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Full Circle: T. S. Eliot's Quest for Spiritual Fulfillment

by

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Throughout his life T.S. Eliot struggled with religion and belief. Raised in a prominent Unitarian household, he was surrounded by religious ideology and debate, but the debates lacked the tradition that other sects reflected. Once Eliot left his religious home, perhaps even before, he began a search for other forms of religious knowledge and lessons that would consume much of his life. During his years at Harvard, 1911-1914, he began to study Buddhism, even studying the Sanskrit language so that he would be able to read texts that were not yet translated (Murata 80). His study of Buddhism began just as his mind was most able to accept this complicated religious practice (81). Buddhism was at the time in vogue as was most everything Asian and exotic, but Eliot's study of the religion was not a passing phase.

Eliot's religious search did not end with Buddhism, throughout his life he would continue to study religious texts including some from Hindu and Confucian origins. Some have described his relationship with religion as a "process of elimination and rejection" (McNelly Kearns 88). This however, seems to discount the sincerity with which he took to each religious practice. His relationship with religion was less about a series of logical progressions towards an inevitable end, instead the search was more like a quest. The study of religion, or perhaps more accurately his quest to find something more powerful than himself, seems to have often been his inspiration for writing. Religious reflection and faith were what sustained Eliot, what gave him the will to write, and what provided him with endless inspiration. Eventually Eliot's quest ended with a full conversion to High Anglicanism. This form of Christianity was a far cry from the progressive Unitarian church in which he grew up. A stricter more devoted practice is what Eliot sought throughout his religious odyssey—a practice that required as much critical reflection and

hard work as his writing. His eventual acceptance of Anglican doctrine raised his confidence in his work, as is apparent in his post-conversion writing, which is more assertive and philosophical.

Already in his pre-conversion writing, Eliot looked towards religion as one key to solving the problems of modernity. Eliot saw modern secularism as having a negative impact on the culture because to him it spelled disconnection or disunion. Without religion, society became a wasteland. At the point at which he began writing his critique of secular modern culture, *The Waste Land*, Eliot was struggling to understand how knowledge, experience, belief, and skepticism all worked together to impact the culture and how they impacted his own sense of self (McNelly Kearns 80).

Eliot was not satisfied by the progressive Protestant faith he was raised with and instead sought something new and intellectually compelling. Eastern philosophy provided him with a more ancient practice, one that required the constant involvement of the practitioner. Being a Buddhist required deep reflection on scriptural texts so that one was able to understand the deeper message behind them and figure out how to incorporate the message into one's daily existence. It is not the kind of religion where a person can listen to a sermon once a week. A person must critically examine the lifestyle which he or she intends to lead and cultivate compassion for other beings. To truly accept this kind of lifestyle the individual must work for these goals and cannot follow empty rituals like so many Christians who go to church on Sunday and then forget about their faith until the following week. Eliot's work and criticism demanded this kind of absolute engagement so it would make sense that this would extend to other areas of his life. Eliot saw faith as sustaining and did not see this kind of spiritual fulfillment in the world around him. Buddhism would provide Eliot with the tools to critically examine himself and the

problems he saw in the shifting of Western culture, but in the end Buddhism was not enough to sustain him. He found true sustenance in Anglican doctrine. References to the East and important concepts from Buddhism would remain in his writing throughout his life, but it is clear in *Four Quartets* and especially in *Christianity and Culture* that he found his true faith in Anglicanism which would keep him enraptured until his death.

Turning Towards the East: Buddhism

References to Buddhism in Eliot's work center around several key Buddhist ideas: suffering, attachment, detachment, and the cultivation of compassion. Suffering is at the heart of this ancient religion. The entire world is suffering according to Buddhists, and the only way past this suffering is to utilize the middle path. One aspect of this path is detachment from the material world. Detachment, however, does not mean that individuals should not care about the people around them or abandon all of their possessions. Instead, we should cultivate compassion for all beings. We should, in fact, love all beings as we love ourselves, but we must do this without creating feelings of craving and desire.¹ This goal of detachment without loss of compassion connects others together and does not create a society based on selfishness. Cultivating this kind of compassion involves many years of devoted meditation, reading, and self reflection; most will not achieve this level before they have spent many lifetimes working towards it. Once this level of understanding or enlightenment is gained a person must remain humble, allowing his or her ego to rejoice in such accomplishment would defeat the purpose of such cultivation. The level of devotion required, as well as the probability that a person would have to continually work towards these goals, was probably

¹ For more information on the specifics of Buddhist doctrine see Rupert Gethin's *The Foundations of Buddhism*.

appealing to Eliot, who as a writer focused on developing new critical perspectives and on constant improvement. Buddhism also gave him a more concrete set of spiritual and ethical goals to pursue and a path to follow. The Noble Eightfold Path involves achieving eight goals, including right intention, right action, right concentration, and right mindfulness (Gethin 81). Buddhists approach these goals one at a time until they master each step. Buddhism provided Eliot with a step-by-step process of how life should be led, whereas Unitarianism provided him with a vague concept.

