CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

It is time now to conclude our observations on the issue of scepticism and belief in T. S. Eliot's poetry. This can hardly be, however, a list of findings proven and final. No analysis, interpretation, discussion can be offered as the last word. At the same time, we do consider our observations to be valid and useful in reading Eliot's poetry. In reading Eliot's poetry to observe the workings of scepticism and belief in it, we have found the poet's own words about poetry and the appreciation of poetry quite useful. He has, for instance, been always concerned about the 'meaning' of poetry:

The poem's existence is somewhere between the writer and the reader; it has a reality which is not simply the reality of what the writer is trying to 'express', or of his experience of writing it, or of the experience of the reader or the writer as reader. Consequently the problem of what a poem 'means' is a good deal more difficult than it at first appears.¹

We cannot but agree with Eliot when he says that the 'reality' of the poem is something which is not simply something experienced by the reader or the writer and it is amply clear from his statement that to him, reading a poem does not merely involve unearthing what the poet is trying to express. Throughout this work, however, we have talked about the sceptic tones in
his poetry and the enactment of belief in some of his poems. Thus, strictly speaking we are trying to bring to light certain things we believe are there in his poetry. This is because we believe that a part of the 'reality' of a poem does have to do with the conscious or unconscious enactment of the poet's beliefs or attitudes of mind. At the same time, since our discussion of scepticism and belief in T. S. Eliot's poetry has to do with some aspects of the 'meaning' of his poetry, with some of the ways his poetry communicates, we need to be careful in our assertions. Too insistent an attempt at getting at some sort of ultimate meaning is, of course, itself not quite right. From our study we can reasonably conclude that scepticism, not as a dogmatic philosophical stance, but as an attitude of mind constantly qualifying his own beliefs, is present in T. S. Eliot's poetry throughout his poetic career. And it is the sceptic in him that has a certain restraining effect on the Christian in him and vice-versa. This tension between doubt and belief has been the main focus of our work here, and it is our contention that this is something that gives his poetry its distinctive stamp. In other words, it is one of the most important aspects of what is often referred to as 'Eliotic'. Without this wrestle between doubt and belief his poetry would not have evoked the kind of response it actually did. Readers do not normally respond to poetry consciously keeping such issues in mind, but even when one has not articulated the reasons for one’s liking a certain kind of text, the reasons are there all the same. We feel that a major part of the answer to the question why T. S. Eliot's poetry appeals to some readers
lies in the tension of scepticism and belief enacted in the poems in various ways—even when the reader has perhaps not formulated the reasons for liking the poetry.

As we have observed earlier, the poetic enactment of the tussle between scepticism and belief varies in different ways in the different phases of Eliot's career. It is not our contention, however, that the different 'phases' mean rigidly different ways of poetic expression. In fact, the so-called phases of Eliot's career overlap and compliment one another. Besides, it is not a question of tracing progression or regression in terms of poetic style or artistry; it is mainly a question of differences and not just differences, but similarities as well. A neat division of early poetry and later poetry in terms of belief and scepticism fails to do justice to the actual nature of the relationship between the different periods of Eliot's poetic activity. In a general way we can only say that there is a certain preponderance of the sceptic tone in most of the early poetry while the poetic enactment of his beliefs becomes clearer in the later poems.

Eliot sometimes repelled certain readers not only by poetic statements of belief, but also clear prose statements asserting his beliefs. The way people reacted to such statements must have added to the reputation Eliot had managed to build for himself as a conservative, somewhat dogmatic person. And if people come to his poetry with certain presumptions about his beliefs, it is doubtful if they would be able to appreciate the poetry in the spirit it should actually be appreciated. In other
words, readers may not exercise tact and tolerance. William Barrett, reviewing Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, finds many faults with the poet's conservative notion of culture. Among other things he said this:

> It seems to me assumed that anyone who is not a believing Christian is so because of irresponsibility, an unwillingness to take religion seriously. I should like to insist on the opposing fact: that there are people who have examined religion carefully, who know that their life would be much easier for them if they could adopt a belief like Catholic Christianity, but whose moral conscience forbids them to do so. As long as there are people who think and feel this way, it is doubtful whether Christianity can become what it once was and what Eliot hopes it will be again: a structure of belief binding together all members of society.²

Barrett concludes by referring to Aristotle and asserting that 'our deliberation about human affairs is significant only if confined to the practicable.' Barret’s conclusion exposes a contradiction in his thought. While he seems to suggest that Christianity is not acceptable because it is not practicable, a little while ago his argument was that one's 'moral conscience' forbade one to accept Christianity. But do moral conscience and practicability go together? This is an example of one kind of criticism against Eliot's religious belief. More than anything else, such arguments are characterized by a rejection of religious beliefs solely because they are
religious beliefs. Actually arguments are not necessary for asserting a difference of opinion, and most of such critical comments are in fact statements of opinion.  

