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From the City to the Cloud: Charles Williams's Image of the City as an Affirmation of Artificial Intelligence

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Introduction

A number of Christian intellectuals who lived through the "catastrophic" twentieth century had a deep distrust of "technological innovation" (Zaleski and Zaleski 4).[1] C. S. Lewis lamented the impact of technology on education, Dorothy L. Sayers lamented the impact of technology on community, and J. R. R. Tolkien lamented the impact of technology on the environment (Khoddam 8-13). Jacques Ellul saw technology as a human rejection of God's work. For Ellul, this was the meaning of the city: from its primordial origins through its apocalyptic end, the city was a "counter-creation"—a technological negation of God's Edenic creation.

Charles Williams stands out from among his contemporaries in his affirmation of technology. After living most of his life in London as an author and an editor for Oxford University Press, Williams was forced by the Second World War to spend his final years in Oxford—which he called a "parody" of London (Lindop 307). Whereas Ellul saw the city as a diabolical, artificial, and autonomous multi-agent system—using terms that make the city seem like a rogue form of artificial intelligence—Williams affirmed the technological city as a divinely ordained project of and for human transformation. Moreover, Williams developed a constructive theology of technological work. Although he was not fully aware of the information revolution he was living through, which was creating a world to be filled with autonomous and intelligent systems, Williams's theological reflections on the city as a place for the reconciliation of divine and artificial agency can help us reflect on our role and destiny in our emerging information environment.

This paper begins with an introduction to Ellul's view of the city, which is a view of technology as a deformative counter-creation. Williams would have described Ellul's approach to the city as "the Way of Rejection," which renunciates "all images." Then it will introduce Williams's alternative view of the city—and work *in* it—which follows "the Way of Affirmation," or "the approach to God" *through* images (*The Figure of Beatrice* 8f). In this view, technology and technological work participate in transformative co-creation. Next, it will provide an orientation to the information revolution we are currently living through and conclude with some comments connecting current hopes and fears related to artificial intelligence with Williams's affirmation of technology and of technological work as means for participating in new creation.

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[1]Cp. Alan Jacobs, 131f.

I. The Rejection of the City

Jacques Ellul was one of the most important critics of the technological society that emerged in the twentieth century. He was a member of the French Resistance during the Second World War, was both a sociologist and a theologian, and he used both disciplines to critique what he called "technique:" a totality of rational methods that maximize efficiency in every domain of human endeavor. "The concrete example of this is the city," he wrote: "The city is the place where technique excludes all forms of natural reality" ("Search for Ethics" 7).

Ellul traced technique all the way back to Cain, whose acts of procreation and construction of a city, which share the same name Enoch, represent Cain's double rejection of God's gifts of life and safety. The arts and sciences, institutions, and other technical pursuits followed; and the city, though created by humans, becomes an autonomous, multi-agent power to conquer time and space. For Ellul, this is a spiritual influence and force that exceeds the powers of its human creators and inevitably leads to confusion, corruption, and the collapse of *every* city. By its own nature, Ellul says, "the city breaks with the divine nature of creation." It is an artificial "counter-creation" and a sign of sin (*The Meaning of the City* 35, 56, 77).

The "failure to recognize God's work is present in its purest form in the city," Ellul concludes (57): the city is "outside of that creation made for man, outside the garden of Eden … [it is] something other than what God had desired for man, what is a deliberate desire to be somewhere other than where God had put him, on a plane other than that attended by God" (59). Humanity's greatest creation, the city, "cannot be reformed" (102). It "must disappear" and another city "must replace" (109) it:

> The new Jerusalem is to be established at the end of time, but absolutely not by any human efforts. She is the creation of God … Instead of being the continuation of history, the crowning act of history is a break with history (163).

Rather than reading Cain's Enochian acts as fulfilments of the mandate to fill the earth and subdue it, through procreation and co-creation, and rather than seeing any salvation of the glories of the nations carried out of Babylon into New Jerusalem, Ellul sees the break between Babylon and New Jerusalem as absolute. The divinely created city replaces the city created by humans. Williams's view of the city is strikingly different. Instead of replacement, Williams used language of renewal (*The Image of the City* 105).

II. The Affirmation of the City

Williams's life began in St. Albans and ended in Oxford, but between these two cities was the historic and great city of London—the city that shaped his literary-

and theological imagination and sustained his professional work. In its churches and law courts, banks and business houses, libraries and presses, he saw human and divine agency co-inhering.