The concept of mindfulness is also a key element for Buddhist practice. One must be mindful of one's own actions and thoughts. People should be aware of their feelings and intentions both physically and mentally. The consequences of every action should be considered before they are acted upon. By contemplating action and intention, individuals bring their attention to the moment at hand; instead of focusing on future actions they attend to the here and now. Narrowing the focus to the present allows people to block out distractions which are commonplace in the modern world. It is easy to imagine Eliot working on a poem, focusing solely on the voice of his narrator, thinking only about the next word, cultivating this kind of one-sidedness.

Eliot's most famous poem, *The Waste Land*, utilizes Buddhist ideology as a lens with which to question Western culture. The poem considers the ideas and images of faith rather than creating a total judgment about them. Certainly, the poem is critiquing the culture of the West, particularly the material and secular nature of it, but it does not come to a conclusion as to how exactly it can or should be repaired; this lack of clear direction illustrates how Eliot was not satisfied with his own path.

The poem begins with visions of the West, after the end of the WWI. Fields that were once covered with the blood of battle have begun growing again, covering the

carnage with green. Life has been renewed but only superficially or materially; the emotional damage remains underneath the new growth. “What are the roots that clutch what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish” (19-20). The new growth is temporal. It is not firmly rooted by tradition. It is like moss, new and easily destroyed. The progress of the new century is new and modern but it, like the roots, is only temporal and not held in place by tradition. In the temporary space there is “no relief,” and among the “dry stone no sound of water” (23-24). Roots cannot grow into the dry soil, there is no water or nourishment to help them grow. Without life sustaining nourishment the roots will remain on the surface and the culture will remain shallow and easily uprooted. This image of dry land will return in the last section of the poem, but in that passage there is hope for genuine renewal and replenishment.

Despite the images of new growth, the cities are places of “brown fog” where:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet (63-65).

The people in town are plain, almost like robots; they cross the bridge unthinking, unfeeling, almost dead. This occurred after WWI as the modern industrialized nation continued to develop. The crowd described work without purpose, move without purpose, and go through life mindlessly. The passage creates an image of soldiers marching in lockstep, following the person in front of them walking, trampling the ground, and not thinking about anything other than moving forward. No reflection, no sense of purpose, just marching, progressing over the bridge with no thought as to where they are going and how they will get there. Those soldiers or city dwellers are indicative of the world they live in. It is an age of progress, new inventions, new machines, and new industry. Out

with the old in with the new became the motto, only no one considered the impact that this break with the past would have on culture and community. Eliot sought to break from this mindless sense of progress.

Madame Sosostris from part two of *The Waste Land*, is another example of the superficiality of modernity. “Madame Sosostris, Famous clairvoyant,/ Had a bad cold, nevertheless/ Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe” (43-45). This tarot card reader is a spiritual leader for the modern Londoner. She is what provides the people with spiritual sustenance and wisdom. No longer do people turn to prayer or the clergy; her “wicked cards” are what give the people the knowledge they need to get through the day. Prayer has gone out of favor; no one asks God for help now. People look to fortune tellers to know what they should fear, “Fear death by water./ I see crowds of people, walking around in a ring.” The people walking in a ring are lost, circling around and around, finding nothing that will lead them to a proper course. Eliot too is making a tour (circle) of religious doctrine. Each new philosophy brings him closer to his final conversion. The people seeing tarot card readers have yet to find their path to belief, despite their reliance on the Madame to bring them to it. Madame Sosostris’s inability to see one card also illustrates the inability of one person to deliver another wisdom and understanding. A person must work to gain insight. In the modern world the citizens want this knowledge for nothing. They want to pay someone else to think and learn for them.

The images of desire and materialism that open section two, “A Game of Chess,” illustrate another result of progress. A woman sits upon a “burnished throne” surrounded by marble, jewels, and glass. The surrounding objects illustrate her desire for material things in the world. She wishes to define and understand herself by surrounding herself with objects; they can do the work for her. Instead of focusing her energy on loving

others, she has focused it on surrounding herself with beautiful possessions. The woman is a symbol of the consumer ideal which instructs people to take solace in possessions in order to feel whole. Those who lack the spiritual and emotional strength that one can get from religion use material wealth to mask their emptiness.

