

# Religion and Myth in T.S. Eliot's Poetry



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Edited by

Scott Freer and Michael Bell

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the notorious surprises in the recent understanding of modernity has been the resurgence of religion. It is perhaps too early to know what this really means and not least because the word itself covers so many ambiguous phenomena. In many instances, religion seems to be a cover for political aspirations and resentments. Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it would have seemed that traditionally religious emotion, including teleological and millenarian structures of feeling, was being invested in politics. But by the late twentieth century widespread disillusion and frustration with politics helped to give a fresh significance to ancestral symbols of identity or community. The familiar ambiguity of 'spilt religion' is compounded by that of a spilt politics.

But this is clearly not the whole story. The limitations of the technological, economic and managed conduct of modern life are evident, often painfully so, to thoughtful citizens across a variety of political orders. Religion has traditionally provided the language, symbols and practices through which to express the gravitas of human life. But if religion is partly a reaction against utilitarian modernity, does that make it less, or more, authentic? Indeed, how could such a judgement be made? It is in the context of these multiple ambiguities that the present volume undertakes to reconsider the continuing popularity and prestige of T. S. Eliot. In particular, since his religious convictions played a defining role in his poetry and his social criticism, it seems relevant to ask how far his current stature pertains despite or because of his religion.

As a literary study of Eliot's poetry, this volume explores the aesthetic dimension of Eliot's religious outlook. Yet, even the most literary focus on the poetry has to engage with the religious point of view that Eliot professes in his essays: the role of Christianity in society and its ethical framework. Eliot certainly did not submit to the Nietzschean position that a mythico-religious aesthetic response (that preceded Christian monotheism) was an appropriate alternative to faith for post-religious modernity. In other words, privileging the individualistic sphere of poetry above the collective function of religion may be seen to give a distorted representation of the general religious aim of T. S. Eliot. Nonetheless, the lasting appeal of Eliot as a modern "poet-metaphysician" derives from a creative wrestling with poetic language, form and convention in order to

express ‘religious’ themes that can be felt and thought (and that often test the limits of human expression).<sup>1</sup> It is in poetry where more nuanced, paradoxical and unorthodox elements come into play, which the discursive mode of the essay tends to flatten out. Furthermore as Lynda Kong’s essay demonstrates, it is via the poetry that readers meet Eliot’s religious aesthetic.

In the critical debate on nineteenth-century writers and Christianity it is generally accepted that literature’s creative engagement with religion involved a “continual slippage” between the sacred and the secular.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, scholars of modernism have been slow to discuss the creative impact of religion, although the publication of Erik Tønning’s *Modernism and Christianity* (2014) and Scott Freer’s *Modernist Mythopoeia* (2015) has signalled a turn to religion with a more nuanced appreciation of the spectrum of possibilities between militant secularity and religiosity.<sup>3</sup> In many works of literary modernism, the creative tension between the secular and the sacred was strongly shaped by a comparative understanding of myth and religion in the wake of Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. Accordingly, the present writers have called for a more searching and discriminating understanding of ‘mythopoeia’ – a metaphysic that underlies modernist poetics and that falls between material secularism and religious conviction by evoking orders of value and even notions of the sacred independent of doctrinal faith.<sup>4</sup>

Many critics point to T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as a classic example of a modernist response to the discourse of comparative religion that attributes equal value to Christian symbolism and patterns of myth in nature. Nonetheless, in contrast to other writers such as D. H. Lawrence and H. D., who endorsed the comparative or syncretic view, Eliot, despite an ambiguous poetic method, became increasingly committed to the orthodox Christian narrative of salvation. In this respect he is not a ‘modernist’ if the term is taken in its first contemporary usage which, as Joanna Rzepa points out, was in the context of Roman Catholic theology. The Pope condemned as modernists those who accepted a more

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<sup>1</sup> See Graham Pechey, *Tongues of Fire: T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets* (Huntingdon: T.S. Eliot Society UK, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> See Mark Knight & Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Erik Tønning, *Modernism and Christianity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Scott Freer, *Modernist Mythopoeia: The Twilight of the Gods* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> See Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

mythopoeic understanding of the Christian symbols and story. The orthodoxy of Eliot's views, informed by Augustinian theodicy, is evident particularly in his discursive writings where he expressed his opposition, for example, to literary humanism, to incarnational theology, and to his Unitarian background.

Eliot was sceptical about the effects of modern secularisation – in particular the divide between religious art and humanist critical views that for him expressed only a “modern emotional attitude” in reducing Christian theology to universal themes: for instance, the separation of Man from God is meant to speak of the “isolation of the human situation”.<sup>5</sup> His resolutely anti-humanist stance may have increased unfairly the perception of his orthodoxy. I. A. Richards *et al* had provoked Eliot's ire because, in promoting poetry as a substitute religion, literary humanism was akin to the reductive force of incarnational theology that placed the divine in the human domain and so demoted the metaphysical to the material level. For Eliot, humanism as a critical practice disempowered and disembodied belief by emptying out the core ingredient: he likened the process to drinking tea without tannin.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, his vision of the fallen modern city, populated with automaton masses and office clerks searching for the cheap thrill of sex, speaks of the *contemptus mundi* of a theological, as well as political, reactionary. Eliot saw some moral danger lurking in attitudes of compassionate humanism such as could be found in the more populist catholic novelist Graham Greene. Yet the ‘revolutionary idiom’ of his poetry meant that it was not so bound by the doctrinal beliefs and social attitudes of his prose while the Augustinian spirit, with its dark expectations of humanity, was equally evident in his constant self-doubt and self-critique. The poetry records how little of dangerous compassion he expended on himself.

