



A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS VISION IN THE PLAYS OF T.S. ELIOT

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot was a very religious man, and as such, he was truly tolerant of all religions which imply spirituality and respect for life. Being a very religious man, his vision of the world was unified, and he was fully aware that men, irrespective of the place and time when they lived, had common aspirations and longings. His profound studies of Eastern and Western thought had made him aware of their complementariness, and of the need for the interpenetration and for a kind of synthesis of the two. Although Heaven and Nirvana are slightly different notions, the notion of reaching perfection through suffering and the shedding off of all earthly impediments – such as desires, ambitions and the demands of the senses – is common to both Christian and Hindu thought”.

Eliot’s attempt for a kind of synthesis of Eastern and Western spiritual philosophy and religious thought is a very important hallmark of his personality which should receive great attention in our present world of religious intolerance and racial wars. The Waste Land and Four Quartets give us great evidence to Eliot’s deepest’ desire for a true synthesis. The Dry salvages of the Quartets encapsulates the wisdom ‘of the Bhagvad Geeta.

An Exploration of the Religious vision as expressed in the plays of T.S. Eliot with special reference to our times has been a very rewarding and enriching experience. It enlarges one’s vision of life and society. Indeed, no exploration is complete; our task is to continue our explorations with fresh vigour and purpose:

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

Keywords: Eliot, poetic drama, religiosity, secularism, Imagism, a depth of feeling, constructivism

Thomas Stearns Eliot, the great poet and poetic playwright is a ceaseless source of inspiration and wisdom to all those who are interested in the variety, mystery and profundity of human existence. His inner grasp of the kaleidoscopic patterns of life continues to illuminate modern man’s crisis-ridden

inner self. He is one of the few writers who could imbibe the modern sensibility in the right and true perspective. His deep perceptions on religion, society and culture have got great significance in our present time which is fraught with multi-faceted crisis. Eliot made his writings a vehicle to impart

spiritual spark among spiritually starved modern men and to propagate certain religious themes. But his concept of religion was not a limited one. John Crowe Ransom says, "Eliot was a religious poet, though he never propounded the dogmas of his faith, which evidently was never eclectic; it could be Hebraic, or Christian, or Greek, or even oriental. " Eliot finds an abiding relationship between religion and literature. Religion forms an integral part of the world view. But Eliot's role as a religious thinker has not received adequate attention, which should be a matter of great concern. What is more disturbing is the fact that many a times Eliot's ideas are disparagingly looked at. Eliot's religious, social and cultural ideas are not against the modern spirit. Eliot still speaks to us as a contemporary and his profound reflections on religion, society and culture are very much relevant to us.

Eliot's greatest focus was on society which has an organic unity and which is capable of fighting the modern forces of atomization and imparting spiritual dimension to the life of the individuals. His social theory and cultural criticism was truly directed towards this aim. The chorus in *The Rock* echoes his profoundest notion of an ideal life in an ideal society: "What life have you if you have not life together? There is no life that is not in community, and no community not lived in praise of God." So, it was Eliot's great concern that an individual must have deep roots in as society, which was nourished by inward spiritual forces. Religion, for him, was a very vital element in the life of a man and also in the life of a society. His definition of culture also reveals this firm belief regarding religion. He firmly believed that religion transcends all our narrow conceptions about life and in this world and it is futile to replace it with humanism or any other system conceived by man with his limited experience and knowledge. The element of supernatural is inalienable from religion. Of course Eliot was deeply influenced by T.E. Hulme whose views on religion he always found fully valid. As correctly observed by Michal Gillum, Hulme had argued that religious and ethical values "Should not be regarded as relative phenomena arising from nature or evolving with man and culture, but as absolutes impinging upon man and nature from a transcendent supernatural order. Naturally Eliot

reacted very strongly against humanism of 19th century and the following extract makes his standing very clear:

Humanism has much to say of Discipline and order and control; and I have parroted these terms myself. I found no discipline in humanism; only a little intellectual discipline from a little study of philosophy. But the difficult discipline is the discipline and training of emotion; this modern world has great need of; so great need that it hardly understands what the world means; and this I have found is only attainable through dogmatic religion. I do not say that dogmatic religion is justified because it supplies this need – that is just the psychologism and the anthropocentrism that I wish to avoid but merely state my belief that in no other way can the need be supplied. The need of the modern world is the discipline and training of the emotions; which neither the intellectual training of philosophy or science, nor the wisdom of humanism, nor the negative instruction of psychology can give.