The woman's life is devoid of any sense of community; she exists selfishly in her own world filled with things. Her life is wholly individual (a danger of secularism). Society's emphasis on the self creates divisions between the citizens. People no longer see what they share with those around them; they lack concern for others or for society itself, instead choosing to encircle themselves with things. This creates a sort of communal apathy. In societies rooted in shared religious faith there is always something higher than oneself; God takes precedent. Within a Church there is also a community that can help guide members; a community where people pray for each other and offer support when members are in trouble. This small church community serves as a microcosm for the larger society. In his later work, *Christianity and Culture*, Eliot uses the traditional small church parish as the illustration for an ideal social structure (23-24). In Buddhism there exists a similar community—the sangha community of lay practitioners who help run monastery operations and often assist the overall community. Both Christian parishes and Buddhist temples create strong communities in and around them. The sense of community creates bonds between members and encourages them to think of those not immediately related to them.

The self-focused nature of modernity is again displayed in "A Game of Chess." A couple is speaking at one another. It is clear from their words that they are concerned only with their own minds and problems. The woman complains but gives no reason as to what's

wrong:

My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
 Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
 What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
 I never know what you are thinking. Think. (111-114)

The speaker seems to be a woman talking to her husband. His response reveals that he is not listening and is involved with his own depression: "I think we are in rats' alley/ Where the dead men lost their bones" (115-116). She is not concerned with his problems as she keeps asking, "You know nothing? Do you see nothing?" (122). They are the modern couple, unconcerned with each other's lives and problems, stuck in their own minds, and unwilling to put someone else ahead of themselves, even for a few moments. The woman cannot even express why there is something wrong with her. "Think," she says, but does she bother to think herself? She keeps talking but does not bother to listen. She continues, "what shall we do tomorrow?/ What shall we ever do?" (133-134). She questions her purpose, what she is meant to do. She feels empty and tries to fill that emptiness with mindless words and actions, listing what she will do the next day, perhaps what she does everyday. Everything she does is timed and planned. There is no joy in her actions just an endless series of events or activities none of which fulfill her.

While revealing the faults the modern lifestyle Eliot he uses a pop culture reference, "O O O that Shakespearian Rag-/ It's so elegant/ So intelligent" (128-130). His use of this reference illustrates two things: first his own appreciation of the artistic aspects of culture and his confusion over the condition of society. Eliot is not conclusive in his descriptions of society in the poem; throughout he considers the conditions of the culture but refrains from making a full judgment about them. Perhaps pop culture was one of the few things in society that connected people as the church once did, albeit in a more superficial way.

Despite the apparent superficiality, music, drama, and art cut across all varieties of

people, creating a common ground. Eliot wrote a glowing essay on a famous comedian, Marie Lloyd, who performed working-class characters for an audience composed mostly, but not exclusively, of the working-class. Lloyd for Eliot brought a sense of purpose and dignity to the lives of those who otherwise may have had none (*Selected Prose* 173). This actress brought out something in the audience which allowed them to see their own lives and examine them. In spite of Eliot's often-snobby remarks, he, like working-class people from the East End, knew the words to the most popular music and genuinely appreciated the kind of artistic space that it occupied. Perhaps Eliot saw pop culture as one of the last vestiges of community.

Part three of *The Waste Land*, "The Fire Sermon," turns away from this positive aspect of culture and again brings up the barren godless nature of society. Garbage litters the river bank (despite his insistence that it does not) while "nymphs" ply their trade. The sex scene in this section is the clearest sign of the decay of community and compassion for other beings:

Flushed and decided, he assaults at once
 Exploring hands encounter no defence;
 His vanity requires no response,
 And makes a welcome of indifference (239-243)

The act does not involve consideration or compassion as it should. The couple is wholly detached from the world; the man only caring for his desire and the woman for seemingly nothing. Mindlessly they copulate, without love or feeling. The woman allows one "half formed thought to pass:/ "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over" (252-252). The pair seek only a momentary release from monotony: he in her body and she in the lack of thought required. The scene is full of loneliness; one can imagine the woman slowly pulling up a sheet as the man immediately dresses to leave. Neither person is satisfied by

the action. It is like a long lived ritual now devoid of the initial emotion and meaning that once made it so powerful. Life in modernity is filled with empty actions, thoughts, and gestures. Once sacred acts and rituals are now drained of meaning. Actions are automatic, not thoughtful.

Later in the section another speaker traveling down the river Thames exclaims, “I can connect nothing with nothing....My people humble people who expect/ Nothing” (301-302, 304). The word “nothing” resonates in the text; one can almost hear it whispered in an effort to make it appear less absolute. The voice seems that of a leader at a loss about what he should do with his land and people. He finds no meaning in the world, “nothing with nothing.” What can he do if there is nothing in the world for him to connect with, nothing to protect or maintain? His people expect nothing from him because nothing is all they know. They go through the world with no tradition, no past, and without any future.