Moreover, it is rarely acknowledged how much Eliot endorsed, and demonstrated, the creative expression of religion – albeit within certain parameters. As a Christian critic, he is often charged with promoting reactionary tendencies in a didactic spirit that his poetry eschews. For Samuel Hynes, “Eliot would have succeeded as a Christian critic if he had

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<sup>5</sup> T. S. Eliot, “The Modern Mind”, from *The Use of Poetry and the use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), pp. 132-4.

<sup>6</sup> T. S. Eliot's “Introduction” to *The Use of Poetry and the use of Criticism*, p. 26. “poetry is not religion, but it is a capital substitute for religion – not invalid port, which may lead itself to hypocrisy, but coffee without caffeine, and tea without tannin.”

made his Christianity invisible; but he made it visible, and so made religion seem a way of being reactionary, ungenerous and cold.”<sup>7</sup> And it is true that when addressing the issue of Christianity’s role in a modern secular culture and society, Eliot is – in his own words – “deliberately and defiantly, Christian ... in a world which is definitely not Christian.”<sup>8</sup> Hynes, however, overlooks how the religious outlook of Eliot’s criticism also underwrites the religious power of his poetry. By bringing the moral and intellectual rigour of his doctrinal beliefs to bear upon himself, as well as his contemporaries, he created the spiritual compression of his poetry.

This suggests that what is at stake, perhaps, is not doctrine or belief in themselves so much as the manner in which they are experienced and lived. This concern underlies his analysis of a unified sensibility in his famous essay “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921), originally a review of Herbert J. C. Grierson’s anthology, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventh Century: Donne to Butler* (1921).<sup>9</sup> He offers this conception in opposition to a post-Enlightenment “dissociation of sensibility” that characterised the modern, post-Cartesian turn of mind. In effect, the unified sensibility is that of the poet in any age even if it is harder, and therefore perhaps more important, to achieve in modernity. The relation to belief is an aspect of the unified sensibility and Eliot frequently champions literary qualities that imply a creative dynamic between literature and belief. His disapproval of Trotsky’s propagandistic view of art is concomitant with his distrust of didacticism in religious literature.<sup>10</sup> The other side of the same coin is that emotion is equally integral to belief. Although his anti-Romantic critique has sometimes given the impression that he was not concerned with the emotional force of poetry, his notion of “impersonal art”, also espoused by the New Critics, was intended to divert attention away from the poet towards the emotional complex, and the

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<sup>7</sup> Samuel Hynes, “The Trials of a Christian Critic”, from *The Literary Criticism of T.S. Eliot: New Essays*, ed. David Newton-De Molina (London: The Athlone Press, 1977), p. 87.

See Ronald Schuchard’s book review: *The Modern Language Review*, 1 July 1980, Vol.75 (3), pp. 646-648.

<sup>8</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Religion and Literature”, from *Selected Essays* (London, Faber and Faber Limited, 1932), p. 392.

<sup>9</sup> T. S. Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets”, from *Selected Essays* (London, Faber and Faber Limited, 1932), pp. 281-91.

<sup>10</sup> T. S. Eliot, “The Modern Mind”, *The Use of Poetry and the use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), p. 136. “Trotsky seems [...] to draw the commonsense distinction between art and propaganda, and to be dimly aware that the material of the artist is not his beliefs as *held*, but his beliefs as *felt* ....”

deceptive organization, of the poem itself. In other words, Eliot upheld the holistic integration and impersonality of poetic experience as an index of a properly religious sensibility. Eliot's ideal reader, in appreciating the multivalent integration of poetry, would not hollow out, or falsely separate, the religious principle. When he denounces the modern reader, it is because of a bifurcated sensibility that is unable to appreciate the organic nature of poetry or belief. It is worth revisiting his well-known formulation:

The latter [the ordinary person] falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.<sup>11</sup>

The reference to the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, is suggestive. Spinoza laid the groundwork for eighteenth-century Enlightenment and modern biblical criticism, as well as being a precursor of the eighteenth-century's foundational sentimentalist turn in ethics, the ultimately humanistic attempt to base the moral life on humane feeling. The allusion to Spinoza may signal an underlying anxiety concerning a secular-sacred schism in the culture at large and in literary critical practice in particular.

If Eliot's poetry has its origins in the high demands he placed on himself, it also makes demands on the reader and in that respect the sustained popularity of his poetry outside of the academy is an intriguing cultural phenomenon. Recent scholarship has tried erroneously to rehabilitate him in the neo-liberal academy by challenging the established view of him as the elitist doyen of literary modernism.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, the weighty annotated edition of *The Poems of T.S. Eliot Volume I*, edited by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (2015) may serve to reinforce the long-established assumption that a proper appreciation of his poetry depends on recognising encrypted allusions beyond the likely range of the common reader.<sup>13</sup> This may aid what Eliot termed a "historical sense" of literature (a counter-point to the denial of the referential dimension that constitutes the Babel fall of modernity), but as Mark Knight argues, neither religion nor poetry depends on such oblique modes of understanding and this book

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<sup>11</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets", p. 287.

