

T. S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*:
A View Fifty Years Later

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Summary

The half-century anniversary of both the publication of T. S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), and his receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature provides us with a timely opportunity to reconsider this book. This work culminates a stream of thought Eliot had developed for decades, specifically in his poem, *The Waste Land* (1922) and in his collection of essays, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), about the interrelationship of religion and culture in modern society.

Key Words: T. S. Eliot, Nobel Prize for Literature, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, *The Waste Land*, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, *After Strange Gods*

The year 1998 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature to T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), the American-born poet, dramatist and essayist. It was also in 1948 that Eliot—who became a British citizen in 1927—was awarded the Order of Merit, which has been described as “the most prestigious and exclusive honor in the British showcase (limited to twenty-four life members).”¹ Furthermore, 1948 is also notable in Eliot's career as the date of the publication of his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. This work was one of a number of Eliot's non-fiction studies, along with his many essays and lectures, in which he discussed the interrelationship of religion and culture. It is no wonder, then, that Eliot's friend, T. S. Matthews, would later view 1948 as “a high point in Eliot's life.”²

This half-century anniversary of the publication of *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, amid the prestigious awards he also received that year, provides us with a timely opportunity to reconsider this work, and how it culminates a stream of thought Eliot had developed for decades, specifically in his poem, *The Waste Land* (1922) and in his collection of essays, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939).

In the course of a series of lectures Eliot gave at the University of Virginia, and that

were subsequently published in 1934 under the title *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*, he observed: "In one's prose reflections one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse one can only deal with actuality."³ This comment is enlightening, especially when considering the author's position throughout his works. William Chace found Eliot's remark useful in that it provided an approach to his philosophy, and he noted that "Eliot's prose is often a medium that seeks to clarify wishes and develop ideas left implicit in the poetry." Chace added that Eliot's poetry is "one of reaction, his prose one of aspiration."⁴

Bearing both Eliot's and Chace's comments in mind, it is well to consider aspects of his most famous poem, *The Waste Land*, as bearing the germ of a vision that would gradually find fulfillment in Eliot's later essays, and then to consider those essays, in order to approach a unified perception of Eliot's religious and cultural philosophy.

Throughout *The Waste Land* one finds recurrent images of the barrenness of modern civilization, that to Eliot was spiritually arid. Indeed, Eliot seemed to have succumbed to despair, and had given up all hope for mankind, when he wrote: "We who were living are now dying" (V, 329). The "dying", as later becomes more explicit, is meant spiritually, and the life sustaining water represents the vivifying power of faith. Eliot then wrote:

If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
. . . But there is no water (V, 335-6, 359)

In the midst of contemporary civilization's disintegration there is then seen
a flash of lightening.

Then a damp gust
Bringing rain (V, 394-5).

Consistent with the motif of fertility, Eliot's rain and presaging thunder are positive symbols. What then follows is Eliot's transcription of an ancient Sanskrit onomatopoeic rendering of the thunder's "words": "Datta," "Dayadhvam," "Damyata" (Give, Sympathise, Control). The commands of the thunder call for sacrifice and, tacitly, a return to religious principles. This message, in fact, is implied earlier, when Eliot alluded to St. Augustine: "To Carthage then I came/Burning . . ." (III, 307-8). In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine opened Book III: "To Carthage I came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves."⁵ It was there that the young Augustine experienced his spiritual wasteland, while lost in the "filth of concupiscence" and the "hell of lustfulness."⁶ By turning to religion through "burning" or cleansing sacrifice and faith, Augustine was able to abandon his spiritually desolate world.

The thunderous Sanskrit message, from the sacred Hindu text known as the *Upanishads*, is pivotal in understanding Eliot's essentially Christian position. In a society bereft of any but secular, even crass standards, Eliot's thunder comes with the refresh-

ing rain of religious principle. To each command the protagonist of the poem offers a negative response that indirectly asserts the need for these universal and (for Eliot) Christian virtues. Here Eliot saw generosity overcoming misanthropy, compassion replacing indifference, and restraint combatting moral irresponsibility. It seems ironic that Eliot would affirm Christian principles through the *Upanishads*, but he is really positing a universality of moral belief: that is, a common bond among religious people everywhere. As Cleanth Brooks pointed out in his critique of the poem, these three Sanskrit words “contain the oldest and most permanent truth of the race.”⁷