Only momentum seems to keep them moving. “Burning, burning...” the world burns with mindless momentum. The speaker pleads “O Lord Thou pluckest me out/ Oh Lord Thou pluckest” (309-310). He pleads for someone to free him from this hell of nothingness. The whole world is burning and not with the purifying fires of purgatory but with the wickedness of some sort of hell. The world must be saved from this hell—something must be done. Salvation must be found.

The *Fire Sermon* is an influential Buddhist text which Gautama Buddha spoke to his disciples shortly after his awakening or enlightenment. The piece, like *The Waste Land*, illustrates the flaws, problems, and suffering present in the world. The world is suffering from a lack of compassion and an obsession with the material goods. Buddha was able to see these difficulties in the world only after many years of asceticism and meditation. The second half of the *Fire Sermon* reveals that achieving this awakening

frees a person from the world and its suffering (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 54-55). This theme of misery, awareness, and redemption plays itself out in *The Waste Land* as well.

“Death by Water,” the shortest section of the poem begins to reveal a change of consciousness and spiritual renewal. In it, a man “...passed the stages of his youth/ Entering the whirlpool./ Gentile or Jew” (317-320). The character sees the passage of time, sees that his youth is fading, and finally leaps into the pools. He jumps into the whirlpool not to die but for salvation. The water of the pool will cleanse and renew his spirits. The image is also reminiscent of the story of Jesus, who upon reaching a certain age came out into the world (whirlpool) and proclaimed himself the son of God. Perhaps this use of Biblical imagery reveals Eliot is becoming more intrigued with Christianity. In the last section of the poem, “What the Thunder Said,” water is again used as a symbol of birth or rebirth. Initially, water is the element longed for and missing: “Here is no water but only rock/ Rock and no water and the sandy road” (331-332). Without water, the world is merely rock, not a living and breathing place. Although the world is barren,

it is not peaceful; there is a rumbling desire for more, for life:

There is not even silence in the mountains
 But dry sterile thunder without rain
 There is not even solitude in the mountains
 But red sullen faces sneer and snarl (341-344)

Somehow those left know that they are missing something, something which they once had. If they could only get back what they had lost, get back the water (faith) that had once sustained them. With the return of water the lands would no longer be barren and people would no longer be snarling; with the return there would be life on the land, smiles on their faces, and pleasant sounds would fill the air.

Faintly those poor souls left can hear “lamentation,” they can hear “the grass singing...about the chapel... the empty chapel, only the wind’s home,” (388-390). The chapel is empty because the community, faith, and devotion that had once held it up were no longer there to keep out the wind. A chapel is a Christian place of worship, yet the description of its location and mention of the Ganga (Ganges) River in the next line imply that the poem has shifted East. It has progressed from the West to India where the “Ganga was sunken” (396). The Ganges is sacred to Hindus and is seen as a mother; its waters give life to the plants and people who surround it, they also purify those who bath on its shores. The water brings renewal, brings life as does true belief and acceptance of faith. The Sanskrit words “Datta./ Dayadhvam./ Damyata” uttered by the thunder, mean “give,” “accept,” “control” (433). The words are often used in Hindu texts, but the ideas can also apply to Buddhism.² Give to your fellow man, accept that there are things in the world which you cannot control and that you may not achieve all that you set out to, control your actions, and cultivate compassion and wisdom instead of material things. The last word of the poem is also a Sanskrit word. “Shantih shantih shantih,” means peace—peace and an end to the suffering and to the mindlessness of the world: peace and renewal (434).

The Waste Land follows Eliot’s path of religious discovery. It begins in Europe, specifically the WWI battlefields and then moves on to the “brown fog” of London. In “The Fire Sermon” both the subject matter and speaker move first down the Thames where, “The river sweats/Oil and tar/ The barges drift,” then on to Queen Dido’s Carthage, and Lebanon where the Phoenicians lived (266-268). Finally, when the poem’s

² The Hindu references are also interesting and important to note throughout *The Waste Land* and especially in this passage, named after a Hindu scripture. These ideas, however, cannot be addressed with the kind of time and attention that a good rendering would require.

splintered speaker gets to “What the Thunder Said,” he is in India on the shores of the Ganges. The path of the poem follows Eliot’s spiritual quest; once he opens his eyes to the bleak, compassionless lifestyle of London, he must travel East (if only in his mind) to gain the insight and understanding he needs to return West.

Throughout *The Waste Land* Eliot seeks to illustrate the decay of Western culture. He describes the emptiness that has taken over. His descriptions are informed by Buddhist ideas of detachment and mindfulness. The characters in the poem, like the young woman having mindless sex, convey the suffering that Buddhists accept as an inevitable part of the world—a part of the world which individual mindfulness and meditation can ameliorate. The poem focuses on the negative aspects of the world because it was written at the point in Eliot’s life when he struggled the most with finding who he was and what he believed in. He did not yet have the confidence that would eventually come through in his post-conversion poems. Eliot’s use of juxtaposition in the poem illustrates his confusion and his attempts to understand all of the ideas in his head. Juxtaposition helped fulfill the goal of the objective correlative,³ for by providing the extremes of something it is easier to see the grey area between them.

