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T.S. Eliot’s endeavour to establish in his plays an artistic interrelationship of religious belief and social humanistic vision, religious view-point and contemporaneity, as analyzed and brought forth in the preceding chapters, is not an isolated phenomenon. It is rather part of the resurgence of Christian verse drama, which began in England with the initiation of the Canterbury Festival in 1928. The dramatists associated with the movement, notably Charles Williams, Christopher Fry, Ronald Duncan, and Eliot himself, wanted to write public poetic dramas which aimed at integrating the temporal and the timeless planes of reality. They were impelled towards this ideal under the influence of the altered view of Christianity put forth by the Christian theologians during the early decades of the present century. The traditional view of Christianity dichotomizes time and eternity and demands the rejection of the temporal world as a means and pre-requisite of achieving the realm of the eternal. The modern Christian theologians such as Paul Tillich, William Temple, Gabriel Marcel and Nicolas Berdyaev, on the other hand, affirmed a view of Christianity which “apprehends time as the medium or, more accurately, the process of divine disclosure and problematic concreteness”.

Evidently, it was a revolution in the direction of a new Christian humanism which involved an assertion of the integrity and significance of the temporal world and the everyday reality. Critics of T.S. Eliot and of the Christian verse drama in general often fail to understand this fact and consequently view the works of the Christian writers as embodiments of their contemptuous rejection of the concrete life of man. This is generally the case with the later poems and plays of T.S. Eliot which are misinterpreted as espousing an escapist attitude to life and its practical concerns. R.H. Robbins, for instance, maintains that Eliot escaped from the real world seen in The Waste Land into the realm of religion, and “over all Eliot’s writings hovers his contempt for human beings – because, as we

know them, they are part of the physical world". Stephen Spender also expresses a similar opinion when he says that Eliot’s works evince a refusal to come to terms with contemporary values, and embody an escapist preoccupation with religious orthodoxy and the past.

It should be, however, evident from the foregoing analysis of Eliot’s plays that he possesses not only a deep awareness of the existential anguish of the modern man, but also a keen desire to suggest ways to overcome that anguish. All his plays display a profound and consistent concern for the human predicament. They embody the playwright’s Christian humanism which seeks to correlate the material and the spiritual, the social and the religious planes of human existence. Eliot’s Incarnational vision of Christianity, intensified by the modern theologians altered view of Christian life, impels and inspires him to interlink religion and society, God and man. The incarnation, as already pointed out, represents not only the Word made flesh, but also intersection of the temporal and the timeless. Accordingly, Eliot in his plays constantly relates the timeless moment of spiritual illumination with the pattern of daily living. His own statement in one of his essays points to this fact: “what poetry should do in the theatre is a kind of humble shadow or analogy of the Incarnation, whereby the human is taken up into the divine”.

In fact, the relation of the Christian faith to contemporary human problems, the adaptation of Christianity to the needs of our time, is what constitutes the unique relevance and greatness of Eliot as a poetic playwright. It is to be noted that Eliot possesses a remarkable sense of his age, of the contemporary human predicament. He feels, as many other existentialist thinkers and theologians do, that human existence is a challenging and often painful experience; that it is fraught with contradictions and tensions; and that to live with any degree of consciousness is to be aware of


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unreconciled conflicts clamouring to be resolved. Eliot’s plays demonstrate an existential diagnosis of contemporary human concerns and social problems much in the fashion of Marx, Freud and Sartre. But as far as his solutions to these problems are concerned, Eliot falls in line with the Christian existentialist, Kierkegaard, who believes that the tensions of human existence can be overcome only when man commits himself entirely to God.