After the thunder's advice, the protagonist begins to fish, and wonders: “Shall I at least set my lands in order?” (V, 426). Despite the collapse of civilization, the speaker is still aware of a “personal obligation”⁸ which he must fulfill. He is not turning his back on the problems of society, but merely accepting this simple fact: although he cannot effect the world's salvation, he may at least achieve his own. His means are meagre—only fragments shored up against his ruins. The protagonist wants to be free from this arid plain, and implicitly asks, “When shall *my* spring come to me?”⁹ Here he refers to Procne, who left her sordid life with Tereus, as a swallow. But first, like Dante's Arnaut, he must willingly go into “the fire that refines them,”¹⁰ a realization that affirms his cognizance of the thunder's command to sacrifice. The fragment of *El Desdichado*, as Edmund Wilson explained,¹¹ indicates the protagonist's sense of being “disinherited,” since all that is left of civilization are these pieces through which he hopes to find his salvation.

It is important to consider Eliot not as trying to dismiss the complex problem of a deteriorating culture by referring to abstract sentiments, but rather as positing ideals that he considers to indicate salvific alternatives. Indeed, Eliot was well aware, as the preponderate mood of this poem indicates, that there can be no reasonable expectation of improving on this dying civilization. Yet, it may be possible. Although Eliot only alluded to Christianity in *The Waste Land*, as a means of revitalizing society, he developed this idea at great length in *The Idea of a Christian Society*. Despite the seventeen years that passed between the publication of these works, there exists an almost immediate logical progression since, as John Margolis noted, this is “his first extended consideration of the relations of religion and society.”¹²

In *The Idea of a Christian Society* Eliot was still concerned with spiritual and intellectual starvation, a feeling made more real by the international political climate of the world on the brink of war, in 1939. Whereas he had suggested the areas in which modern civilization was failing, in the earlier poem, he is more specific in this essay:

. . . that a liberalised or negative condition of society must either proceed into a gradual decline of which we can see no end, or . . . reform itself into a positive shape which is likely to be effectively secular. . . . But unless we are content with the prospect of one or the other of these issues, the only possibility left is that of a positive Christianity society.¹³

In terms of *The Waste Land*, Eliot restated the possible alternatives: either accept the fact that “London Bridge is falling down” (V, 427), or follow the admonitions of the thunder.

In T. S. Eliot’s view, “we have today a culture which is mainly negative, but which, so far as it is positive, is still Christian.”¹⁴ This small remaining factor is analagous to the residual fragments of *The Waste Land* (V, 431). But Eliot here is not simply concerned with shoring the fragments against the ruin of civilization, but for developing and rebuilding society on the foundation of these fragments. Far from the defeatist didact that David Craig¹⁵ envisioned the author of *The Waste Land* to be, Eliot’s attitude is forcefully idealistic. His “primary interest is a change in our social attitude.”¹⁶

Thus, in *The Idea of A Christian Society* Eliot saw part of our problem being due to the existence of an overindustrialized society. This “unlimited industrialism [tends] . . . to create bodies of men and women—of all classes—detached from tradition, alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion: in other words, a mob.”¹⁷ In place of this dehumanizing force, Eliot suggested Christianity—that is: “a Christian organization of society.”¹⁸ In terms reminiscent of the thunder’s commands, Eliot stated that what is needed to effect this saving transformation are: “discipline, inconvenience and discomfort: but here as hereafter the alternative to hell is purgatory.”¹⁹

In this proposal Eliot emphasized that the society necessary to save man would have to be concerned with both his natural and spiritual needs. It would acknowledge “virtue and community”²⁰ for all, and “beatitude—for those who have eyes to see it.”²¹ This social reorganization requires autocratic control through which “there is a unified religious-social code of behaviour.”²² Eliot was more explicit about such a community in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, as we shall later see.