So there is no compromise on the dogmatic nature of religion and Eliot firmly believes that no amount of intellectual training can replace the role of religion in the discipline and training of the emotions. All our strivings and activities would be of no great significance unless and until they are permeated by the grace of God, a grace which is inextricably linked with humanity. He writes: "For only in humility, charity and purity – and most of all perhaps humility – can we be prepared to receive the grace of God without which human operations are vain."

But the spiritual energies that are inevitable to regenerate and vitalize the present sick society are always underplayed by the society, which is preoccupied by its hedonistic, materialistic, and self-aggrandizing aims. "Surely," writes Eliot, "There is something wrong in our attitude towards money. The acquisitive, rather than the creative and spiritual instincts, are encouraged". Really a society that revolves round materialism has got nothing ennobling and inherently worthy. The activities of such a society are too trivial, ephemeral and

uninspiring. Eliot who was deeply disturbed by the superficiality of his society asked very poignantly;

Was our society, which had always been so assured of its superiority and rectitude, so confident of its unexamined premises, assembled round anything more permanent than a congeries of banks, insurance companies and industries, and had it any belief more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends?

The above thought provoking question is too scathing that it can shatter the complacency of even the most diehard materialistic who is plunged into a world of sheer profit and loss.

Eliot felt that religion was a vital unifying force of society and is the most vital element of culture, but it is not in a narrow sense, but in a very broad sense he associates religion with culture he admits that: "The way of looking at culture and religion which I have been trying to adumbrate is so difficult that I am not sure I grasp it myself except in flashes, or that I comprehend all its implications". He firmly believes that "there is an aspect in which we can see a religion as the whole way of life of a people, from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture" Eliot felt that there was a great deal of dissociation and fragmentation in the individual life and in the society. The modern civilization fostered a split in intellect and emotion about which Eliot was profoundly and keenly aware of. He felt that separation of intellect and emotion can only foster fragmented individuals and a fragmented society. Origin of this compartmentalization of life lies in the separation of religion, philosophy and art. Eliot writes, "The artistic sensibility is impoverished by its divorce from the religious sensibility, the religious by its separation from the artistic".

Eliot accepts the relevance of religion in all the spheres of artistic activity, the drama being no exception. In his view both the elements – the religious and the artistic – are vitally important. Religion is essential since it alone can impart the wholeness of outlook that is a cardinal characteristic of a genuine work. Art, on the other hand, can save

the drama from subjecting itself to being a mere copy of common place reality. As a matter of fact, Eliot's whole approach to the drama is conditioned by the belief that man's present predicament is the direct outcome of a gradual process of spiritual deterioration. In order to redeem his lost poise he must unravel the mystery behind the human soul and make efforts for his spiritual salvation. Such efforts, however, demand from man an unflinching sense of discipline which religion alone has the power to cultivate. In this sense Eliot's plays are the legitimate products of his abiding faith in religion as a means of redeeming man's spiritual glory. These plays, though religious in essence, never teach religion in the form of a dogma. At their best they may be regarded as genuine excursions in to spiritual awareness in so far as their themes uphold the basic truth which sustains Eliot's world-view, viz. the primacy of the supernatural order over the natural world.

Inclusive of *Sweeney Agonists*, and the *Rock* Eliot has seven important plays to his credit. In both form and matter the religious element is quite prominent in *Murder in the Cathedral*. It is based on the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, and the plays uses liturgical forms and a chorus to present Eliot's basic theme of inner development from despair to an awareness of the nature of Original Sin and thence to a capacity for self-redemption. Though the other plays do not deal directly and obviously with religious themes as in *Murder in the Cathedral*, it is evident that in treatment and spirit they are essentially religious. Eliot tries to adapt popular modern forms of drama to his poetic and religious purposes. In *The Family Reunion* he places his Oresteian hero in a modern country house against the backdrop of the ritualism of his chorus. *The Cocktail Party* owes much to Euripides *Alcestis* in its concern with spiritual guardianship, altruism and self-sacrifice. In *The Confidential Clerk* the spotlight turns on the spiritual development of the hero. *The Elder Statesman* highlights the probing of guilty secrets and its hero achieves serenity by confessing his sins to his daughter.

Eliot stresses the abiding link, the harmonious correlation between Christianity and

human salvation. According to him, Christianity helps the individual develop his full humanity in relation to God and thereby avert the danger of running in to placid humanitarianism. This correlation runs through the whole body of Eliot's poems and prose writings. But a detailed study of his plays has not been made so far from this angle of vision. The present study is intended to throw light on Eliot's plays with a view to bringing to limelight this distinctive feature.