For Williams, the City of the Apocalypse is not *only* an eschatological re-creation. It is certainly that, but William wrote that this inevitable state of reconciliation—into which the church is called, and which is the church's destiny—must be "worked out in terms of flesh … [for] our Lord Himself deigned to work out the conclusion of the whole matter in terms of flesh." The city, defined in the final paragraph of the Apostles' Creed, descends from heaven as it causes us to ascend to it; it comes to us from the future as it directs our present toward it. [2]

An earthly city, then, participates in an apocalyptic pattern of exchange between heaven and earth, eternity and time, spirit and matter, divine and human agency. Anne Ridler, who collected Williams's critical essays into a volume called *The Image of the City*, pointed out that

> Williams was accustomed to see, in *any* aspect of the City, what *ought to be* as well as what was … as C. S. Lewis so well described his insight: 'On

many of us the prevailing impression made by the London streets is one of chaos; but Williams, looking on the *same* spectacle, saw chiefly an image—an imperfect, pathetic, heroic, and majestic image—of Order.' (emphasis added, xlvii).

Williams's affirmation of the city is evident in his literary work. As Bradley Wells argues, "Rather than transporting the reader to a distant imaginary world, Williams expands our understanding of the everyday empirical one" by situating his creative works in "a particular location and time in our familiar world"—places filled with modern and material technologies (101ff). [3] William's affirmation of the city was evident in his daily technical and urban work as a publisher as well. [4] His colleague Gerard Hopkins stated the press

> was, to no small extent, the moving force of [Williams's] life. It shared, it symbolized, the

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[2] Williams, *The Image of the City*, 103, 110; Williams, *He Came Down From Heaven*, 143-44; *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church*, 15; *He Came Down from Heaven*, quoted in *Charles Williams: Essential Writings in Spirituality and Theology*, 228.

[3] See also "London—City of Redemption: Charles Williams's Vision of the City," *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, vol. 43, 2010, 143-156; "Camelot Incarnate: Arthurian Vision in the Early Plays of Charles Williams," in *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, Apocryphile Press, 2017, 435-58.

[4] For more on Williams as publisher, see Michael J. Paulus, Jr., "From a Publisher's Point of View: Charles Williams's Role in Publishing Kierkegaard in English," in *Charles Williams and His Contemporaries*, edited by Suzanne Bray and Richard Sturch, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, 20-41.

fervent religious faith and happy domestic love which rounded his existence. The City of God in which he never ceased to dwell, contained [the publishing office of] Amen House as its noblest human monument, and all who lived and worked within it were citizens with him (qtd. in *The Masques of Amen House*, edited by David Bratman, 17).

III. A Theology of Technological Work

In the midst of his life and career in London, Williams wrote a trilogy of plays, *The Masques of Amen House*, to be performed with his press colleagues in the Library there. Williams described the masques as a parable of the "only one work which is pursued everywhere and at all times, from which nothing is alien and to which all things are directed (otherwise they are null and void)": that is, "the re-union of man and God" (Lindop 153). The plays celebrate the workers and their work, which connects them and it with a peaceful and perfect end "Where the world shall be made anew"("The Masque of the Monument," *The Masques of Amen House* 36f). But the work and workers, through the three plays, must pass through the "Way of Purgation" and the "Way of Illumination" before they find themselves in the "Way of Union" (Lindop 153f).

In the first masque, "The Masque of the Manuscript" (1926), a Manuscript seeking to become a book enters the press's library, thinking it is "The portal of freedom, the high city" ungated, "the house of all holy indwelling"—in other words, New Jerusalem (*The Masques of Amen House* 38). Before the Manuscript can become a book, though, the various skills and tools of the book workers must be applied to it: design of layout, organization of type, editing of proofs, binding of volumes, and accounting for the market. In the skillful hands of professionals, the Manuscript must die to be transformed into a Book.[5]

In the second masque, "The Masque of Perusal" (1928), the Book must participate in the creation of another book. The tools of the publishing office—inkpot, pen, type, paper, periodicals—become hallowed elements in a Graal ceremony, which aids the Book's cooperation and reconciliation with the divine. Through this rite, another writer's inner Thought becomes outward action in the form of another book. The publishing staff and their ritual, reflecting a divine pattern of love and life, reveal their participation in this pattern and their service as mediators of communion and union with God.

"Poet" is the vocation named on Williams's tombstone, but being a publisher was *also* part of his vocation. His character Thyrsis in "The Masque of Perusal" identifies himself as "an author and a publisher," in whom

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[5]See Williams, "The Masque of Perusal," *The Masques of Amen House*, 53-75; *Arthurian Commonplace Book*, 1912-1923, transcribed by David Llewellyn Dodds.