It is interesting to note that Eliot considers the problem of man’s loneliness like Marx, Freud, and Sartre, but unlike them, he comes back to a faith in God and spiritual values. According to Marx, the root cause of man’s alienation is the malstructure of society. He believes that man is basically good and a social animal, but the exploitative class structure separates him from his fellow men. Obviously, Marx’s concept of alienation stems from economics. He hopes that with the establishment of a classless society and the elimination of private ownership, alienation will be reduced. Freud, on the other hand, thinks that alienation is rooted in man’s ‘psyche’ and not in society. He believes that alienation will never cease to exist because it emanates from human impulses. At best, it can only be tranquilized through self – actualization. Sartre is even more pessimistic with regard to man’s problem of isolation. He conceives of man as a hopeless creature and of life as essentially absurd and meaningless. T.S. Eliot has understood and adapted the diagnosis of civilization presented by these thinkers. He has put their ideas to his own use and purposes. In particular, he has made a remarkable use of the psychological insights provided by Freud to convey his spiritual meanings in his plays. He has, however, drawn his own conclusions as to why the contemporary man is surrounded by suffocating problems. According to him, human beings in the modern society suffer because they have confined themselves to their narrow self, and severed all connections with God and the divine principle. Their alienation is the inevitable result of their indifference to God and spiritual values. Their reluctance and inability to respond to God have rendered them incapable of establishing contact even with one another. The result is that they find themselves imprisoned in their loneliness. Eliot believes that the loneliness, emptiness, despair, and directionlessness – diseases that have infected the modern man – are essentially spiritual ailments, and can be cured
only when man restores links with God, Church and the moral and spiritual values. This is the reason that he constantly views the moral and psychological problems of the contemporary humanity in the light of his religious faith, seeking thereby an integration of religion and society.

This should, however, not lead one to conclude that Eliot is a propagandist fighting for the cause of Christianity and the Church. He is rather concerned with the rediscovery of spiritual life. What is repeatedly stressed in Eliot’s late poems and also his plays, is the need for spiritual awakening. In his essay on Baudelaire, Eliot writes about him: “His business was not to practise Christianity, but – what was much more important for his time– to assert its necessity”.

The comment is equally applicable to Eliot himself, as he too is not really interested in spiritual growth that leads to illumination and on to union so much as he is interested in affirming the necessity of spiritual life. Martin Scofield rightly observes that “Eliot’s beliefs are a matter for record, examination, questioning and presentation (making us feel what they feel like) in his poetry, not a matter for propaganda and persuasion (still less proselytizing)”.

What Scofield says with regard to Eliot’s poetry is, in fact, more truly applicable to his plays written after Murder in the Cathedral (1935). In these plays Eliot’s vision is not only religious, but also psychological and social. As a matter of fact Eliot achieves in them a rare synthesis of belief and humanistic vision, religion and society. Eliot’s artistic genius is able to transmute his deeply held religious convictions into works of art so as to underline their relevance to the practical sphere of human life. As such, Christianity becomes an all-comprehending vision, a way of seeing and feeling things rather than merely a system of abstract theology.

This is therefore, to be borne in mind that T.S. Eliot is far from being a religious orthodox. He is more worried about the decline of religious “sensibility” than about the decline of religious “belief”. “The trouble of the modern age”, Eliot writes in his essay entitled “The Social Function of Poetry” (1943), “is not merely the

4. Selected Essays, p. 422.
inability to believe certain things about God and man which our forefathers believed but the inability to feel towards God and man as they did. It is evident from the remark that Eliot would like to make religion a matter of emotional response and not of sentiment. It has to be repeatedly emphasized that Eliot’s insistence on the maintenance of religious sensibility and outlook does not involve a renunciation of practical life and the world in favour of a higher plane of existence. It rather implies the cultivation of the virtues of detachment and spiritual consciousness. In an interview for Horizon in 1945, Eliot was asked, “How would you, out of the bitter experience of the present time, wish mankind to develop?” and he answered:

I should speak of a greater spiritual consciousness, which is not asking that everybody would rise to the same conscious level, but that everybody should have some awareness of the depths of spiritual development and some appreciation and respect for those exceptional people who can proceed further in spiritual knowledge than most of us can.