<sup>12</sup> See David E. Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> *The Poems of T. S. Eliot Volume I*, eds. Christopher Ricks & Jim McCue (London: Faber & Faber, 2015).

reviews in that spirit some of the expressive means that sustain the religious themes of Eliot's poetry.<sup>14</sup>

Generally, biographical treatments emphasise Eliot's "theological turning" as if in accordance with Eliot's view that 'belief' should not altogether be separated from a literary appreciation. This volume therefore opens by seeking a closer understanding of how Eliot's Anglo-Catholic faith from the time of his baptism in 1927 shaped his Christian poems. Barry Spurr argues that T.S. Eliot's life and work cannot be fully understood without an informed knowledge of what it meant, for Eliot in particular, to be an Anglo-Catholic, and how the poet's commitment grew out of his long quest for a sustaining belief. Spurr focuses on Eliot's first identifiably Christian poem, "Journey of the Magi" (1927) along with his most characteristically, and specifically, Anglo-Catholic work, *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), where prominent liturgical influences are intricately woven into the verse. Then the lyrical fourth sections of the *Four Quartets* are discussed as concentrated expressions of the poet's Anglo-Catholic beliefs and devotion.

Whereas Spurr's emphasis is on religious belief and practice in Eliot's post-conversion poems, Tony Sharpe argues that Eliot's faith, so far from furnishing ready-made answers serving to dissipate the cloud of unknowing in which his poetry originated, depended as much as that did on scepticism and doubt. The resulting tension underwrites both the complexity of the poetry and the authenticity of the belief. Sharpe's chapter addresses the issues surrounding Eliot's Christianity, both as perceived by his contemporaries and as reflected in more recent criticism. Starting from a distinction between 'doctrine' and 'poetry' proposed to Eliot by Leonard Woolf, Sharpe questions the validity of a simply antithetical approach, and explores to what extent Eliot's verse tends to be weakened or energised by the presence of doctrinal elements. Eliot himself reflected that it was "rather trying to be supposed to have settled oneself in an easy chair, when one has just begun a long journey afoot" and many have underestimated aspects of uncertainty that continued to inflect his professed faith. Does the 'post-conversion' poetry (a term that begs the questions concerning real or merely apparent discontinuity) propose solutions or raise an altered set of questions? Is the spiritual journey secure in its sense of destination, or is it uncertain, potentially self-deceived, and prone to distraction?

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<sup>14</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), from *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 40. Mark Knight, *An Introduction to Religion and Literature* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 1-6.

T. R. Wright in his seminal book, *Theology and Literature* (1988), argued that the embodied medium of 'incarnational literature' *supra facie* mirrors the revelatory nature of 'incarnational theology' – where the Word is made flesh.<sup>15</sup> However, the promotion of literature as providing “a new set of scriptures enshrining an alternative set of liberal-humanist values” exacerbated the tension between theology and poetic truth (one that separates faith from literary imagination), and this contemporaneous critical context explains much of Eliot's reactionary derision. Yet, as Andy Mousley argues, without the assurances of orthodox belief, we have to lay ourselves open to the work of art (what Eliot saw as the left-over emotions of belief) in order to discover for ourselves what the nature of meaningfulness *might* be in a literary work. Meaning is not a foretold or guaranteed outcome. In this respect, Mousley addresses the issue of Eliot's wider appeal and asks whether his poetry can serve as spiritual resource for the 'unchurched' to remedy the ills, evils and disenchantments of modernity. For Mousley, this is not to argue, along with Eliot, for the necessity of institutionalised religion, but on the contrary to suggest that literature may be a spiritual resource if the individual reader can approach it in the appropriate way open to the *possibility* of significance. F. R. Leavis put his faith in the creative insight of great poetic art to provide a remedy to meaninglessness but only through its necessarily imprecise, loose intuitions of “felt significance”. The literary criticism that Leavis was so instrumental in shaping made it clear that the nature of such significances could not be adequately known in advance of reading a literary work. They were immanent to them, and complexly so, as he demonstrated in his reading of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and *Four Quartets*.

Critics still persist with the view that *The Waste Land* is a poem of “religious quest” in which “a seeker” is “weighing the claims of various religious traditions”.<sup>16</sup> The implication is that Eliot, like his modernist contemporaries, was party to a discourse of 'comparative religion' that constituted the 'de-mythologizing' of Christian faith in denuding the singular and supernatural signification of Christ's death; the third edition of *The Golden Bough* comprises of 12 volumes, yet it can be truncated to a simple myth argument: Christ was slain in order to fulfil a magical view that condemned many other dying gods across the world. The question of myth, as Michael Bell argues, is therefore a term that often sits

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<sup>15</sup> T. R. Wright, *Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1988), pp. 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin J. H. Dettmar, ““An occupation for the saint”: Eliot as a Religious Thinker”, *A Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. David E. Chinitz (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 363-75.

ambiguously between religious belief and secular analysis. Eliot's use of "primitivist" motifs, inflected by contemporary anthropological understanding as indicated in the notes to *The Waste Land*, has led to his being seen as a mythopoeic writer along with such contemporaries as Yeats, Thomas Mann, Joyce or Lawrence. But Bell points out how myth in Eliot is radically opposed to the mythopoeia of other modernists. Whereas for them it is a way of affirming values in the conscious absence of metaphysical grounding, in Eliot it is rather a place-holder for religious belief, the sign of a wide-spread, if not universal, religious need. At the same time, it points to what he shares with these contemporaries in pursuing a spiritual path while inhabiting the radical scepticism of the modern world. In the *Four Quartets* the elements of doubt, self-doubt and spiritual aspiration combine not just in, but as, the demonstrative enacting of poetic creativity. Leavis's severe critique of these poems arises from their being for him supreme and rare examples of poetic creativity as the radical exploration of the human values at stake within the given historical moment.