"the great longings stir / To write, to print, and to proclaim aloud … A wisdom so far hidden" (*The Masques of Amen House* 63).

Reflecting on the meaning of vocation in his *Arthurian Commonplace Book*, in which he kept notes on the Graal, Williams recorded another writer's claim that "all the great professions had their base … in the failings of men. Law, medicine, [etc.]" (46). Vocations have a corrective or restorative power, but, as seen in first masque, "The Masque of the Manuscript," this is only the beginning of the meaning of work. Later in this commonplace book, Williams recorded these thoughts:

> Love creates (or was intended to) in a man a sense of exaltation of spirit and sense which enable and excite him to labour and delight in his particular "vocation"—the soldier, poet, statesman, mystic, etc. His love is himself interiorly, his vocation himself exteriorly—love his attitude towards the microcosm, vocation his attitude towards the macrocosm (133).

In the masques of Amen House, the publishing staff is moved by love to engage in restorative *and* constructive work—making things new and making new things. Their work *reveals* and *participates* in new creation. "What happens to the soul of man," Williams wrote, "happens to the works of man, and it seems to me that all good things done in goodwill are part of the revelation of infinite Perfection—publishing, books, building

bridges, adding up figures … or anything else" (qtd. in Lindop 153).

In the twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor distinguished between three major forms of work. First is the work of God in forming the world out of nothing, which includes the subsequent work of nature. Second is the work of human *artificers*, which is corruptible and can deform God's (and nature's) work. Third is the work of Christ, which includes his life, the scriptures and sacraments, and the communities that mediate Christ. The work of *Christ* takes up and transforms all work into new creation (Hugh of St. Victor 55).[6]

Hugh argued that technology has a central role in reforming our relationship with God and nature. Technology is part of the human quest for wisdom; it extends our abilities and understanding; and, when used wisely, it can reform what has been deformed. And since wisdom ultimately is grounded in Christ, technology may be understood as part of the transformation of creation that reconciles divine, natural, and human *artificial* creativity (Allen 119).

Bringing Hugh into Williams's context, and connecting his thoughts with those of Williams's

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[6]See also Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary on Hugh's Didascalion*, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, 124; Boyd Taylor Coolman, *The Theology of Hugh of St. Victor: An Interpretation*, Cambridge UP, 2010, 170.

contemporary Dorothy Sayers, can help provide an outline of Williams's theology of work. Williams agreed with Sayers's statement that "work is the natural exercise and function of man—the creature ... made in the image of his Creator" (Sayers 72f). He could have affirmed her theological propositions about work: that (1) work is the thing one lives to do, and the medium in which one offers oneself to God; (2) that humans are created to serve God in work, making it "the medium of divine creation"; and (3) that a worker's first duty is to serve the work (Sayers 76, 81). But Williams would have affirmed more, in agreement with Hugh. He would have affirmed the central and transformative role of technology in his apocalyptic view of work: technological work, making things new and making new things, reveals and participates in new creation.[7]

IV. Our Information Revolution

So what has New Jerusalem to do with today's cloud-capped Silicon cities?

While Williams was busy publishing, teaching, and writing in Oxford, Alan Turing, born the same year as Ellul, was secretly at work breaking the Germans' Enigma code at Bletchley Park—a task accomplished

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[7]For more on Williams's theology of publishing, see Michael J. Paulus, Jr., "Charles Williams's Theology of Publishing," *VII* 34, 2017, pp. 57-70.

with the help of computing machines. Turing was also accelerating an *information* revolution. Advances in information theory, cybernetics, digital computers, and artificial intelligence (AI) gained momentum after the war and Williams's death in 1945, but the information revolution through which we now know we are living began during Williams's life. This information revolution is about the advent of automated information processing and intelligent technologies, which are changing our lives and world "pervasively, profoundly, and relentlessly" (Floridi, *The Fourth Revelation*, vi).

There have been four major information revolutions in human history. Each of these revolutions significantly enhanced our abilities and agency and revealed new insights about what a human being is and about our role in the universe. From a theological perspective, each information revolution is also an information revelation about our agency, nature's, and God's.

The first major information revolution occurred about 100,000 years ago (give or take 50,000 years), when humans developed the ability for information abstraction—the ability to imagine a world other than the one they saw. Imaginative language followed, which included the capacity to communicate more information (as well as misinformation and disinformation) about observed phenomena, other people, unobserved phenomena, and creative possibilities. The abstraction of information revolutionized how humans functioned as

information agents, who were now able to create plans, stories, social systems, and new environments. They could also imagine and contemplate a deeper spiritual dimension to reality—including new knowledge of good and evil. Yuval Harari calls this the "Tree of Knowledge mutation" (21).