One of the most obvious areas in *The Waste Land* where juxtaposition is used is in the beginning of “The Fire Sermon.” “The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers/Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends/Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed” (177-179). The Thames is described clean and pure, no garbage lines its shore but by using the lack of garbage as a description the image made

³ The goal of this is to force the reader to feel what the speaker is feeling without directly stating it. By giving the feeling or idea a name it becomes an abstraction, and abstractions are not real enough to evoke true emotions.

the shore seem dirty and filled with excess. The absence of the garbage on the shores does not take away the impact that such overindulgence has on society.

Beyond meeting the requirements of the objective correlative, juxtaposition allows Eliot to both support and question total faith (McNelly Kearns 87). This technique serves to destabilize any religious form. This destabilization is essential for Eliot, who sees blind uncritical faith on par with no faith. The poem “The Hollow Men” was written just prior to Eliot’s official conversion to the Anglican faith and illustrates this questioning. The poem is about the spaces between two concepts. What falls in the space between is “the Shadow.” The shadow is a questionable figure in the poem and could be many things. Certainly, a shadow is a kind of grey area, not light, not dark, but in between. It could represent where society exists for Eliot, it could be faith, or the lack thereof. The shadow is where Eliot is able to question his faith. The shadow allows for several interpretations, none of them fully supported by the text. Eliot wants questions. He wants the reader not to fully understand, just as he wants the people of society to question their beliefs.

The poem begins with the lines “...hollow men/...the stuffed men/leaning together/Headpiece filled with straw” (1-4). The image is of men, hollow unknowing, unquestioning; they accept what they are told, with empty minds:

Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass (5-8)

The men do as they are told. Whispering their prayers, they stand and sit as they should at the service but they think of nothing, believe nothing. They do not question what they do; prayer is an empty act. Accepting faith blindly, without question is just as bad as

abandoning it. Questioning faith, at the very least, shows that a person is thinking about it. Following the rituals but not believing in them is not a way to live. Secularism and the modern way of life have caused people to put no effort into their religious belief. The lack of religion in daily life does not necessarily create a hoard of atheists. It creates a group filled with no need or desire to look into their beliefs. They go to church on Sunday as the “hollow men,” go through the prescribed motions and depart. During the rest of the week they put no energy into spirituality. Society has become “...the dead land...” where “...stone images/Are raised, here they receive/The supplications of a dead man’s hand” (39, 41-43). Again, the people pray as they are told but put no effort in to it. They “supplicate” to images not to God; their beliefs are empty. Eliot again uses the shadow to

illustrate the questioning of belief:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the shadow (72-76)

Between the idea of believing and what a person actually believes, between the motion of prayer, and the act of believing what you are saying lies the question (shadow). The question, not the act, is what is important because the question reveals consideration. The fact that Eliot wants people to question their beliefs might appear curious because throughout his writing he works to show people that society needs faith and religion in order to reconstruct the community created through shared faith. But, as we have seen, Eliot himself experimented with several religions before coming finally to Anglicanism, and even after his conversion he would continue to use Eastern philosophy to inform his Christianity.

Although Eliot eventually converted to Christianity and used Christian references extensively, the use of these references was not intended to convert anyone. His goal was to encourage society in the West to once again examine their religious beliefs, to question, and think critically. His problem with society was less about a lack of faith and more about the lack of a critical faith. Certainly, most people in the West at the time attended church, if only to keep up appearances. They were not, however, devoting much time to considering what they were being told or what they believed in, time Eliot saw as vital. This lack of deliberation was encouraged by the secularization of society; by removing religion from many major institutions it became less of a concern and guidepost for people. For Eliot, adhering to the rituals of faith was not the same as faith itself. Society needed a return to religious exploration and discussion.

Circling Westward: Eliot Post-Conversion

Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism was a result of many years of religious pursuit and study. As mentioned previously, his quest began during his years at Harvard and continued throughout his life in England. The actual date of his conversion however, was preceded by several years of health concerns for his first wife Vivienne. Their marriage was dominated by her health issues both physical and mental. Beginning in the early 1920s her problems became increasingly life threatening and her depression, which had been present throughout their marriage, deepened. She began requiring Eliot to spend all of his time with her, and when he did leave she would punish him with her foul demeanor when he returned (Gordon 198-201). The demands of his wife as well as his unhappiness strained Eliot's health, and he himself left England for a time in order to rest and collect himself.