Reviewing the alternatives to an adoption of Christian principles, Eliot envisioned only an eventual, apocalyptic condition, not unlike a world inhabited by people with “red sullen faces [who] sneer and snarl/From doors of mudcracked houses” (V, 344–45). In a particularly timely observation Eliot contended that “the organization of society on the principle of private profit, as well as public destruction, is leading both to the deformation of humanity . . . and to the exhaustion of natural resources”²³ Thus, as the thunder implied in *The Waste Land*, the only way to attain peace (shantih) is through discipline—in the Christian form of sacrifice. Eliot could not, of course, guarantee that a return to the “eternal source of truth”²⁴ will resolve the looming chaos. In light of inherent human imperfection, Eliot’s idea should be considered not as a plan that is blindly optimistic or unrealistic, but as one qualified by the realities of human nature. As he stressed man’s inadequacy throughout *The Waste Land*, Eliot was less persistent on that subject here, except that he makes this observation:

whatever reform or revolution we carry out, the result will always be a sordid travesty of what society should. . . . In such a society as I imagine, . . . there will be

innumerable seeds of decay.²⁵

For all his directness of advocating a Christian society, Eliot's actual *Idea of a Christian Society* was at times too vague and abstract to be considered for practical implementation. In *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* Eliot was less general, although he still proposed a number of ideas that avoid specificity. In this essay also Eliot remained as doubtful over the state of civilization, and he found the prospect of culture's complete destruction to be not at all improbable. With his familiar tone of qualified skepticism Eliot observed:

. . . our own period is one of decline . . . the evidences of this decline are visible in every department of human activity. I see no reason why the decay of culture should not proceed much further, and why we may not even anticipate a period, of some duration, of which it is possible to say that it will have *no culture*.²⁶

This passage, and indeed the entire essay, is decidedly concerned with culture rather than religion as such. However, these are not mutually exclusive concepts, as Eliot himself pointed out: "any religion . . . on its own level, gives an apparent meaning to life, provides the framework for a culture, and protects the mass of humanity from boredom and despair."²⁷ Indeed, culture is so much a part of religion that there is in this inherent unity a difficulty in making clear a distinction, as Eliot was well aware, noting that "bishops are a part of English culture, and horses and dogs are part of English religion."²⁸

In addition, this essay does indicate another progression in the development of Eliot's Christian advocacy. While he alluded to salvation in the midst of a deteriorating culture in *The Waste Land*, and then again in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, he translated the saving message into Christian terms in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, and applied the thunder's command to a society of a distinct nature.

By 1948 Eliot was able to envision an alternative to the wasteland he depicted in 1922 which was comprised of a controlled social unit in which class distinctions would be minimized. His proposal reveals him to be a practical elitist who advocated that "all positions in society should be occupied by those who are best fitted to exercise the functions of these positions."²⁹ Those best suited to fulfill the higher or more noble functions would be the elite, and each class would cooperate under their direction toward achieving common aspirations. In concert with this position, Eliot maintained:

. . . a society must not be content to be *governed* by the right people: it must see the ablest artists and architects rise to the top, influence taste, and execute the important public commissions.³⁰

Doubtless, this form of social management leaves little room for democracy, but in a

community ruled by the most able, and guided by Christian principles, Eliot saw no need nor equity in democracy. On an ideal level it does seem imbalanced to give everyone—of varying ability—equal responsibility. As Eliot explained, it “would be oppressive for the conscientious and licentious for the rest.”³¹

Eliot divided this ideal society into three elements: “the Christian State, the Christian Community, and the Community of Christians.”³² Each group would be linked by their shared beliefs. The State is marked by, at least, “conscientious conformity of behaviour,”³³ while the Christian Community’s faith would be so ingrained as to require unconscious behavior. The Community of Christians exemplified “conscious Christian life on its highest social level,”³⁴ and it is here that we find the elite. This group should be “composed of both clergy and laity, of the more conscious, more spiritually and intellectually developed of both.”³⁵ Sharing a set of common beliefs, as well as a common educational and cultural background, this elite unit will form “the conscious mind and the conscience of the nation.”³⁶

The idea of such a society creates the suspicion that T. S. Eliot’s new world order might really be a form of fascism, and that only in such a repressive society could the situation decried as a wasteland be avoided. It would appear to fit the pattern, since Eliot was advocating the control of the society by an elite corps of supermen, combined with his encouragement of discipline, and based on a common fund of belief. However, these measures were not designed as a political tool, but as part of a total religious response. If his thought must be classified, then, it would not be as fascist but more as a form of Christian socialism, although describing it as a Community of Christians under the authoritarian eye of the Church of England³⁷ would be even more accurate. For, it should be pointed out, Eliot’s primary objection to fascism was “that it is pagan.”³⁸

