CHAPTER 30

Religion

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T. S. Eliot's declaration of his Anglo-Catholicism was made in the preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928): 'my present position . . . may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion' (*FLA*, ix). It is commonplace to refer to the poet's 'conversion' to Anglo-Catholicism, which is useful for marking his formal commitment of 1927 when he received, in private, the Christian sacraments of baptism and confirmation (on 29 and 30 June, respectively). And Eliot occasionally uses the word himself, of his own experience and more generally: 'scepticism', he wrote in 1932, 'is the preface to conversion'.[1] But he also noted: 'No one ever attempted to convert *me*; and, looking back on my pre-Christian state of mind, I do not think that such a campaign would have prospered.'[2] Where 'conversion' is misleading, with regard to Eliot's faith, is in its suggestion of those instantaneous events, as a result of which converts are changed utterly and a breach is made with their previous, unregenerate lives. They are 'born again'. This is where Anglo-Catholic tradition and Eliot's own spiritual experience part company from Protestant, evangelical ideas of conversion, about which (especially the emotional element, which can play a powerful role) he was deeply suspicious. Accordingly, even when Eliot had become the best known of Anglo-Catholic writers, he was at pains to point out that, as no one ever attempted to convert him, so, in his Christian writings, he was not 'attempting to convert' (*ICS*, 21) his readers.

The term 'conversion', in Eliot's case, tends to diminish the importance of the diverse elements that led up to his baptism and confirmation over so many years and, by implying certitude and finality, contradicts Eliot's conception of the individual Christian's experience (especially in the modern age) as a much more complex phenomenon, shot through with doubts and backslidings, throughout one's earthly pilgrimage. The 'Catholic should have', Eliot wrote (after some six years as an Anglo-Catholic), '*absolute* ideals – and moderate expectations'.[3]

In Eliot's fullest formal statement about the stages of his conversion, we note the emphasis placed on the intellectual process that leads to belief:

> The Christian thinker – and I mean the man who is trying consciously and conscientiously to explain to himself the sequence which culminates in faith . . . – proceeds by rejection and elimination. He finds the world to be so and so; he finds its character inexplicable by any non-religious theory: among religions he finds Christianity, and Catholic Christianity, to account most satisfactorily for the world and especially for the moral world within; and thus, by what [Cardinal] Newman calls 'powerful and concurrent' reasons, he finds himself inexorably committed to the dogma of the Incarnation. (*SE*, 408)

What is notable here is that full Christian commitment is specifically understood by Eliot in terms of acceptance of the Incarnation – that is, God becoming man in Christ. He has repeated recourse to this doctrine, in prose and poetry:

> I take for granted that Christian revelation is the only full revelation; and that the fullness of Christian revelation resides in the essential fact of the Incarnation, in relation to which all Christian revelation is to be understood. The division between those who accept, and those who deny, Christian revelation I take to be the most profound division between human beings.[4]

In 'The Dry Salvages', Eliot affirms that 'The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation' (*CPP*, 190) where the capitalisation draws attention to the specific event and dogma. Emphasis on the theology of the Word made flesh, and the idea of the seven sacraments of Catholic Christianity (most importantly, that of the Mass) as extensions of the Incarnation, are at the heart of the Catholic revival in the Church of England, dating from the early nineteenth-century Oxford Movement. They had found their full doctrinal and liturgical expression in the Anglo-Catholicism of the twentieth-century interwar period, when Eliot embraced the faith. This is the essential context in which his life and work must be set and interpreted, from 1927 until his death in 1965.

Further back, these theological and liturgical principles can be discerned in the Anglican Church of the early seventeenth century, which resisted the Protestantism of the Puritans, in doctrine and worship, and particularly in the learned spirituality of Bishop Lancelot Andrewes. Eliot expresses his indebtedness to this older tradition in his first works as an Anglo-Catholic poet and literary critic: in 'Journey of the Magi' of 1927 (which begins in quotation from Andrewes) and in the essay collection, *For Lancelot Andrewes*, of the following year. In relation to that first poem of his Christian period, we can see, again, how misleading is the term

'conversion' when applied to Eliot's poetry. 'Journey of the Magi' focuses, repeatedly, on the difficulties of faith and the elusiveness of transcendental experience, while urging that it is always necessary to strive towards these things. The poem closes inconclusively, with a solitary Magus, years after the event, yearning for a further death to worldliness and for the new birth in Christ. Eliot's poetry is no more attuned to the evangelical goal of converting his readers than his Christian life, at large, was directed by this intention. To the Episcopalian priest who suggested to him that *The Cocktail Party* (1949) was 'covertly all about the Mass', Eliot responded: 'I really wanted to write a damn good play, and I hope I did.'[5]

