. Mary is commonly associated with the rose, and the five wounds of Christ were sometimes represented in medieval piety by the five petals of a rose. Following the prophetic imagery of Isaiah 11, Christ has been depicted as the “bloom” from the stump of Jesse.<sup>19</sup>

This ritual enactment of the Incarnation “exposes” or reveals both the hidden unity of the Empire and the greater unity of Byzantium and Sarras:

We exposed, We exalted the Unity; prised shone  
web, paths, points; as it was done  
the antipodean zones were retrieved round a white rushing deck,  
and the Acts of the Emperor took zenith from Caucasia to Carbonek. (37–40)

The divided zones on the Empire were momentarily unified around the “white rushing deck” of the ship that carried Galahad to Sarras with the Grail. Galahad achieved what Logres as a whole could not; but in his wake, a glimpse of the unity that was intended for Logres was revealed. Now, as the Mass is celebrated, Galahad appears over the altar, and the reconstituted Round Table ascends with Galahad at the head:

The Table ascended; each in turn lordliest and least—  
slave and squire, woman and wizard, poet and priest;  
interchanged adoration, interdispersed prayer,  
the ruddy pillar of the Infant was the passage of the porphyry stair. (45–48)

The “Infant,” Galahad as a type of Christ, has forged a pathway for communion between Byzantium and Sarras, just as Christ unified heaven and earth through the Incarnation and the Crucifixion. This pathway required the shedding of blood, as symbolized in the blood red of “ruddy” pillar and the “porphyry” stair that connect heaven and earth. The unity of the spheres is mediated by the Eucharist, and the Round Table, now functioning as the type of “egalitarian hierarchy” that it was always intended to be, ascends to the heavenly city in Galahad’s wake.<sup>20</sup>

The ultimate and definitive co-inherence of Sarras and Byzantium through the fulfillment of Logres as a model of exchange is frustrated in the departing of the Grail for Sarras. Christ’s *parousia*, the promise of Logres, is delayed. It is through the Mass that this co-inherence is experienced in part and through which the promise of the Grail is carried on. We see here a “frustrated co-inherence” as the Grail departs, and we are left with the Eucharist to provide the sign and partial experience of the union of heaven and earth.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See the traditional carol of German origin: “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming.”

<sup>20</sup> The Eucharist celebration in “Castra Parvulorum,” the final chapter of Williams’ novel *War in Heaven*, depicts the co-inherent nature of the sacrament as deceased members of the community become visible, and those present receive supernatural insight into their future. The past and future co-inhere in the present as the supernatural nature of the universe is displayed through the Eucharist.

<sup>21</sup> Moorman picks up on the particular significance of the Mass in this poem as he notes that “what should have been accomplished in the ordinary life of Logres can be effected only after the failure of the kingdom

*“The Prayers of the Pope”*

In “The Prayers of the Pope,” the scene is no longer Logres but Rome, the “hands” of the anatomical Empire. The poem “represents a turbulent, eventful crescendo of historical events and developments which lead to the final catastrophe—the downfall of the realm and the dissolution of Taliessin’s fellowship” (Göller 493). The poem takes the form of a meditation on the *Magnificat* as Pope Deodatus prepares to celebrate the Eucharist:

Over the altar a reliquary of glass held  
an intinctured Body; the Pope waited to pass  
to sing his tri-fold Eucharist; meanwhile he prayed  
alone in the candled shroud of the dark. (8–11)

The Pope has heard reports of the conflict among Arthur, Lancelot, and Mordred. The division of this civil war has brought disorder to Logres:

Against the rule of the Emperor the indivisible  
Empire was divided; therefore the Parousia suspended  
its coming, and abode still in the land of the Trinity.  
Logres was void of Grail and Crown, but well  
had Mordred spelled his lesson from his father King Arthur. (145–49)

Mordred has cast Logres and the Table into in-coherence, and social disintegration has spread throughout the Empire as rulers and governors turn from service of the Emperor to tribalism. With the passing of the Grail, the Empire has ceased to look “for the perfect Parousia” (43), despairing of Christ’s coming. This breakdown of the social order is a result of the failure to live according to co-inherence, as, “Frantic with fear of losing themselves in others / .... / They rejected the City; they made substitutes for the City” (47, 51). Mordred has replaced the lords of the Table with pagan chieftains, and wizards, the seers of the heathen, are performing rituals of necromancy. Invoking pagan deities, they raise an army of corpses, “the poor, long-dead, decomposing / shapes of humanity” (106–07). The tentacled grip of P’o-l’u, the land to the south of Byzantium under the chaotic reign of the Headless Emperor, spreads and threatens to overwhelm the Empire.