By 10,000 years ago, following the agricultural revolution, the second information revolution came with the establishment of the earliest cities. These artificial environments depended on political, economic, and religious institutions that operated as information agencies—organizations responsible for rules, trade, and cultural narratives that structured and sustained civic life. The city became a complex technology, a multi-agent system that aggregated individual agency and extended collective agency in space and time.

The third information revolution occurred some 5,000 years ago, when information agencies developed written communication and information artifacts. Through tablets of commands, holy scrolls, and collections of books—and their management through archives and libraries—humans began to communicate throughout larger communities, across generations, and with God through texts. In the midst of this revolution, to use Hugh's language, Christ became the third apocalyptic book of creation, mediating new information and new creation through a life, texts, and a community.

Within the last 100 years, we created technologies for information automation, inaugurating the fourth information revolution. Within the last 50 years, our intelligent technologies became digital, globally networked, and mobile. Now, with new advances in AI, we are only beginning to understand what human agency should look like in a world full of autonomous artificial agents.

V. AI and New Creation

Current AI systems use a variety of information-processing techniques to accomplish different goals, but these are very specific or narrow programs. From the beginning, though, general or human-level intelligence has been the "holy grail" of AI development. This goes beyond modeling specific human-like capabilities, such as vision, language, reasoning, and learning. The idea of artificial general intelligence is that it would be able to master everything of which human intelligence is capable—and then surpass it, becoming superintelligent. Whether or not any of this is possible is a matter of intense debate, and different positions reveal competing beliefs about AI. Luciano Floridi characterizes the extreme positions as *AITheist* and *Singularitian*: the belief that AI is just regular computing, and the opposing belief that AI will surpass human intelligence and then continue to develop on its own—which could be great or terrible, depending on whether or not it is aligned with our values (Floridi, "Singularitians," 8-11).

AI experts can be found at either extreme and everywhere in between. There is broad agreement about a

number of immediate ethical issues that we need to confront as a society, with emerging consensus around many generally shared but particular concerns related to attentional autonomy, data collection, and algorithmic control. Beyond these, however, there are a range of hopes and fears about the future of humans, work, human civilization, and the world. AI has become, as John Brockman puts it, "the Second Coming and the Apocalypse at the same time" (Brockman xv). Some AI narratives are optimistic and utopian, anticipating AI to solve known problems and create a superior form of life. Others are pessimistic and dystopian, expecting AI to exacerbate old problems and create new ones. The most extreme anticipations and anxieties include apocalyptic visions of an earthly paradise, posthuman immortality, and the end of the human species and human civilization.

Since eschatological narratives about AI often draw from Judeo-Christian apocalyptic categories, they encourage us to engage with the apocalyptic imagination from which the earliest Christians drew inspiration when confronting their experience of God's future breaking into the present in Christ (Geraci 1).[8] "Apocalypse,"

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[8]For a definition of the apocalyptic imagination, see N. T. Wright, "Apocalyptic and the Sudden Fulfilment of Divine Promise," in *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination*, 111-34.

N. T. Wright explains, "is not about denying the present creation but about overcoming its sorrows and realizing its promise." And the "great vision" of God's promised future is of the New Jerusalem, where divine, natural, and human *artificial* agency are fulfilled together: God establishes a new heaven, earth, and city; nature fills the city with beauty, life, and healing; and humans bring the honor and glory of nations into the holy city (Wright 201, 203; Revelation 20:9-22:5). Brian Blount points out that the image of a "tangible, measurable, objective city" at the end of the Apocalypse "signals a salvific identity that is neither individualized nor spiritualized but concretized in the communal relationship that exists in an urban environment." A follower of Christ, he concludes, "works with God to transform the world" (20, 376-78).

Life in the city has always involved increasingly technological work. From the earliest builders of walls, temples, and libraries to the present builders of digital devices, networks, and virtual machines, human work continuously and radically transforms the world. Williams's affirmation of the technological city and of technological work—with all its sorrows and promise—was thoroughly apocalyptic. Whereas many of his peers saw cause for skepticism and rejection, Williams saw God's new creation breaking into the present and calling for participation in the coming city of God. Perhaps the same apocalyptic imagination and narrative that inspired Williams can inspire us, as we seek a greater standing of what our current information revolution is

understanding of what our current information revolution is revealing about us, our world, and how our newest artificial creations may participate in new creation.

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