The start of the new millennium has witnessed philosophical investigations into historical accounts of "modern evil" through books such as Susan Neiman's *Evil in Modern Thought* (2004) and James Dawes' *Evil Men* (2014).<sup>17</sup> The moral question of free choice and determinism is no longer contained in analytical thought-experiments, and a broader understanding of the nature of evil has prompted literary investigations too – e.g. Terry Eagleton's *On Evil* (2010) and Mark Knight's *Chesterton and Evil* (2004) – that locate theological issues within a context of cultural concerns.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, Ronald Paulson's *Sin and Evil: Moral Values in Literature* (2007), by polarizing a theocentric conception of 'natural' inborn sin and a humanist understanding of the external act of 'evil', represents a persistent position.<sup>19</sup> To an extent, Eliot's understanding of evil can be historicised: *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* are both framed by the trauma of world wars whilst expressing in part themes of Augustinian theodicy. This said, the metaphysics of evil is an enduring poetic matter too, and what Dawes terms the "paradox of evil" – to other or to humanise evil – is pertinent as well to Eliot's vision. Scott Freer addresses the treatment of

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004) and James Dawes, *Evil Men* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), Mark Knight, *Chesterton and Evil* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Paulson, *Sin and Evil: Moral Values in Literature* (Yale University Press, 2007).

evil in T.S. Eliot's poetry by challenging a default critical position that assumes twentieth-century literature of 'fallenness' pertains solely to Judaeo-Christian absolutist categories of good and evil. Freer argues that the poeticizing of ennui signals a vision of spiritual apathy, borrowed from Charles Baudelaire, that is unorthodox in modernity but is drawn from the medieval notion of *acedia* (being dead to the world and oneself). Ennui is an extension of Original Sin – the condition of alienation from God – and is also Eliot's distinctive way of thinking about human apathy towards the state. For Eliot, ennui is a perverse solipsism and an inability to be moved by a preliminary consciousness of evil. To suffer from ennui is to be spiritually dead and unable to receive God's gift of grace as the counterforce to Original Sin. Freer argues that Baudelaire is a significant overarching voice in Eliot's poetry because, by identifying ennui as the symptom of modern decadence, he translated evil into psychological, concrete imagery. Nonetheless, in his schema of evil Eliot refuses compassion to those guilty of ennui as they have lost the capacity for agency and cannot be redeemed. Such a view of ennui as an extreme condition of alienation, a negation of being that denies the fullness of humanity and the presence of grace, might seem to reflect the disdain of the elect for the fallen but, for Eliot, in seeking salvation it is equally important to maintain a sense of evil's familiarity.

Whereas Freer focuses on the broader implications of T.S. Eliot's poetic and existentialist expression of moral theology, Joanna Rzepa examines a particular historical encounter with modernist theology. During his stay in Paris (1910-11), Eliot became acutely aware of a contemporary "theological crisis" through the ideas of Catholic modernist theologians and their neo-scholastic adversaries in France (and later with Anglican modernism in England). Three years earlier Pope Pius X had condemned the movement of theological modernism in his encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis*, and modernist theologians' claims concerning the primary importance of individual religious experience were rejected by the Vatican as irrational pseudo-mysticism. Rzepa argues that this provided Eliot with a stimulus for his own thinking on religion and religious experience, in particular the problem of how to conceptualise the role of individual experience in relation to theology. Rzepa's chapter discusses ways in which our understanding of Eliot's poetry from the 1920s, especially the *Ariel Poems*, can be significantly enriched in light of Eliot's deep ambivalence towards theological modernism.

The publication of Jeffrey Mayes McCarthy's *Green Modernism* (Palgrave 2015) signals a new understanding of the relationship between eco-criticism and literary modernism, whilst making a strong case for an

anti-Romantic conception of nature.<sup>20</sup> Eco-critics have traditionally claimed that ecological values are distorted by the anthropocentrism of Romanticism that invests the imagination into a numinous natural order. It is well known that Eliot's anti-Romantic position was informed by a desire for an impersonal poetic. A less familiar view is that Eliot rejects the comparative view of myth and religion, because for him God is not incarnate in nature and faith does not lie in nature. In other words, Eliot distances himself from an incarnational theology that promotes a notion of divinity that is at odds with an orthodox view of Original Sin. Nonetheless, Jeremy Diaper argues that Eliot's agrarian sympathies were closely interconnected with his religious beliefs and relates his pre-Dial pronouncements to the Christian dimension of the British organic husbandry movement. With reference to the agrarian opinions voiced in the *Criterion* and the *New English Weekly*, Diaper examines how Eliot's sustained interest in agrarian thought affected his poetic development. *Four Quartets* and *The Rock* are re-read in the light of his religious agrarianism, and with a view to the "organic" poetics that emerged from the creative output of the 1930s. For Diaper, Eliot believed the cultivation of the soil presented a vital opportunity for society to develop a religious sensibility although he is equally keen to stress that Eliot's sympathy with agrarianism was not a romanticized reversion to a rural idyll, but rather an attempt to recapture the spiritual "wisdom of humility".

The feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether in *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* has argued that the spiritual feminine has been represented as a passive mediator in patriarchal religion rather than as a source of spiritual autonomy.<sup>21</sup> In this light, Matthew Geary's essay illustrates that Eliot's treatment of the divine feminine to a certain degree belongs to a Catholic tradition. Geary considers doctrinal and stylistic aspects of *Ash-Wednesday* (1927-1930) in the context of Eliot's relationship with his mother, Charlotte Champe Stearns, who died on September 10, 1929. The chapter offers a new understanding of the poem's relationship with Dante's work, and its use of allegory, by drawing on Walter Benjamin's radical re-conceptualisation of allegory in his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928). Geary relates the 'Lady' of *Ash-Wednesday* to the on-going poetics of the maternal divine and explores its apotheosis of the feminine by concentrating on "epiphanic" allegorical moments that are connected to redemptive death and the maternal body.