It is his outlook on life, which has concern with the selection of the theme of his plays; so it is worthwhile to say here something about his philosophy of life. "The most important single idea which Eliot has expounded is probably the notion that modern life is without meaning- is pointless, futile and sterile- unless one has religious faith without the knowledge of good and evil, which depends on religious faith, mankind does not truly exist. He has learnt from his own experience that "the distinguishing feature of human life consists in the occasions' on which the individual most fully reveals his character, and that those are moments of intense 'moral and spiritual struggle'. It is in such moments, rather than in the 'bewildering minutes' of passion 'in which we are all very much alike, that men and women come nearest to being real. Further, the idea of death in Eliot is based on the concept of spiritual regeneration and is very much like that of Christopher Fry, who considers death, a beginning or the renewal of life. Both seem to have been influenced by Lord Krishna's teachings about the nature of the transition called death. The religious views of Eliot have been shaped by his study of the doctrines of medieval Christian divines, of Heraclitus, of Krishna, of Upanishadic sages. In this connection he has remarked, "I Like a definite and dogmatic philosophy, preferably a Christian and Catholic one, but alternatively that of Epicurus or of the forest Philosophers of India." Thus, it is not surprising if the wide study of various religions has brought Eliot to blend drama, poetry, and religion, and despise the views of "those who only aim, to show us a vision, a dream if you like, which is beyond good, and evil in the common sense." He also finds that "when a poet like Shakespeare, who has no 'philosophy' and apparently no design upon the

amelioration of our behavior, sets forth his experience and reading of life, he is forthwith saddled with a 'philosophy' of his own and some esoteric hints towards conduct." Eliot's blending of religion with drama does not mean that he aims to weave religious themes in his plays all the time and tries to impose his religious views on the audience. He simply wishes to base his plays on religious, moral and ethical foundations, so that we may be conscious of the idea of good and evil, virtue and vice, all the time.

Eliot's blending of moral considerations with drama is certainly praiseworthy, since in the absence of the same one may not expect to see poetic justice on the stage which is very essential to satisfy the moral sense of the audience. Eliot's conception of good and evil seems to be of a universal nature and not confined to any particular religion. For him good and evil go hand in hand in life, and "in a world without evil, life would not be worth living." In this plays he seems to present a design of human actions and human attitudes associated with divine mystery, so that one may have to human drama related with the divine drama. He says, "Morality, we need to told again and again, is not itself to be judged by moral standards: Its laws are as 'natural' as any discovered by Einstein or Planck". The most important thing which also needs to be mentioned here is that Eliot's outlook on life and his blending of religion with poetic drama fulfill one of the aims of the revival of poetic drama, namely that of bringing about spiritual awakening in the present century.

Another point of his technique to which one may refer is that so far people were prepared to put up with verse from the lips of personages dressed in the fashion of some distant age, but Eliot in his various plays has made people hear verse "from people dressed like ourselves, living in houses and apartments like ours, and using telephones and motor-cars and radio-sets. He has brought "poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre." by doing so Eliot further hopes that "our own sordid, dreary daily world would be suddenly illuminated and transfigured." This theory of his may further be found reflected in his plays.

Thus, a sensitive and scintillating study of meaninglessness and hollowness of modern society by T.S. Eliot in his plays highlights the importance of 'absolute' and its role in restoring the vigor and vitality of the present society. In all his plays Eliot presents various spiritual problems of modern denizens and relates them to meaningful historical past. The problems of man have been same through out the history, but his conception of sin, guilt and morality has undergone a sea change. In his dramatic experiments as *Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Rock* he presents a devitalized, rootless man unable to formulate basic questions regarding his spiritual existence and roots. The rock portrays 'Church' as a foundation stone on which meaningful society can be built. The concept of religion as portrayed by TS Eliot does not find its basis in dogmatic religion but on a system that is supported by Cardinal values of truth and remains untarnished even today. His religion makes a man responsible and dutiful to the moral conscience within. The *Family Reunion* highlights the problem of 'sin' and its consequences on psychological makeup of a young man. The christian theory of sin that needs expiation can not be underplayed by modern generation. It's affirmation and recognition can only lead us to a new spiritual awakening. The *Cocktail Party* portrays two alternatives to human life. One is adjustment to the normal lives we lead and other is taking a way of life in which human beings lead a life for others. They shed their blood so that others may live. They live a life for society and attain a status of saints and martyrs. The *Murder in the Cathedral* portrays an illumination which is both in and out of time. It refers to a state of being which has become devoid of sensations of pain and pleasure i.e. becoming 'sthithprajna'. For modern materialistic man steeped in blindness it may appear to be a suicide. The *Confidential Clerk* presents dilemma of a modern man in search of his self identity. It delineates the need for adopting his true vocation and its difference from one's career. The search for 'father' is man's perennial search for divine father. Though other people have their dues but the supreme duty of a man is towards his inner self. The *Elder Statesman* portrays a life that is led with a