The alternative to Eliot’s proposal, quite antithetically, is a pagan one. In this dichotomy he was concerned not with the practical advantages of adopting one view over another but, rather, the essential moral truth that Christianity possesses over paganism. In this vein Eliot thus found it “worst of all . . . to advocate Christianity, not because it is true, but because it might be beneficial.”³⁹ Eliot then noted: “To the quick and simple organization of society for ends which, being only material and worldly, must be as ephemeral as worldly success, there is only one alternative.”⁴⁰ That alternative is religion, through which man acts in conformity with nature and, by extension, with God. Thus did Eliot see the possibility of reducing the chaos that so haunted him decades earlier. Nonetheless, as the world is flawed, so too is Eliot’s solution, although he felt it to be the most natural alternative. He added, humbly, that even his answer “would require constant reform.”⁴¹

Thus, what we encounter in T. S. Eliot’s *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* fifty years later is not a broad, simplistic plan for social order conceived in the wake of World War II, but rather a reasonable, qualified proposal. While we cannot classify

Eliot as being an optimist, we can say that given his sense of realism he might be best termed a meliorist, that is, one who sees the better side as necessary and potential, in the midst of the very real forces of antagonism to culture and civilization.

Fifty years have not dulled his message. Indeed, one is reminded on this anniversary of an anecdote concerning T. S. Eliot. When the news of his receiving the Nobel Prize reached the University of Iowa, some graduate students sent Eliot a phonograph recording of the song, "You've Come a Long Way from St. Louis," in recognition of the city of Eliot's birth and the great strides he had made since. Eliot sent the students a reply in which he quoted that song's last line, which is relevant even today, in terms of the progress of contemporary culture: "But, baby, you've got a long way to go!"⁴²

NOTES

- 1 T. S. Matthews, *Great Tom: Notes Towards the Definition of T. S. Eliot* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 152.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), p. 30.
- 4 William Chace, *The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1973), p. 126.
- 5 E. B. Pusey, trans., *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (New York: Modern Library, 1949), p. 36.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Cleanth Brooks, "The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth," from *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, pp. 136–72, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), rpt. in C. B. Cox and Arnold P. Hinchliffe, eds., *T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land": A Casebook* (Nashville: Aurora Publishers, 1970), p. 155.
- 8 Ibid., p. 154.
- 9 F. L. Lucas, trans., "Vergilium Veneris," *Aphrodite* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 49. Eliot's "fragment" (underlined), in context:
Illa cantat, nos tacemas. Quando ver venit meum?
(Ah, she sings. But we are silent. When shall my spring come to me?)
Quando fiam uti chelidon, ut tacere desinam?
(When shall I grow as a swallow, and my lips at last be free?)
- 10 John D. Sinclair, trans., "Purgatorio," *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 342–3.
- 11 Edmund Wilson, from *Axel's Castle* (New York: Charles Scribners's Sons, 1931), rpt. *T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land": A Casebook*, p. 102.
- 12 John Margolis, *T. S. Eliot's Intellectual Development: 1922–1939* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 209.
- 13 T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, in *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt,

- Brace and Company, 1949), p. 20.
- 14 Ibid., p. 10.
 - 15 David Craig, "The Defeatism in *The Waste Land*," *Critical Quarterly* (1960), rpt. in *T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land: A Casebook*, pp. 200–15.
 - 16 *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 8.
 - 17 Ibid., p. 17.
 - 18 Ibid., p. 27.
 - 19 Ibid., p. 19.
 - 20 Ibid., p. 27.
 - 21 Ibid.
 - 22 Ibid.
 - 23 Ibid., p. 48.
 - 24 Ibid., p. 50.
 - 25 Ibid., p. 47.
 - 26 T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, in *Christianity and Culture*, p. 91.
 - 27 Ibid., p. 106.
 - 28 Ibid., p. 105.
 - 29 Ibid., p. 109.
 - 30 Ibid., p. 117.
 - 31 Ibid., p. 121.
 - 32 *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 20.
 - 33 Ibid., p. 23.
 - 34 Ibid.
 - 35 Ibid., p. 34.
 - 36 Ibid.
 - 37 Ibid., p. 37.
 - 38 Ibid., p. 15.
 - 39 Ibid., p. 46.
 - 40 Ibid., p. 50.
 - 41 Ibid., p. 47.
 - 42 T. S. Matthews, p. 154.

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