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<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Mayes McCarthy, *Green Modernism* (London, Palgrave: 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

Drawing upon the recently released volumes of Eliot's letters and the 1928 typescript of the poem, Geary contends that the death of Eliot's mother significantly affected the poem's writing to the point that female divinity became a central religious trope.

Lynda Kong's autobiographical chapter (a creative critical mode of self-writing pioneered in the *Life Writing* journal) reflects on how Eliot's poetry appeals to readers living in a secular age. His poetry achieves a unity of the emotions and intellect when describing the "lived experience" of belief. It inwardly instantiates the felt meaning of this term when searching for belief in the Christian God and she identifies five aspects to this. First, Eliot's poetry evokes common human experiences in the modern age that compel us to ask: what is the meaning of life when God's presence is no longer felt? Second, his poetry is intimate: it knows us well without knowing us personally at all. Third, it unfolds into moments of epiphany, invoking in the reader an awareness of possible transcendence. Fourth, Eliot offers the incarnation of Jesus Christ as a resolution for our human predicaments. And finally, he dramatizes the difficulties and complexities of Christian belief through his peculiar modern metaphysical poesis. Kong's chapter retells a personal conversion narrative – from Chinese-American atheist to Christian believer– and recalls how Eliot's poetry provided a guiding thread through this process.

Kong's personal testimony is an appropriate conclusion since the thrust of the volume overall is to indicate how Eliot's poetry, with its peculiar imbrication of poetic and religious struggle, constantly leads even the secular reader to engage with the life of the spirit as that has been conceived by generations of religious thinkers across a variety of faith traditions.

Scott Freer & Michael Bell



## CHAPTER ONE

# “ANGLO-CATHOLIC IN RELIGION”: ASPECTS OF ANGLO-CATHOLICISM IN ELIOT’S POETRY

BARRY SPURR

### 1

Of the significant influences on T. S. Eliot’s life and work, his Anglo-Catholic religion is the most often misunderstood and misrepresented. The reasons for this are, first, the failure to take the poet at his word in several important statements that he made about his Christianity and, second, to be informed about the particular variety of it that he embraced. We also need to give careful attention to the ways in which his experiences of faith made an impact on his poetry, thematically and technically.

Eliot announced, in 1928, that the position that he had adopted (with regard to religion) was that of an “anglo-catholic”.<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to be clear about what that statement means and what it does not mean. Eliot, as the trained philosopher, characteristically presents us with a precise formula. And his declaration amounted to an unequivocal public expression of allegiance to an increasingly conspicuous variety of faith and practice in England in those inter-war years. Eliot was to remain faithful to this for the rest of his life. He was not merely a “High Church” Anglican; he had not, by embracing Anglo-Catholicism, joined the “establishment” (quite the contrary, in fact), and he had not become, as some confused commentators seem to believe, a “Catholic”, apparently meaning to designate by that term a Roman Catholic. And, usually, people speak of Eliot’s “conversion” to Christianity. Not only did Eliot not

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<sup>1</sup>“Preface”, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), ix.

undergo a conversion experience, he firmly and repeatedly deprecated the idea.

Being accurate about these matters is vital if we are to read aright the poetry which derives from them.

The stubbornly persistent conversion theory, for instance, leads commentators into crude misreading of Eliot's poetry, propagating, for example, the idea that Eliot "refashions himself from the poet of *The Waste Land* into the Christian poet" with "an entirely new manner and vision".<sup>2</sup> Rather, the continuities in Eliot's *oeuvre*, thematically and technically, are more remarkable than any striking change of manner and vision as the result of a mid-career renunciation of his former life, ideas, poetic preoccupations and manner. The incantatory voice, for example, of which he is a master, persists throughout his work, being given, in the later poetry, an added liturgical quality. So, too, does the motif of journeying, questing, searching; from J. Alfred Prufrock in 1911, setting out on his search for yearned-for romantic love and meaning; to the querent of *The Waste Land* seeking redemption through the Holy Grail; to the "old men" of the *Four Quartets*, who ought to be "explorers" (in "East Coker")<sup>3</sup>, and the voyagers and seamen of "The Dry Salvages" who must not merely "fare well", but "fare forward".<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the pre-conversion text, *The Waste Land* (1922), with its dependence on the myth of the Grail and the Passion story, is at least as much a "Christian" poem as *Four Quartets*, which is an extended philosophical meditation on time and timelessness that is only intermittently specifically Christian in reference (but then explicitly so, in its emphasis in the Anglo-Catholic way, on the doctrine of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh). In that later work, the sense of the wasteland experience of modern men and women pointedly persists, even if it is now punctuated with the possibility of an alternatively redemptive and transcendental experience and domain.

My detailed biographical account of the sources and evolution of Eliot's Anglo-Catholicism has been recently published.<sup>5</sup> We see there that the poet's interest in Christianity in general, and the Anglo-Catholic expression of it in particular, was being formed well before his formal,

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<sup>2</sup> "Preface", *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume 3: 1926-1927*, eds Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> "East Coker", V, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 182. All references to the poetry are to this edition, hereafter cited as "CPP".

<sup>4</sup> "The Dry Salvages", III, *CPP*, 188.

<sup>5</sup> *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T.S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2010).

sacramental reception in the Church of England (in his baptism and confirmation in 1927) and the publication, in the same year, of what is generally regarded as his first Christian poem, “Journey of the Magi”.