It seems that it was at this point he found need for a religious practice instead of just religious study. “Eliot craved a stronger, more dogmatic theological structure than was to be found in his own ethical background” (Gordon 213). His Unitarian upbringing lacked tradition and severity. Buddhism had fulfilled this need for tradition and devotion, but it failed to truly fulfill Eliot’s need for a spirituality that could find root in the life he had built in England. His interest in Buddhism sustained him for a time and provided him with hope that perhaps there is still a strong tradition of faith and community. The foreignness of such an ancient practice was both an asset and a limitation in Eliot’s mind. Eliot required a practice entrenched in the culture which he was a part of. Tradition was an important aspect to art and culture for Eliot. Traditions must always be carried over into new projects. To remove all elements of the past from the present is destructive

(Selected Prose 38-39).

Buddhism also represented a more open and free lifestyle. Eliot required more structure, discipline, and ritual in order to sustain him. Thus religion came to be about stability and community rather than solely emotion or spirituality. Certainly, the difficulties and unrest in his material circumstance would have made a strict religious practice, where routine and tradition are central elements, compelling. Yet this conversion was not the rash result of turmoil, but rather of a lifetime searching for a religion that could keep his mind and soul nourished and intrigued.

The poem that truly reflects Eliot’s protracted conversion is “Ash-Wednesday,” but the poem more illustrative of the change in style and shift in focus resulting from this conversion is the epic *Four Quartets*. The poem is made up of four sections which can in some ways be read as individual poems that can stand alone. For the purposes of this study, the first section “Burnt Norton,” will be addressed. This section of the poem

reveals that Buddhist ideas still informed Eliot's point of view, but Western Christianity had become his saving grace and driving inspiration.

In this poem Eliot speculates that, "Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future,/ And time future contained in time past" (1-3). This means that time past, present, and future are present in each other; the past shapes both the present and the future because we approach it with ideas and histories from the past. The ideas or traditions that we each carry continually influence the way we see and interact with the world. Religion is like this for Eliot as well: he will always approach new religious theology with previous knowledge or concepts and these will shape his present understanding. The individual is what determines the meaning of each idea at that time. It is the present that is the key in this text as it is the key in Buddhism. Focusing one's mind on the present moment and allowing your mind to experience each moment is the key to gaining enlightenment.

A pursuit is underway in the poem; the speaker is seeking knowledge and understanding. "Foot falls echo in the memory/ Down the passage which we did not take" (11-12). The image provoked is of a person moving quickly down a dark passage. Eventually the person finds a fork and must choose one path. Eliot pursued Buddhism and other religious practices, but at a certain point he found it necessary to follow the path of Anglicanism. The past however remains important to his understanding. "Shall we follow?/ ...Find them, find them," (20-21). The narrator is encouraged to keep searching, keep moving forward working for that bit of truth. As the search speeds up, so do the words. The character is almost in a panic, running and searching. The idea of constant pursuit is reflected in both Buddhist and Christian texts. In Buddhism a person must work to cultivate wisdom and compassion. In Christianity a person must constantly

resist temptation and keep to the path to salvation. The quests are not wholly dissimilar; each religion encourages the pursuit of perfection, only the methodology used is different.

Finally, the speaker finds something:

So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
 Along the empty alley, into the brown circle,
 To look down into the drained pool.
 Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
 And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
 And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly
 The surface glittered out of heart of light, (33-39)

Insight is found. For a moment they see the glittering bit of understanding of faith. Water, as with the Ganges in *The Waste Land*, is the renewer. What is different in this poem is that the water which is more associated with rebirth in the East is brought forth by sunlight. Light is a more Christian image of renewal and growth. In the East and especially in Buddhist and Hindu culture, the lotus is a symbol of purity and profound understanding. This bit of wisdom comes from the water (East) but is illuminated by light (West). Eastern and Western traditions come together to build this moment of clarity. Years of searching have revealed this bit of insight to the speaker but only for an instant for “humankind/ Cannot bear very much reality” (44-45). The truth can only be revealed one piece at a time because humans cannot admit more than that.