In the midst of the violent division of the Empire, a note of hope resounds. In one scene, Taliessin addresses his Company, releasing them from the vows that have held his “household” together. If Logres was meant to function as the ideal City, demonstrating co-inherence for the whole Empire, then the Company, centered on the lieutenancy of Taliessin, was meant to be the model of co-inherence to which

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and within the operation of the Mass. All is reconciled and exchanged in the final moment, but the grail has departed, the ‘parallels,’ symbols of order, ‘desecrated’” (75–76). In the Mass, culminating in the Eucharist, a social order is enacted that cannot yet be known in Logres.

Logres itself looked.<sup>22</sup> With the lords of the Table dead, save Lancelot, Taliessin sends the Company out into the broader Empire:

“Therefore now We dissolve the former bonds—”  
 the voice sounded, the hands descended—“We dissolve  
 the outer bonds; We declare the Company still  
 Fixed in the will of all who serve the Company,  
 but the ends are on Us, peers and friends; We restore  
 again to God the once-permitted lieutenancy;  
 ...  
 We restore it to God in each singly and in all.  
 Receive it in God.” (187–96)

The scene moves back to the Pope, who prays for the disbanded Company. “Keep thy own for thyself” (212), he petitions, further asking:

let them then  
 go into every den of magic and mutiny,  
 touch the sick and the sick be healed, take  
 the trick of the weak devils with peace, and speak  
 at last on the coast of the land of the Trinity the tongue  
 of the Holy Ghost. (226–31)

The Pope charges the Company in exile with practicing co-inherence within the now divided and paganized empire. Like the first-century Christians, they are to act as ambassadors of co-inherence and substitution in an antagonistic empire.

The Pope passes from his meditation on the *Magnificat* to the Eucharist proper. As he does so, the hope that he expresses for the Company’s capacity to continue to act as agents of co-inherence is reflected in the ritual that he performs:

The Pope passed to sing the Christmas Eucharist.  
 He invoked peace on the bodies and souls of the dead,  
 yoked fast to him and he to them,  
 co-inherent all in Adam and all in Christ. (300–03)

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<sup>22</sup> See “The Founding of the Company,” in RSS. The real-world model for Taliessin’s Company was Williams’ own informal group of followers, the Companions of the Co-inherence. For more on how Williams and his company engaged in the practice of substitution, see Newman.

It is in the Eucharist that co-inherence becomes explicitly demonstrated. At the altar, past and present, visible and invisible co-inhere in the Pope's ritual act. The living and the dead are brought into the presence of Christ through this extension of his saving work. At the moment of "the junction of communion" (310), the moment that the elements of the Eucharist are transformed, Christ acts as a substitute through the person of the Pope. At that moment,

he offered his soul's health for the living corpses,  
his guilt, his richness of repentance, wealth for woe.  
This was the Pope's prayer; prayer is substance;  
quick the crowd, the thick souls of the dead,  
moved in the Pope's substance to the invoked Body,  
the Body of the Eucharist, the Body of the total loss,  
the unimaged loss; the Body salvaged the bodies  
in the fair, sweet strength of the Pope's prayer.  
The easement of exchange led into Christ's appeasement  
under the heart-breaking manual acts of the Pope. (310–20)

Through the Pope's substitutionary mediation at the altar, Christ is made present.<sup>23</sup> The army of reanimated corpses "stopped, dropped, disintegrated to dust" (322); they are put back to rest in order to await their true resurrection at the time of Christ's *parousia*. The Empire is still broken, and the promise of the Grail still goes unfulfilled; however, the downward spiral has been broken:

... consuls and lords within the Empire,  
for all the darkening of the Empire and the loss of Logres  
and the hiding of the High Prince, felt the Empire  
revive in a live hope of the Sacred City. (324–27)

Though the Grail is gone and the *parousia* delayed, the hope of the Grail is mediated through the Eucharist. Sarras and the Empire are not yet united, but the reality of that union can be experienced in part through participation in the Mass. Just as each act of Communion brings worshipers, living and dead, into the

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<sup>23</sup> Ridler draws out the co-inherent nature of the poem's Eucharist celebration:

It is a most difficult poem to grasp, because it has to express, in the sequential form of poetry, happenings which require to be held simultaneously in mind. It is the same difficulty that we are in when we use the words *repetition* or *recalling* for the action of the priest in the breaking of bread—words which tend to separate his action from Christ's sacrifice, made 'once for all' and yet here *happening*. So the Pope's Christmas Eucharist gives us the *happening* of the division and reconciliation, which have been the subject of the whole cycle. (lxvi, emphasis original)

presence of Christ, so the future union of heaven and earth co-inheres in each eucharistic act. Logres failed to achieve that union through the Grail, but its promise remains and is enacted through the Eucharist.<sup>24</sup>

## Christendom Unified Around the Eucharist

Williams, in his more scholarly writings, articulates a metaphysic in which time/eternity, humanity/deity, and Christ/Church co-inhere within one another. This view is brought to life in the Arthurian world of the Grail quest. If the traditional questions surrounding the nature of Christ's presence in the Eucharist have dealt with how the physical matter of bread and wine can be transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ, Williams creates an ontological category through which he can explain as well as depict how such a mystery can occur. If the Eucharist is the ultimate rite of a co-inherent universe, then its celebration is able to make present every stage of redemptive history, past and future, in any individual celebration. When bread and wine on any altar are consecrated, that particular celebration will itself co-inhere with the celebration of the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, and the future Marriage Supper of the Lamb. The substance of the elements does not need to be transformed for this to happen, but it does make Christ present in a way that is entirely real. If the universe cannot easily be divided into natural and supernatural, but is rather "arch-natural" in its composition, then Christ's real presence in the ritual cannot be limited by time or space. Instead of offering one more suggestion about how the natural elements can supernaturally become the body and blood of Christ, Williams undermines the metaphysical presuppositions of the traditional eucharistic debates. If Williams' picture of the universe is accurate, then the real presence of Christ comes not through transubstantiation of the elements but through co-inherence of events.

If, for Williams, the Arthurian myth is a symbol of Christendom, then there can be little worse than a Christendom in schism. The Grail is the focus around which Logres and the Empire have the possibility of being unified, and it is around the Eucharist that the divided branches of the Church must seek their unity. Ironically, eucharistic theology has been one of the major issues that has divided and defined the separate branches of the Church. Williams' understanding of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, by recasting the metaphysical underpinnings of the longstanding debates of Western theology, offers the possibility that these divisions might be overcome.<sup>25</sup> Surely this will only happen when, with Williams, we prostrate ourselves before the mystery of the co-inherent sacrament:

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24 Bray makes the important observation that for Williams, "any sacrament, Christian, satanist or whatever, becomes the present realisation of the spiritual event evoked by the rite" (12). This comment shows that something like the traditional formula of *ex opere operato* ("by the work worked" or "by the very fact of the action's being performed") is present in Williams' thinking.

25 The ecumenical potential of Williams' eucharistic theology extends beyond the Western Church. Ware notes the resonances in Williams' theology with Eastern Orthodoxy. Furthermore, the potential of Grail imagery in articulating a eucharistic theology is picked up by Sergius Bulgakov, an Orthodox contemporary of Williams. Bulgakov's *The Holy Grail and the Eucharist* contains striking parallels with Williams' themes of the co-inherent nature of time and of Christ's presence at the Eucharist.

I will genuflect and adore the Presence, because it seems to me consistent with the general movement that he should so have withdrawn creation into him. On the other hand, I am shy of the arguments; the Rite which culminates in an adorable Mystery of co-inherence will serve for me! (qtd. in Hadfield 212)

There is unlimited ecumenical potential here for the divided Body of Christ if it is willing to ask: "What serves the Grail?"

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