Of paramount importance, in religion, for Eliot, was 'the love of God and a sound Catholic doctrine'. The former (fulfilling the First Commandment) was insufficient, as, relying on our own perceptions, we may fail to determine matters correctly. A 'fixed point' is needed, to prevent 'our deflecting from the ideal course'. Catholic doctrine makes it possible that 'we may at any moment determine our position' by reference to it.[6] We discern the antithesis here, familiar in Eliot's earlier literary criticism, between personality and impersonality, subjectivity and objectivity, the Romantic and the Classical world-view. He identified Catholicism with the impersonal, objective, Classical critique of the individualistic, Romantic and Protestant 'inner voice' (*SE*, 27). So far from heeding this unreliable counsel, Catholic Christians, Eliot insisted, should be convinced of the 'vast importance of adhering to, and developing, our dogmatic theology'. Theology was, for Eliot, a 'science',[7] the discipline of faith which the humanists and liberal Protestants had abrogated by divorcing themselves from this repository of impersonal wisdom of the ages to pin their hopes on spiritual whims and fancies – 'undisciplined emotions'.[8] He traced the decline in theology not merely from the Enlightenment or even the theological developments of the Reformation, but from the end of the Middle Ages (for him the epoch of Aquinas and Dante). Since then, there had been a 'progressive spiritual deterioration'.[9]

Faith and its practice were inextricably linked; practice was the incarnation of belief (as the 'culture of a people', he argued, was 'an *incarnation* of its religion' [*NTDC*, 33]). Such locutions sound formulaic, but Eliot never underestimated the difficulty of living a Christian life true to these principles, noting, after more than twenty years as a devoted Anglo-Catholic, that

> The reflection that what we believe is not merely what we formulate and subscribe to, but that behaviour is also belief, and that even the most conscious and developed of us live also at the level on which belief and behaviour cannot

be distinguished, is one that may, once we allow our imagination to play upon it, be very disconcerting. It gives an importance to our most trivial pursuits, which we cannot contemplate long without the horror of nightmare. (*NTDC*, 32)

Eliot repeatedly rejected the idea that becoming a Christian provided an easy solution to (or an escape from) the world's problems, or made one's own personal life simpler. Writing in the 1930s of young people who were submitting themselves to Communist ideology ('the faith of the day') and were discovering, thereby, a 'godsend' in finding something in which to believe, he warned:

> Once they have committed themselves, they must find (if they are honest, and really growing) that they have let themselves in for all the troubles that afflict the person who believes in something … They have joined that bitter fraternity which lives on a higher level of doubt; no longer the doubting which is just play with ideas … but that which is a daily battle.[10]

Eliot remembered that it was in the autumn of 1933, the year of the centenary of the Oxford Movement and of a great Anglo-Catholic congress to celebrate it, that 'I first attended Mass at St Stephen's [in Gloucester Road, South Kensington]' – a fashionable West End church and one of the leading Anglo-Catholic shrines in England. Eliot came to know his new vicar, the Reverend Eric Cheetham, 'and not long afterwards he offered me rooms, which had become available, in his presbytery in Grenville Place'.[11] Eliot remained in the clergy house until 1940, when the circumstances of the war led to all the occupants departing. Cheetham appointed him his warden just a year after the poet had come to the parish, in 1934, and Eliot remained in that position until April 1959 and continued worshipping at the church until his death six years later.

Central to Eliot's Christian life at St Stephen's was a regime of attendance at Mass that was fervent even by Anglo-Catholic standards. His worship expressed the commitment of someone who especially valued 'ritual and habit', which, he said, are 'essential to religion' (*FLA*, 134). It was a practice that had no purpose, so far as he was concerned, in terms of witness for others, let alone their conversion:

> I do not go out to an early communion on a cold morning in order to convert my housekeeper, or to set a good example to the night porter of my block of flats before he goes off duty. If this was my motive, I had better not, for my own sake, go at all; and if the housekeeper and the porter suspected that this was my motive, they would – far from being softened – merely be justifiably irritated by my trying to interfere with their lives.[12]