Apart from the negative influences of a youthful rejection of his family’s Unitarianism; the realisation, after extensive study of Eastern philosophical and religious systems at Harvard, that he was not going to find an alternative spiritual home in those teachings; and many years of agnostic despair, both of personal and universal dimensions, as expressed in his first poems gathered in the collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917); Eliot began to discern the appeal of Western Catholic Christendom in early adulthood. This was a process by turns intellectual, cultural, aesthetic and, in his private life, (with his intense suffering in his first marriage and a deepening sense of individual sinfulness), emotional and spiritual, too.

The initial appearance of the emerging poet’s interest in identifiably Anglo-Catholic matters is to be found in a letter of 1911 (when the earliest poems in the *Prufrock* collection were being written), as he lists (with the enthusiasm of a young man after his first visit to London) the sights he has seen for a friend at home, his cousin, Eleanor Hinkley. Written on Eliot’s return from London to Paris, he delights in recording that he avoided the conventional sightseer’s destinations:

I have just discussed my trip with the prim but nice English lady at the pension. She said “And did you go through the Tower? No! Madame Tussaud’s? No! Westminster Abbey? No! ...”

What is striking is his account (emphatically, copiously listed) of what he did see:

I then said—do you know  
 St. Helens  
 St. Stephens  
 St. Bartholomew the Great  
 St. Sepulchre  
 St. Ethelreda [*sic*].<sup>6</sup>

All but the last (St Etheldreda, the Roman Catholic church in Ely Place, Holborn) are Anglican City churches, scattered about that famous one square mile. Eliot was being mischievous, both to the “English lady” and his cousin, for he later points out that he did indeed visit such predictable sights as the National Gallery and the British Museum, although, again,

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<sup>6</sup> 26<sup>th</sup> April, 1911. *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, Volume 1 1898-1922, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 96.

we notice that this later, less eccentric list includes the most important of City churches, St Paul's Cathedral.

While the young Eliot may have been as religiously unprepared for what these churches had to offer him and were to offer him in the years to come, like the worldly visitor he envisaged at the tiny church at Little Gidding, more than thirty years later: "if you came by day not knowing what you came for..." ("Little Gidding", I<sup>7</sup>), it is nonetheless remarkable that he visited the churches, and so many of them.

The poet's first encounter with several of these historic sacred places in the midst of the commercial heart of the capital was destined to develop, in the years of his work in the City at Lloyds Bank (from 1917 to 1925), into a deep appreciation, expressed in both prose and poetry. Their unobtrusive but potentially redemptive presence amongst men and women who, like Phlebas the Phoenician in *The Waste Land*, were bound to "turn the wheel" of commerce, stirred him to question whether (as he was to put it later)

our society, which had always been so assured of its superiority and rectitude, so confident of its unexamined premises, [was] assembled round anything more permanent than a congeries of banks, insurance companies and industries, and had... any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends?<sup>8</sup>

A decade after Eliot's initial encounter with the City churches, he strongly criticised a proposal to demolish nineteen of them:

They give to the business quarter of London a beauty which its hideous banks and commercial houses have not quite de-faced.... the least precious redeems some vulgar street.... As the prosperity of London has increased, the City Churches have fallen into desuetude.... The loss of these towers, to meet the eye down a grimy lane, and of these empty naves, to receive the solitary visitor at noon from the dust and tumult of Lombard Street, will be irreparable and unforgotten.<sup>9</sup>

This was written six years before Eliot's supposed conversion which admitted him to the sacraments which those churches celebrated, and in the period when he was drafting *The Waste Land*.

Eliot's crucial words (and we should note the sequence) are "beauty", "redeems" and "receive". He speaks of the churches' aesthetic value

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<sup>7</sup> "Little Gidding", I, *CPP*, 191.

<sup>8</sup> *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939; London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 82.

<sup>9</sup> "London Letter", *The Dial*, May, 1921, 690-1.

amidst the hideousness of the profane world; then of the way each “redeems” the “vulgar street”. But, climactically and personally, he records that they “receive” the “visitor”, which is itself another significant word, for a visitor is not yet a member. Obviously, in this sense, *he* had been such a visitor. But, in another meaning of the term, there is the idea of churches being open to receive committed Christians who would visit them (indeed, seek them out) for private prayer (apart from public worship), reflecting the Catholic understanding of churches as consecrated buildings, places of special holiness.

Particularly, if the Blessed Sacrament is “reserved” in a tabernacle in the building, the devout experience not only the desire to make a visit, but are encouraged to do so, in Catholic and Anglo-Catholic spirituality. This is in order that the Real Presence of the Lord, thus reserved, might be acknowledged and its special inspiration for concentrating the mind on private prayer be drawn on, in addition to the formal occasions of public worship in the liturgy itself. It is a meeting of the timeless with time.

As well, in Anglo-Catholic churches (unlike other Anglican churches of less elevated churchmanship), there are usually shrines to saints, notably the Virgin Mary, before which the visitor will light a votive candle and make a brief prayer for her intercession in the course of a private visit of this kind. Eliot’s concentration in his later poetry on the importance of particular times and places where a spiritual experience has occurred (“you are here to kneel / where prayer has been valid”<sup>10</sup>) indicates that he placed a particular value on the availability of such places and opportunities in churches and elsewhere. And the word “valid” in that passage and context has a precise resonance, too, reflecting the importance placed, in Catholic theology and Anglo-Catholic polemic (in which Eliot occasionally engaged), on the valid offering of the sacraments through the guarantee of a validly ordained priest and the use of the prescribed liturgical prayers for that offering.