Later in the text the speaker provides a clearer and more detailed explanation of this conversion. The speaker is released from “practical desire,” suffering, and actions (73-75). This kind of release clearly reflects the Buddhist concept of enlightenment as illustrated earlier in “The Fire Sermon.” A person who achieves enlightenment can see past the distractions of the world—the many things that disguise the true nature of it. Yet, just after this Eliot writes, “...a white light still and moving...both new world/ And the

old made explicit, understood/ In the completion of partial ecstasy” (75, 77-79). This release is not only Buddhist. The white light combines the old world and the new in order to create this moment of clarity. Only by using the old (East) and allowing it to inform the new (West) can the speaker understand. Ecstasy is also a clue to another path that was used to find this place. Poets, including one of Eliot’s key sources of inspiration Dante, commonly called upon the image of religious ecstasy, when a person has a physical connection with God. This image evokes a more physical connection with a being, not detached understanding that one can achieve in his/her own mind as with Buddhist enlightenment. Later in the same passage the past and future are said to, “to protect mankind from heaven and damnation/ Which flesh cannot endure,” (83-84). The flesh or physical body would not need protection if Eliot meant to reflect Buddhist doctrine. Instead, he is drawing on the Christian, especially Catholic (or Anglican), focus on the earthly—on the body which is invoked at every mass through ritual communion. Once this conversion takes place the speaker is better able to describe it. Eliot returns to the images of social waste and devastation used in *The Waste Land*, only now the words chosen are less descriptive and more accusatory:

...time ridden faces
 Distracted from distraction by distraction
 Filled with fancies and empty of meaning
 Tumid apathy with no concentration (103-107)

Faces filled with apathy with lack of concern for anything or one. The faces go through the motions without any attempt at understanding or search for something better. They have become so disenchanted with life and with their place in the world that they can no longer look for something deeper. Eliot, however, had spent his life searching for something deeper, for a mystery whose nature would defy empirical and analytical

knowledge. For him life was about seeking that which was unknowable. Eliot needed to be consistently in awe of something or someone, religion filled this void. Once the people, or rather the society they are a part of, were also focused on understanding God and pursuing a life which incorporated this sense of awe. Humans now are beyond being awed by the power of God. Science and industry have replaced this sense of wonder with cynicism and logic.

Later in his life, Eliot would better define his concept of a Christian society, one which uses Christian morality and the institution of the Church as basis for societal structures. Eliot states, "...religion must be primarily a matter of behavior and habit, must be integrated with social life, with its business and its pleasures;" this suggests that all aspects of society, including the social and political, benefit from the inclusion of Christian doctrine. Eliot focuses on the time-honored English parish, which he idealizes as the "traditional unit of Christian Community" (23). Eliot claims that he does not wish turn back time and to reorder the world into parishes, but as the writing continues this is called into question.

For Eliot, religion was at once private and utterly communal. Religion is the link that bonds the people of a culture together. Despite differences in belief, cultures are often built around religious doctrine, even if they claim to separate the church and state. Even if a person chooses not to accept the religious doctrine laws and structures are based on their acculturation is shaped by it, and as much as a person tries to give up these teachings, portions of them will always remain. The teachings that remain are what hold societies together. The "golden rules," so to speak, are what create order in society. The connection created by these beliefs was to Eliot what made cultures last. The church served for two millennia as the center of the community; town gossip or news was spread

in the discussions after church. Couples met together at church events and socials where they were free to interact. Just the physical act of sitting in a room with fellow townsfolk is enough to create a connection between people. This kind of relationship between community members was essential to Eliot.

In the early pages of the rather short work *Christianity and Culture*, Eliot explicitly states that it was not intended to be a manifesto. Eliot declares that he is merely “discussing” the ideas of Christian society and is not attempting to proclaim that it is the *only* way for a society to operate (6). It should be noted, however, that the alternatives that Eliot offers to a Christian society, including one based on “Pagan rituals,” are described negatively.

In addition, one line in the text seriously questions his claim to only be “discussing” ideas: “my primary interest is a change in our societal attitude, such a change only as could bring about anything worthy of being called a Christian society” (8). This statement seems to reveal that Eliot does, in fact, want to encourage the creation of such a societal structure. Eliot also declares that he will neither discuss nor refer to current Christian societies, however, his description of an ideal society is modeled after an English parish. Eliot claims that he is focused solely on “the end to which a Christian Society... must be directed” (6). In other words, Eliot is interested in how the culture will change if this system is adopted. Surprisingly, Eliot acknowledges the problems that such society could bring and the imperfection of religion itself but still maintains that it is a better option than alternatives.

For Eliot the construction of a Christian society generated a shared culture expressed by individual actions and through major institutions like schools and government. Education was to be the backbone of this culture because it is where citizens would be taught the values essential to the maintenance of the community. This system of

shared beliefs created a neighborly bond between community members. Constituents of this community did not have to be Christians necessarily but did have to follow the “golden rules” as defined by Christian teachings. Despite the acceptance of non-Christian religions, religious beliefs that varied from Christian doctrine were not equally valued. The superiority of Christianity was to be reinforced through the education system whose “aims will be directed by a Christian philosophy of life” (30). In this society Christian morality reigns supreme and members of the community are tightly bound by these shared beliefs. The superiority of Christianity in Eliot’s Christian society reveals that he has fully adopted the ideas of the Anglican Church and that religions that he pursued earlier in his life are no longer as important to him as they once were. *Christianity and Culture* reads like a program Eliot wants put in place in order to reestablish cultural bonds and not a like a “discussion” of ideas.