He rigorously kept the Eucharistic fast, from midnight, prior to receiving communion, so that the Sacrament might be the first food to pass the communicant's lips that day. He also observed the Friday fast, when Roman and Anglo-Catholics used not to consume any meat. Eliot's friend and former Faber colleague, the poet Anne Ridler, recalled for me how Eliot would warn prospective Friday hostesses of the necessity (in his case) for fish. This would have been an exceptional request from an 'ordinary' Anglican. But Eliot was adamant that others should be aware of his position and the implications of his faith. Herbert Read noted of his friend: 'a statement of differences he could respect; what he could not tolerate was any false interpretation of the position he himself held'.[13] The climax of Eliot's worshipping week (which included daily private prayer, often using the rosary – he had had two blessed by Pope Pius XII – and attendance at weekday Low Masses and on all Holy Days of Obligation) was High Mass, late on Sunday morning, at St Stephen's. The climax of his worshipping year were the Holy Week and Easter ceremonies, which were celebrated at St Stephen's in accordance with the elaborate rubrics of *The English Missal* and *Ritual Notes*, the 'bibles' of Anglo-Catholic worship throughout the interwar period, when Anglo-Catholicism was enjoying its heyday as the dominant party in the Church of England.

As the Incarnation accomplished 'the intersection of the timeless moment' (*CPP*, 192) with time, so the Real Presence of the Lord in Holy Communion and in the tabernacle on Anglo-Catholic high altars extended that timeless moment into 'Time present' (*CPP*, 171). The essential thesis of *Four Quartets*, advanced in such phrases and in its most important metaphor of the 'still point of the turning world' (*CPP*, 173), has its source in Eliot's Eucharistic faith, even as it is articulated, in the poetry, in a non-specific expression in terms of the desire for a 'further union, a deeper communion' (*CPP*, 183). This Anglo-Catholic context has been insufficiently recognised by most commentators on Eliot's poetry because they have been uninformed about the centrality of Incarnational theology in Anglo-Catholic faith and practice and of Eliot's unswerving devotion to it.[14]

Of similar importance in Eliot's Christianity, and one of those hallmarks of Anglo-Catholicism which differentiates it from mainstream Anglicanism, was his commitment to the sacrament of penance, or 'confession'. 'Penitence and humility', Eliot declared, 'are the foundation of the Christian life'.[15] Certainly, they are intimately connected, as the recognition of the need for penitence is contingent upon the humbling process of facing up to one's sins. On 15 March 1928, three weeks into the annual penitential Lenten season, Eliot told the priest who had baptised

him, Father William Force Stead, that he had made his first confession 'and feel as if I had crossed a very wide and deep river: whether I get much further or not, I feel very certain that I shall not cross back, and *that* in itself gives one a very extraordinary sense of surrender and gain'.[16] The ascetic discipline was central to his rule of life, as Eliot revealed in an unusually public expression (in a BBC radio broadcast) of the private persuasion of his faith: 'the Christian scheme seemed the only possible scheme which found a place for values which I must maintain or perish (and belief comes first and practice second), the belief, for instance, in holy living and holy dying, in sanctity, chastity, humility, austerity'.[17] A fortnight later – in another BBC broadcast – Eliot confesses to 'low appetites' and 'vulgar tastes' and how they have been assuaged in his life: 'I have perceived their transience, their unsatisfactoriness, and the horror of satiety which is far beyond the famine of deprivation ... Without the love of God there is no love at all.'[18] Eliot's regular use of the sacrament expressed the deep-seated sense of sin in his personality (not newly discovered in his Anglo-Catholicism, but deriving from his Calvinistic, Puritan heritage – severely watered down, doctrinally, in Unitarianism, but with the scrupulous moral consciousness preserved intact). Yet Eliot also regarded the issue matter-of-factly, in the Catholic way:

> I shall no doubt do and say the wrong thing again and again; but the important thing is to be conscious of the error or weakness and of its nature, and then to be sorry for it ... We show our Christianity in the way in which we are aware of our faults and shortcomings, and the way in which we are sorry for them.[19]

Eliot preferred to have, as confessor, a priest distinct from his vicar at St Stephen's.[20] The first of these was Francis Underhill, cousin of Evelyn Underhill, the author of *Mysticism* (1911). The phrase, 'Bless me father', which Eliot (like all penitents) would have uttered on having knelt down in the confessional, is woven into the final section of Eliot's Lenten and most liturgical poem, *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), as the speaker refers to the ongoing temptations of the sensual world which continue to bedevil him (and, it is implied, always will) in spite of all that he has accomplished, in the foregoing sections of that poem, in the purgative discipline of ascent.