These Anglo-Catholic references and vocabulary in the poetry could have resonances with his earliest life, too. The lyrical prayer in the third quartet, “The Dry Salvages”, beginning, “Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory” recalls such commemorations of the Virgin as the church and statue of Our Lady of Good Voyage in the fishing port of Gloucester, Massachusetts, a sight familiar to Eliot during his boyhood holidays there. Writing these lines in 1941, the committed Anglo-Catholic now fully appreciates Mary’s role as Mediatrix and *Regina Coeli*, in lines of petition that neatly conflate the mortal journeying of her Son (of whom she is also the daughter) in his Passion and that of fishermen voyaging to the sea in

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<sup>10</sup> “Little Gidding”, I, *CPP*, p.192.

ships that may not return:

Repeat a prayer also on behalf of  
 Women who have seen their sons or husbands  
 Setting forth, and not returning:  
 Figlia del tuo figlio,  
 Queen of Heaven.<sup>11</sup>

This lyric, in the form of a prayer to the Virgin, gives an insight into the poet's mature prayer-life as an Anglo-Catholic. And witnessing others at prayer in churches, years before, may have been influential in drawing Eliot to the Christian faith. Indeed, George Every, a brother of the Anglo-Catholic Society of the Sacred Mission, gives an indication of this in the course of remembering the one occasion when Eliot "gave something like a testimony to the motives of his conversion":

What sticks in my mind is his description of the impression made on him by people praying, I think in a church, or it would not have been so obvious, but certainly outside a time of service. He suddenly realised that prayer still went on and could be made. It wasn't simply of historic and cultural interest. People did pray and he might.<sup>12</sup>

Eliot's reference to "the solitary visitor at noon from the dust and tumult of Lombard Street" identifies the City church that was most familiar to him, St Mary Woolnoth, on the corner of Lombard and King William Streets, mentioned in *The Waste Land*: "where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours".<sup>13</sup> The reference in the poetry to the "dead sound on the final strike of nine" from the church's clock recalls the ultimate death, for the Christian, of Jesus' crucifixion, at the ninth hour.

Later in the work, another City church appears, in the often-quoted lines of celebration of St Magnus the Martyr, in Lower Thames Street at London Bridge, as the poet notes that

the walls  
 Of Magnus Martyr hold  
 Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.<sup>14</sup>

The white and gold columns of its nave, aesthetically sumptuous, also summon the liturgical colours of Easter, the feast of the resurrection,

<sup>11</sup> "The Dry Salvages", IV, *CPP*, 189.

<sup>12</sup> "Eliot as a Friend and a Man of Prayer", unpublished paper, shown to me by the author.

<sup>13</sup> *The Waste Land*, I, *CPP*, 62.

<sup>14</sup> *The Waste Land*, III, *CPP*, 69.

following Jesus’ death, which St Mary Woolnoth had earlier commemorated in a poem that, at large, continually yearns for resurrected life beyond mortality and the burial of the dead, even as it repeatedly registers disappointment in the attainment of it. The “splendour” of the church’s interior, in other words, is not merely aesthetic, but betokens redemption, which is why it is “inexplicable” to wastelanders.

Eliot’s attraction to church buildings, whether in England or on the continent, is a recurring theme in his growing appreciation of Western Catholic civilization at large. On a visit to Italy, arriving at the principal church of the West in the summer of 1926, just months before his baptism and confirmation, the poet fell to his knees at the entrance:

his sister-in-law remembered being with him and his first wife, Vivien, when they all together entered St. Peter’s, Rome. Vivien, who wasn’t easily impressed, said something like “It’s very fine”, and then they suddenly saw that Tom was on his knees praying.... It was the first hint that his brother and sister-in-law had that his conversion was imminent, and they naturally misunderstood it. They thought he was going to Rome, and perhaps he thought so himself.... at this point his Christianity was becoming more than an interest, [rather] an experience which had to be practised.<sup>15</sup>

In the following year, he was baptized and confirmed in the Church of England, on 29<sup>th</sup> and 30th June, and “Journey of the Magi” appeared, less than two months later, on 25th August.

This poem is focused on the doctrine of the Incarnation, which identifies it as a characteristically (if not, exclusively) Anglo-Catholic work. Two Christian doctrines were of paramount importance to Eliot and those of his churchmanship: that of the Incarnate Word made flesh and the doctrine of Original Sin. Both are present in “Journey of the Magi”, as indeed in Eliot’s other major Christian works, *Ash-Wednesday, 1930* (where, unsurprisingly, given its title, the concern with sin dominates) and *Four Quartets*, where, more positively, the apprehension of the Incarnation is the “gift” that is yearned for: “the hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation”.<sup>16</sup> But as “Journey of the Magi” is, obviously, especially concerned with Christmas (its title recalling the visit of the biblical Wise Men to the Christ child, a scene so often represented in art) and, therefore, on the feast in the Church’s liturgical year that is

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<sup>15</sup> George Every, “Eliot as a Friend and a Man of Prayer”, unpublished paper.

<sup>16</sup> “The Dry Salvages”, V, *CPP*, 190.

particularly focused on the mystery of the Incarnation, that doctrine is primarily before us here.

The Incarnation is central to Anglo-Catholic theology because it initiates and encapsulates the miraculous meeting of the spiritual and the physical which is central to the sacramental interpretation and practice of Christian life and faith. This has its ultimate expression in the sacrificial offering of the Mass which is at the heart of Anglo-Catholic (and, therefore, Eliot's) theology and devotion. But it is intrinsic to all of the sacraments, which are traditionally spoken of as 'extensions' of the Incarnation. Eliot's conspicuous commitment to two of these (that of the Mass, in Holy Communion, and the sacrament of penance (or private confession of sin to a priest), relates directly to his appreciation of the doctrines of the Incarnation and of Original Sin (the "terrible aboriginal calamity", as John Henry Newman called it<sup>17</sup>, in which all humanity is implicated since the Fall). Further, these two crucial doctrines are intrinsically connected. The Incarnation, initiating the saving work of Christ on earth, culminates in his passion, death and resurrection, whereby the victory over sin is secured.

