Preface

Thomas Stearns Eliot is an epoch-making poet, critic and dramatist of the twentieth century. However, his reputation as a poet and critic tends to overshadow his importance as a dramatist. As a matter of fact, his contribution to drama is as great and significant as to poetry and criticism. Eliot's plays are, no doubt, an extension of the dimensions of his poetry, but they have an advantage over his poems in the sense that his philosophical speculations in the poems become an experienced reality in the plays. Eliot wrote his plays in his later creative period when he had outgrown his earlier iconoclastic tendency and had explored and found his religious belief. They reflect, therefore, a maturity of vision that is rarely found in his poems with the possible exception of *Four Quartets*. It is significant to note that in his plays Eliot gives more attention to an application of his new-found religious belief to the problems and challenges of the modern man. He shows in dramatic terms how the moral and psychological problems of the contemporary society could be solved in the light of religion.

A careful study of Eliot's plays shows that they evince a progression of vision so far as the interplay of religion and society is concerned. Eliot's first full-length play *Murder in the Cathedral* presents the solid foundation of Christian belief. It depicts the conflict between the eternal and the temporal leading to the final victory of the man of God over worldly temptations. In its impact upon the chorus who typify the common man in society, the play displays a deep social concern which acquires an increasing force in the subsequent plays. In fact, from *The Family Reunion* onwards, we find a sort of thematic retrogression in the sense that the emphasis from the assertion of religious belief shifts to a canvas of positive social vision. It seems as if the poet of *Four Quartets* is returning to the themes of early poems through the medium of drama. But still the dramatization of spiritual dilemma as well as psychological conflicts is accomplished through the window of belief. Thus after *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot seldom makes a direct statement of belief in his plays; rather he tries to project the relevance of religion in the daily life of man.
Eliot's plays deal mostly with religious themes such as original sin, humility, confession, purgation, illumination and redemption. Side by side, he also takes up themes such as acknowledgement and acceptance of the past, discarding of social masks and pretences, and attempting to understand others through recognition of the power of love. In this regard, it is worth noting that even though Eliot's plays embody a world-view based mainly on religious belief, his religiosity does not imply an escape from the problems of practical social life. His religio-social vision rather impels him to confront and grapple with contemporary social problems with utmost sincerity and seek in spiritual enlightenment an answer to the human predicament. In fact, Eliot's religious quest involves both a discovery of the psychic and spiritual trouble of a life without faith and an affirmation of religious meanings and values that transcend and redeem it. Although there is no dearth of critical studies on Eliot's plays, they have not as yet been examined in detail from the religio-social perspective undertaken in this study.

The aim of the proposed work is to examine in detail how Eliot applies his religious perspective to psychological and moral dilemmas of the modern man. On the one hand, I seek to contradict the view that Eliot is an escapist who turns away from the world of reality to find shelter in the abstract world of religion, and on the other hand, I also plan to assert that Eliot's later plays cannot be passed off as merely realistic. Emphasis is laid on the often overlooked fact that Eliot is always concerned with man's life in society. He never talks of religion in isolation, nor does he consider religion an end in itself. His intention, particularly in the plays, is to bring about spiritual awakening in man so that he might discover purpose and meaning in the otherwise meaningless life. Thus the focus of the present work is intended to be on analysing and bringing out the interrelationship of Eliot's religiosity and his contemporaneity, with the hope that it will promote a better understanding of his purpose and vision.

The thesis is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter offers a comprehensive introduction. It seeks to bring out the making of Eliot, the dramatist. The growth of Eliot's socio-religious vision is discussed here in detail. It studies the various social, intellectual and philosophical influences that shaped Eliot's creative
sensibility. The second chapter is devoted to the discussion of Eliot’s socio-cultural views in relation to his belief. Eliot’s idea of tradition, culture, society, politics and education is analysed in the context of his religious vision. Eliot’s attitude to humanism vis-à-vis religion is also brought forth in this chapter. The next five chapters seek to offer an in-depth analysis and interpretation of Eliot’s plays in the perspective of his socio-religious vision. The final chapter sums up the earlier findings, and seeks to assess the achievement of Eliot as a poetic dramatist.

Nobody working on Eliot can claim absolute originality. I, too, am indebted to distinguished Eliot scholars and critics for shaping my ideas and conclusions. I owe a deep debt to the eminent critics I have referred to in my work.

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(Vineeta Tiwari)