mask. The play of masks and names leads to disclosure of real identity.

T.S. Eliot's plays aim at the inner refinement of the individuals which would ultimately make this world a better place to live in. The chorus in *The Rock* explicitly states the root-cause of the sickness of the age: "If humility and purity be not in the heart, they are not in the home: and if they are not in the home, they are not in the city". Each of his plays is an attempt as its own level to restore religious element and purity into the individual lives which would, then, flow into the entire society. The most unforgettable line of *Murder in the Cathedral* "action is suffering and suffering is action" has great relevance to the present society in which most of the individuals live a life which is self centered, mean and narrow. In this play, Becket throws light on his past life

I searched all the ways
That leads to pleasure, advancement and
praise.
Delight in sense, in learning and in thought
Music and philosophy, curiosity.

Eliot, in the above lines, has captured the dominant temper of modern times. He was not against one's genuine aspirations for pleasure and advancement. But he was definitely against making pleasure-seeking an end in itself. He endeavored to show his fellow men the path of purity and holiness a path that leads to real happiness. To a society obsessed with acquisitive, prestige seeking and self-glorifying tendencies, Harry in *The Family Reunion* gives an excellent message:

I feel quite happy, as if happiness
Did not consist in getting what one wanted
Or in getting rid of what can't be got rid of
But in a different vision.

As the chorus in *The Rock* proclaim, a life rooted in one's community and in God is the most enduring and satisfying;

What life have you if you have not life
together?
There is no life that is not in community,

And no community not lived in praise of GOD. Eliot's plays which aim at individual refinement with deep spiritual radiance do not treat social problems in an explicit manner. But they are not devoid of social aspects. The Rock renders a lively awareness of the unemployment problem. Murder in the Cathedral is particularly relevant in an assassination. The Family Reunion presents a loveless marriage and its unhappy consequences. This play has great significance in an age which strives to do away with moral problems and the sense of guilt. The Cocktail Party centers on conjugal disharmony and man-woman relationship. The play highly enlightens the audience on how true bliss can be obtained in married life. After all marriage, like all other jobs, is making the best of a bad job and its success lies in mutual understanding and appreciation and in avoiding excessive expectations. The Confidential Clerk has in it the theme of choosing one's profession. The task of each man is tilling his own field and not in unrealistic ambitions and brooding over lost opportunities. Every profession is good in its own way provided one invests one's talents honestly. And everyone must strive to cultivate an inner life which would guard against other earthly misfortunes. The Elder Statesman exposes the inner hollowness of a person who had been very active in public life. His career was a big success before the eyes of others, but the realization that he lost the essential things of life in his excessive prestige-seeking endeavors and extreme preoccupations dawned upon him only after his retirement. Only when he embraced a life without hypocrisy and feeling for others, he could find real happiness. Eliot made it abundantly clear that only when we give up our proud and egoistic approach to life, can we have real happiness. Humility leads to compassion. And these are the qualities that the society requires much more than social engineering at this critical hour of history. We very much need people for whom "Action is suffering and suffering is action" and who can actually get involved with the society's sufferings.

Eliot never denigrated the importance of rationalism and the new awareness brought in by science and other branches of knowledge. What he actually desired was a true blending of traditional

wisdom with the rationalism of the modern age. But he was deeply aware of the limitations of the ever expanding areas of knowledge and he clearly discerned that the firm grip on spirituality was the most essential thing in life. Eliot was deeply religious and the way he embraced religious faith is something that deserves our special attention. It was after undergoing a great deal of inner spiritual struggle, which included intense conflicts, skepticism and doubts, that he finally embraced religious faith. He was deeply convinced that morality and religion 'cannot beyond a certain point be treated separately'. His sincerest endeavors for a unification of the Eastern and Western religious philosophies is very much remarkable.

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