This focus on community has been illustrated several times in Eliot’s work, including lines 63-65 of *The Waste Land* when men march across a brown drab bridge through London, all the same, all uniform. In the poem he illustrates that a lack of critical reflection and religion in general is the cause of disinterest and negative detachment. Earlier in his work Eliot encouraged people to critically consider their beliefs and lifestyle. Eliot’s Christian society is all about the communal and bringing together members of all classes and areas society under one set of morals. This society is based on continuity of ideas, yet earlier he encouraged the questioning of this kind of blind acceptance (47). The questioning that Eliot once called for is, in a Christian society, the job of priests and other clergy members. The task of the religious figures is to ensure that the culture is headed in an appropriate direction, which is of course, informed by Christian doctrine and morality. Eliot does not seem to trust the public members of his

Christian society and instead would rather leave the intellectual work to a group of high brow priests.

In *Christianity and Culture*, Eliot also addresses his ideas regarding secularism. Despite

Eliot's negative view of the secular society that he belonged to, as illustrated in *The Waste Land* and "The Hollow Men," he did not believe that the system was all together useless. Eliot saw secularism in another form, as a path to rebuilding a more Christian society (20). To a modern reader these ideas might seem antithetical but not to Eliot.

State institutions and the people themselves would be encouraged to think in terms of Christian morality and values, but the government would not become a theocracy.

Christian morals would define the opinions and ideas of both the general public and the politicians that represent them, but priests and church figures would not hold power in the government. Members of the government would be encouraged to allow their religious

devotion to help them make laws, just as the people were expected to include their Christian beliefs into social circumstances. Eliot seems to have wanted to have his society both secular and religious. He saw that difficulties often arise when the Church holds the power of government and therefore wanted to keep church leaders out of direct government positions, but Eliot did want religious conviction to play a major role in decision-making. Eliot wanted a return to an older slower way of life but still wanted to reflect lessons that government has learned over the years.

Eliot's idealization of days-gone-by in the context of a Christian society became a common theme in literature throughout the twentieth century. Critic Jane Bennett writes on the theme of disenchantment in modern writing, and although her writing does not directly cite Eliot as an example, her discussion clearly applies to him. As discussed, Eliot's life was spent in search of a religious practice and perhaps more importantly a

religious community which fulfilled him. Bennett would call this feeling of fulfillment, wonder or enchantment. She argues that the views of the world as disenchanting, views which are expressed in *The Waste Land* and in some areas of *Four Quartets*, deny the inherent wonder that fills the world (3). For Eliot, Anglicanism fulfilled this need for wonder; it made the world seem like a place not wholly operated by man but instead created and ordered by something much larger. Eliot needed to feel that there was something more powerful than himself, more powerful than humans. Buddhist ideas and ideology, though exotic in nature, could only temporarily satisfy Eliot's need for both order and wonder. Tenets like attachment and detachment were adopted by Eliot and incorporated into his later writings and perhaps into his Anglican practice. Buddhism however, lacks a god figure and with that a certain amount of control and order which a Christianity society offered. Buddhist practice was too individual for Eliot and did not create the kind of strong communal bonds that a Christian church brought with it.

In Christianity, especially in a Catholic based doctrine, humans are expected to make mistakes because they are inherently sinful. Christians have the opportunity to choose a good life or one filled with wickedness as do Buddhists. However in Christianity there are ways to atone for this. Confession offers a way to atone for sins before death. In Buddhism the fruit of actions only ripens when one dies, a person can try and make right the wrongs he or she committed during his or her life but will suffer in some way no matter how much he or she tries and atones. Confession became an important part of Eliot's profession of faith. The ritual of confession and the elaborate rituals commonplace in Anglican churches satisfied Eliot's concurrent needs for enchantment, order, and atonement. These rituals and the ritualistic nature of Christianity

informed both his profession of faith as well as how he felt the members of a Christian society should express their own faith.

Christianity and Culture brings together the years of Eliot's searching and confusion over faith into one clear doctrine. The lifestyle that Eliot writes about illustrates the path which suits his idea of faith. The community described in the text creates a place where Eliot can fulfill his own needs and will allow others to come to similar realizations and find their place in such a society. The text is a culmination of Eliot's lifelong pursuit of a path or doctrine that provided him with both the structure and wonder which he sought. Although Eliot explicitly states that the document is not a manifesto or an appeal to society to adopt this kind of lifestyle the text reads otherwise. The piece illustrates the culmination of his struggle to understand unknowable and his ultimate return from Eastern philosophy seen throughout *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* back to Western Christianity, which he would practice until the end of his life.

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