It is in Eliot's plays, however, that the necessity for the expiation of sin is most evident. Several figures are portrayed as types of father-confessor, while others are in the role of the penitent engaged in rigorous preparatory searching of conscience in a personal desire for absolution and atonement. At the very core of *The Family Reunion*

(1939), which can serve as just one example of this phenomenon, we find a concentration of attention on the process of the recollection of sin and the desire for repentance: it is, to use Agatha's term, a theatrical 'pilgrimage of expiation' (pilgrimage itself, in Catholic tradition, customarily involving recourse to confession). Harry retreats to Wishwood for a contemplative experience of self-discovery (retreats, also, being an important feature of Anglo-Catholic spirituality to which Eliot had recourse, in monastic communities, several times each year). Harry is haunted by the faces and circumstances of a traumatic past and he needs, if he is ever to be freed from the despair they are daily imposing on his spirit, to encounter them courageously and (in humility) to be purged from their influence. Agatha (the name of the virgin martyr who is listed in the Canon of the Mass and who is invoked against fire) promises that, at this moment of grace, all time will be gathered together and stand still: 'When the loop in time comes – and it does not come for everybody – / The hidden is revealed' (*CPP*, 289). Harry's situation is given dramatic force by his impatience for confession and, hence, liberation from his sinfulness. As in *The Cocktail Party* where the penitents turn to a psychologist as their 'confessor', so in *The Family Reunion*, Harry would bare his soul to Warburton, the family's doctor: 'I don't know why, but just this evening / I feel an overwhelming need for explanation' (*CPP*, 318).

This is not merely a desire to discuss the experience of evil, but a determination that is driven by an unpredictable and inexplicable infusion of grace. Agatha discerns this mystery, in mystical and biblical terms:

> Accident is design
> And design is accident
> In a cloud of unknowing.
> O my child, my curse,
> You shall be fulfilled:
> The knot shall be unknotted
> And the crooked made straight. (*CPP*, 337)

Her reference here to the 'cloud of unknowing' recalls the concept of man's separation from God described in the famous fourteenth-century mystical treatise (upon which Eliot draws again in the final part of 'Little Gidding'). The unknown author encourages the contemplative to meekness, and insists, when referring to counsel, on the necessity for the penitent to follow his confessor's advice.[21]

Agatha reflects:

> What we have written is not a story of detection,
> Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation.
> . . .
> It is possible that sin may strain and struggle
> In its dark instinctive birth, to come to consciousness
> And so find expurgation. (*CPP*, 333)

The Family Reunion concludes with a simulation of the ceremony of *Tenebrae* – the Good Friday service in which all church lights are gradually extinguished in symbolic anticipation of the rising of the Sun of Righteousness on Easter Day and which Eliot attended every year at St Stephen's.[22] It is an ambiguous close to the play – penitential, by virtue of its quasi-liturgical reminiscence of Good Friday, but pregnant with hope. By setting *The Family Reunion* in the Anglo-Catholic context of the sacrament of penance, I am not arguing that it is, explicitly, an exploration and commendation of that ordinance, any more than *Four Quartets* is a versified celebration of the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Real Presence. What I am arguing is that, in order to fully appreciate the world-view and interpret the remedies that Eliot proposes (however, contingently, tentatively and through metaphor) to the profound problems of human existence in the modern age, we are best equipped if we are familiar with the Christian context of faith and practice in which Eliot had immersed himself and which, in various ways, emerges throughout his poetry and prose in the last forty years of his life.

In Eliot's works of Christian social commentary, principally *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) – but in many other shorter articles and chapters too – he explains his thesis about the culture of a people being the incarnation of their religion. Eliot's own commitment to the Church of England was determined by his appreciation of the fact that the cultural life of the country that had become his home was inextricably bound up with Anglicanism: 'culture and religion . . . [are] when each term is taken in the right context, different aspects of the same thing' (*NTDC*, 29). Eliot catalogues something of that '*whole way of life* of a people, from birth to the grave', in a much quoted catalogue: 'Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar' (*NTDC*, 31). This shows, he contends, that 'the actual religion of no European people