The reply of Eliot should leave us in no doubt about his intentions as a religious dramatist. His essential concern is how to break the meaningless cycle of history, how to establish the validity of spiritual life. Accordingly, the primary concern of his plays is man and his moral and psychological problems. Since he views these problems from the angle of his religious faith he emerges as a Christian realist striving to correlate religious belief and social vision with a view to evolving a wholesome, integral vision of life. He adheres to this ideal in all his plays though the nature and level of the correlationship of religion and society vary from play to play. The direction of the correlationship is clear right from his early experiments in the field of drama – Sweeney Agonistes and The Rock. These works juxtapose the Word and the world and point towards a necessity of the wholesome interaction between the

human and the Divine. Eliot’s religious convictions receive their most emphatic and explicit treatment in the choruses of *The Rock*. The following lines provide an excellent example:

> Where is the life we have lost in living?
> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
> The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
> Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.⁸

Along with this emphasis on the spiritual wisdom, we also get ample evidence in *The Rock* of Eliot’s social and humanistic concerns. The portrayal of the plight of the poor and unemployed is very human and moving. The relationship between the secular and the spiritual is brought forth in the following lines:

> ‘Our citizenship is in Heaven’; yes, but that is the model and type for your citizenship upon earth.⁹

In addition to it, Eliot also stresses the need for community life which can be a possible solution of the problem of isolation.

It is, however, in Eliot first full-length play *Murder in the Cathedral* that the meaningful interaction between the temporal and the eternal, the social and the religious, is developed and dramatized in a satisfying way. The spiritual struggle and growth of Thomas the protagonist, is presented in this religious play so as to awaken the Chorus, the Women of Canterbury, to a religious apprehension of life. Since the Women typify the entire mankind, their spiritual education involves that of the audience itself. But the centrality of the play lies in its assertion of Christian faith.

In Eliot’s next play *The Family Reunion*, we witness a broadening of his social vision. The playwright now takes up a psychological problem and shows how it can be reconciled to a spiritual solution. The story of the play is the story of a neurotic made whole by having been brought towards spiritual reconciliation. We witness a

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8. CPP., p. 147.
9. Ibid., p. 151.
dramatization of the spiritual awakening of an ordinary man in a manner which has a unique relevance to our everyday experience. Eliot rehandles the Greek myth of Orestes in a Christian light so that people, doomed to a life of spiritual sterility, may be awakened to the Christian values. Harry’s acceptance of his past, his acknowledgement of his sin, and his undertaking the spiritual journey towards the end of the play, have a fructifying influence on the lives of the less perceptive characters who are brought to a perception of the new spiritual dimension of life.

The later plays of Eliot evince a progressive widening of his social and human interests. They deal with the themes and problems which are usually met with in the naturalistic plays of the 20th century, such as those of Ibsen or Shaw. But Eliot handles these problems in a manner which brings forth his socio-religious vision in a sharp dramatic focus. In *The Cocktail Party*, the way of the saints and the way of ordinary mortals are given almost equal importance, and the emphasis is laid on their mutual interaction. The sacrifice of Celia, who chooses the way of spiritual journey, helps the Chamberlaynes perceive new meaning and purpose in life. They accept their past, their real identities, and discard their assumed selves. This, in turn, helps them understand and accept each other as they are and not as they pretended to be. Thus they feel liberated from their prison of isolation. *The Confidential Clerk* dramatizes a foundling’s search for true identity and parentage. Colby Simpkins, the new confidential clerk of Sir Claude Mulhammer, discovers by the end of the play that he is the son of God. But more important than that, the play depicts the need for integrating the private and public worlds, that is, the inner spiritual world and the outer world of secular social concerns. It is stressed that only the religious vision can help man reconcile the two worlds and unify them into a single real world. *The Elder Statesman* is the most human of Eliot’s plays in which he dramatizes the relationship between earthly love and divine love. The protagonist Lord Claverton learns by the end of the play that peace and joy can be experienced in life only after the abandonment of pretences and masks, and revealing one’s real, limited self to a person one really loves. The special feature of the play is that the universal meaning – the spiritual rebirth of Lord Claverton – is discovered in the particular action itself and is not imposed from without by means of overtly symbolic figures.
It has to be pointed out that Eliot’s interlinking of religious belief and social vision in his plays is not without limitations and imperfections. Though his plays move generally in the direction of contemporaneity and realism both in the action and the verse, the difficult integration of spiritual meaning and dramatic action is seldom fully achieved in them. The source of the failure in this regard does not lie so much in his lack of dramatic genius or in his desire to proselytize, as in the difficult relationship between the Christian dramatist and the post-Christian modern world, in which God has either died or withdrawn. The disintegrations of Christian tradition compels the Christian dramatist to project his image of the human predicament from the self-conscious point of view of his commitment. Thus despite his desire for “a literature which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly Christian”, Eliot at times appears to be self-conscious and overt in his assertions of spiritual meaning. Moreover, he is seldom able to project the pattern of sin and redemption as a felt experience. Thus, for example, when Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* says: “Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain: /Temptation shall not come in this kind again”, his feeling seems to be real and genuine, but its dramatization is inadequate. Similarly, in *The Family Reunion*, the under pattern of the Greek myth of Orestes threatens to overwhelm the surface pattern of contemporary action. The playwright seems to force the pattern because he is not sure that his audience will easily discover it in the action. Eliot’s use of the chorus also tends to emphasise the pattern of meaning, and rarely becomes an integral part of the dramatic action. The Furies in *The Family Reunion* and the Guardians in *The Cocktail Party*, for example, do give the impression that they are supernatural agents.