"Journey of the Magi"<sup>18</sup> (the title of which would lead us to think that this was to be only a Christmas poem) brings to mind, and together in one poem, the two events, Christmas and Calvary, along with their doctrinal underpinning. But it does so briefly, obliquely, mysteriously and incompletely. The event and scene at Bethlehem are referred to, apparently off-handedly, even bathetically, as "the place", without even naming it; and the experience seems to be all but dismissed in the bland adjective "satisfactory", preceded by the further qualification in a parenthetical aside: "you may say"; while the scene of the crucifixion is rendered, as if in a traveller's casual, incidental observation, as "three trees on the low sky". Again, the biblical name of the place is not given.

The Magi are introduced in bleak mid-winter in the midst of difficult journeying. Indeed, Eliot begins the poem in a protracted complaint from one of them, adapted from a seventeenth-century sermon on the Nativity by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes:

"A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey..."

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<sup>17</sup> "Position of my Mind since 1845", *Apologia pro vita sua* (1865), <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/apologia65/chapter5.html>

<sup>18</sup> *CPP*, 103-4.

When we remember that this is Eliot’s very first Christian utterance in poetry, it is striking to note the multiple and insistently negative characteristics of the language related to one of the principal events of the Christian story, and from the beginning of the poem, moreover, binding it to (rather than separating it from) such recent works as “The Hollow Men” of 1925, with its almost unrelieved negativity.

The negative tone here, however, may be of a different kind from the infernal despair of that preceding poem. The first verse paragraph (as of that of *Ash-Wednesday*, the early sections of which Eliot was also writing at this time) can be placed, rather, in the tradition of the *via negativa* of the Christian’s pilgrimage, most famously set out in the works of St John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, whose ideas and imagery in such as *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* inform a number of Eliot’s poems from this time onwards. He praised the mystic’s “purity and intensity of religious feeling and... literary excellence”.<sup>19</sup> Eliot’s appropriation of Counter-Reformation spirituality reflects the absorption of the devotional traditions of Western Catholicism by Anglo-Catholics in these years. That the Magi refer to their preference “to travel all night” may suggest submission (whether conscious or not) to the spiritual discipline of the soul’s journey through its “dark night”.

Paradoxically, the negative way (encouraging the Christian’s nurturing of a sense of self-emptying, with regard to any hopeful aspirations) is a quest for renewal in the faith. The multiplication of negative ideas (including the lusciously-alliterated allure of the sensuous “silken girls on slopes” is, in fact, part of a spiritual regimen, for all of the air of ramifying reservations in the opening verse paragraph of the poem.

In the poetry’s language and rhythm, Eliot’s voice takes its lead from Andrewes’ prose, incorporating it effortlessly and seamlessly into his incantatory style, from the sixth line. The numerous repetitions of “And” in the first verse paragraph give a rhythmic pulse to the verse; again, paradoxically, as this invests the language with an energy and impetus that the dispiriting narrative would seem to deny. And it recalls a familiar verbal quality of the Authorized Version of the Bible, of 1611, of which Andrewes was one of the translators, with its specific intention to be aurally engaging, designed, as it was, “to be read in churches”. The simple matter of the repetition of “And” links this modern voice in poetry to that old language, as Anglican tradition and the individual talent engage; time present and time past meet, and even the possibility of the poet’s word

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<sup>19</sup> Address to the Friends of Salisbury Cathedral, in Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot’s Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 183.

transcending the limitations of spatio-temporality to engage and express the Word (a preoccupation explored in detail in both *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*) begins to be imagined.

The Magi declare of their journey that “a hard time we had of it”. Their search for an encounter with the source of faith involves intense and protracted suffering, and in the face of contemporary, irreligious derision: “with the voices ringing in our ears, saying / That this was all folly”. Eliot never underestimated the difficulty of the Christian’s pilgrimage and strongly rejected the idea that embracing a theological and spiritual system, as he had done, was tantamount to a decisive arrival at a destination, and an easy life thereafter:

it [is] rather trying to be supposed to have settled oneself in an easy chair,  
when one has just begun a long journey afoot.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, the poet’s orthodox Christian belief and practice were regarded as a betrayal by many of his friends and literary associates, such as members of the Bloomsbury Group. Virginia Woolf, for example, was appalled by it, needled Eliot about it (Stephen Spender recalled<sup>21</sup>) and assumed (prematurely) that the poet would “drop Christianity with his wife, as one might empty the fishbones after the herring”.<sup>22</sup>

If we are to identify a division in Eliot’s artistry marked by the dawning of his formal Christian commitment as an Anglo-Catholic, then it is undeniably found at the beginning of the second verse paragraph when the Magi emerge from their dark night and

at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation,  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness.

This new day is especially striking in the context of Eliot’s poetic imagery at large as, for the first time in his corpus, we encounter a natural landscape that is not only positively presented, but is brimming with the *vita nuova*. In the parched heat of *The Waste Land*’s desert landscape there

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<sup>20</sup> Letter to Paul Elmer More, 3 August, 1929, in Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden, eds, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume 4: 1928-1929* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), 567.

<sup>21</sup> In Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2008), 56.

<sup>22</sup> Letter to Francis Birrell, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1933, in John Cooper, *T.S. Eliot and the Ideology of ‘Four Quartets’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 200 n.3.