has ever been purely Christian, or purely anything else', and he does not deny the spiritual impurity of such interaction: 'It is inconvenient for Christians to find that as Christians they do not believe enough, and that on the other hand they, with everybody else, believe in too many things . . . bishops are a part of English culture, and horses and dogs are a part of English religion' (*NTDC*, 32). Having such cultural roots but tolerating a theological and ritual diversity without parallel in any other Christian communion, Anglicanism was scarcely well placed to be always attuned to the orthodox Catholic interpretation and expression of human life and civilisation which Eliot also profoundly valued. He was prepared to admit the combination of 'unity and diversity in religion', while insisting that the essential teachings of the Catholic faith must be maintained. There may be, 'that is, universality of doctrine with particularity of cult and devotion' (*NTDC*, 15) which will include 'many variations of order and ritual' (*NTDC*, 29). Obviously, nowhere is this more the case than in the Church of England, which 'has comprehended wider variations of belief and cult than a foreign observer would believe it possible for one institution to contain without bursting' (*NTDC*, 73). The guarantee of the Catholic character of the Church of England depended upon its recognition of an authority transcending its national boundaries and traditions. Anglo-Catholicism was constantly reminding the Church of England of that universal authority.

There was never any question that Eliot would become a Roman Catholic, so long as he was a British citizen. Had the First World War not happened and had he stayed in Europe, and become a Christian, it is beyond doubt that Eliot would have joined the Church of Rome. But, in England, this was an impossible allegiance for him, not because of any doctrinal or liturgical reservations, but because of the disconnection from the cultural life of the nation of English Roman Catholics. So far from being part of the mainstream of English life, that church, since the Reformation, had been a cultural curiosity in England. Eliot certainly regretted this situation. For he acknowledged that 'When we consider the western world, we must recognise that the main cultural tradition has been that corresponding to the Church of Rome', noting that, at the Reformation, 'the separation of Northern Europe, and of England in particular, from communion with Rome represents a diversion from the main stream of culture' (*NTDC*, 73). And when Eliot was on the Continent, he would fulfil his religious obligations in Roman Catholic churches. But he was convinced that the Catholic Church in any nation must not only hold fast to orthodox doctrine, but be the religious

expression of the culture of its people and, indeed, 'representative of the finest spirit' (*FLA*, 15) of its people. The Church of England was, as he often observed, the Catholic Church in England and it was precisely in its Anglo-Catholic movement that the combination of Englishness with the faith and practice of Catholic orthodoxy was most actively and wholeheartedly pursued. So, once again, we see the necessity of setting Eliot's Christianity explicitly in the context of the tradition he espoused – in this case, with regard to his extensive body of published work on social and cultural theory.

Eliot's Anglo-Catholicism belongs to an Anglicanism that no longer exists, as his idea of English culture and society is redolent of an Englishness that has passed. Those who are keen to understand his life, thought and work will need to recover the contexts of these ecclesiastical and cultural circumstances and conditions with an ever-increasing awareness of their historical character.

NOTES

1. 'Christianity and Communism', *Listener* (16 March 1932), 383.
2. *A Sermon Preached in Magdalene College Chapel* (Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 5.
3. 'Catholicism and International Order', *Christendom* (September 1933), 176.
4. 'I By T. S. Eliot', *Revelation*, ed. John Baillie and Hugh Martin (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), pp. 1–2.
5. Quoted in David Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 130.
6. 'The English Situation', *Christendom* (June 1940), 108.
7. Ibid., 102, 103.
8. 'Catholicism and International Order', 175.
9. 'Religion and Science', *Listener* (23 March 1932), 429.
10. 'A Commentary', *Criterion* (April 1933), 472.
11. 'The Panegyric by Mr T. S. Eliot', *St Stephen's Parish Magazine* (May 1959), 5.
12. *Sermon Preached in Magdalene College Chapel*, pp. 6–7.
13. Herbert Read, *T. S. E.: A Memoir* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), p. 19.
14. See Barry Spurr, *'Anglo-Catholic in Religion': T. S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2010).
15. *Sermon Preached in Magdalene College Chapel*, p. 8.
16. Quoted in Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 152.
17. 'Christianity and Communism', *Listener* (16 March 1932), 383.
18. 'The Search for Moral Sanction', *Listener* (30 March 1932), 446, 480.
19. *Sermon Preached in Magdalene College Chapel*, p. 6.

20. Information provided by George Every (1909–2003), a member of the Society of the Sacred Mission, Kelham.
21. See *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Dom Justin McCann (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1924), p. 9n.
22. Information provided by Mary Trevelyan, Eliot's friend and fellow parishioner at St Stephen's in the 1940s and 1950s.