In fact, the plays of T.S. Eliot set out to dramatize inner, spiritual experiences.

10. “Religion and Literature”, *Selected Essays*.
11. CPP., p. 258.
which are in their very nature difficult to objectify. In this connection, D.E. Jones has made a significant remark:

Eliot’s concern with the spiritual life has been his great strength and his great weakness as a dramatist. It has been his strength in that it has led him to write passages of spiritual exploration and communion such as we have hardly known in English drama outside a few moments in Shakespeare. It has been his weakness in that such passages tend to be static and do not in themselves fulfill our expectations of a play. The spiritual life does not lend itself to drama, which requires a certain amount of physical action, and the groping towards spiritual understanding, which is what we mostly have in the plays in contemporary settings, as in the life they represent, is hardly more dramatic.¹²

It has to be admitted in the final analysis that despite certain limitations T.S. Eliot’s greatness and achievement as a poetic dramatist can hardly be over-emphasised. His exemplary role in the revival of poetic drama, his re-establishment of poetry in the theatre not only by presenting a systematic theory about the nature and functions of verse in drama, but also by putting his own theory into practice and creating a modern and suitable dramatic verse, and above all, his efforts to interlink religious and secular social planes of existence in his plays, have earned him a significant place in the history of English drama. He displays in his plays that the integral vision of life now lost can only be recovered through a cultivation of religious and spiritual understanding of life. D.E. Jones rightly observes that Eliot’s plays have been “a subtle demonstration of the relevance of religion to all spheres of human activity. They throw light on aspects of modern life normally thought of as removed from the ‘sphere’ of religion as well as on areas of experience that modern psychology and sociology fail to take account of. Because they are implicitly and not explicitly

Christian, they surprise people into an awareness of the meaning and implications of Christianity".  

An unbiased study of Eliot's plays reveals that Jones's observation is valid, for in them Eliot does not set out to deal with theological metaphysics. He rather concentrates attention on the social, humanistic side of religion, on the relation of God to man, and to man's higher spiritual needs. The relevance of Eliot's religio - social vision to man's eternal predicament lies in his affirmation of both the material and the spiritual, the human and the divine. He wouldn't rest content with any form of belief which did not sustain in every essential part the full circle of human and social interests. His is a vision which considers man in the integrality of his natural and supernatural being. And therefore he can be called a true Christian humanist. His plays seem to assert that religious belief without social vision is dry and lifeless, and social vision without belief is lame. It is the integration of the two that leads to a wholesome human existence. Thus Eliot has opened up a new thematic dimension for dramatic writings in future, even as he provides a universal solution of the human predicament. His importance as a twentieth century verse-dramatist will never diminish in value and significance.

13. Ibid., p. 214.