Perhaps it is not out of place to observe, in talking about Eliot’s attitude towards Christianity, that many people like him consider Christianity to be the single most important factor in making European civilization possible. And while it is true that the Modern Age differs from the Middle Ages in not being preoccupied with religion, it is also true that the Modern Age is characterized by an unprecedented complexity; it allows for greater diversity; it accommodates contrary and contradictory systems of thought and belief like atheism and religion.

Occasionally one comes across critics who do not conform to Eliot’s religious views, and yet acknowledge the value of his ideas. This is possible because Eliot’s spiritual quest is not just one individual’s concern with belief, but it is something quite inseparable from the social and cultural tradition of the entire Western civilization. A. D. Moody, who does not subscribe to Eliot’s religious beliefs, nevertheless acknowledges the importance of Eliot’s thought and belief:

What Eliot believed is alien to me, and still it is ineradicably at work in me and in my society and this makes his work of profound concern to me.  

It is only through such acknowledgement and understanding, that the difficult poetic thought of T. S. Eliot becomes fully comprehensible and
interesting. Of course, it would not be possible for many readers to fully agree with Eliot when it comes to his equating Christianity with European Culture. In a radio broadcast in 1945, T. S. Eliot spoke about 'the common tradition of Christianity which has made Europe what it is, and about the common cultural elements which this common Christianity has brought with it.'\(^5\) Seen from such a stand-point, his joining the Anglo-Catholic Church is merely conforming to the only culture of Europe. It is another matter that this—that Christianity represents European Culture—is not the view of many historians today:

Despite the apparent supremacy of Christian belief right up to the mid-twentieth century, it is impossible to deny that many of the most fruitful stimuli of modern times, from the Renaissance passion for antiquity to the Romantics' obsession with Nature, were essentially pagan in character. Similarly, it is hard to argue that the contemporary cults of modernism, eroticism, economics, sport, or pop culture have much to do with the Christian heritage.\(^6\)

To us, this does seem a more comprehensive and more realistic view than Eliot's, which can be termed as the conservative view on the issue. To briefly consider the question of the reader's attitude towards something that represents an alien system of thought, we may again observe something of interest occurring in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. Talking about how his attitude towards Shelley's ideas affected his enjoyment of Shelley's poetry, Eliot admits that he positively dislikes some of Shelley's
views and that this hampers his enjoyment of the poetry. At the same time, however, he concedes something which is of interest to us here:

I am not a Buddhist, but some of the early Buddhist scriptures affect me as parts of the Old Testament do; I can still enjoy Fitzgerald's *Omar*, though I do not hold that rather smart and shallow view of life.  

Perhaps many readers of Eliot's poems, particularly the later poems, would say something similar about their appreciation of Eliot's poetry. While it may not be possible for the reader to feel the way Eliot feels about his religious convictions, it is possible for him to enjoy the poetry. If, however, one positively dislikes Eliot's religious views with the kind of intensity Eliot evidently dislikes Shelley's views, it may perhaps become impossible to enjoy the poetry.

It is important to note that in choosing to accept the authority of the Church, Eliot made a very deliberate and conscious decision. While his poetry enacts the struggle towards faith, he sometimes made his position forcefully clear in prose. What becomes clear from his words and action is that he was not an individualist in the sense that he chose to surrender his individual judgement to the Church. At the same time, his poetry enacts the struggle he had to face to do this. It has to be noted, however, that his surrendering his individual judgment to the Church did not at all meant that he was a weak-willed, dependent person. On the contrary, it was a decision taken with a lot of deliberation; and even after joining the Anglican Church,
he did not simply become a religious poet. As we have seen in this work, even the poems where he affirms his faith—the *Ariel Poems*, *Ash Wednesday*, *Four Quartets*—retain an engaging appeal for all readers, believers and non-believers alike, because of their intense deliberations with serious issues that affect us all. His explicitly Christian poetry transcends its Christian boundaries.

But one need not be all the time defensive about Eliot’s religious poetry and religious sentiments. One reason why many people find it difficult to seriously appreciate religious sentiments or religious poetry is because they believe that religion is a superstition that has to go away with the awakening of the modern, scientific temperament. This, of course, is simplifying things too much, and this presumption ignores the fact that religious feeling or spirituality can be a natural and important component of human sensibility. All this is, of course, connected to what we have asserted more than once in this work: that Eliot had a natural yearning for spirituality. This claim that he had a spiritual element in his character presupposes that human beings—at least some of them—have a natural thirst for spirituality. This urge may lead one to accept some institutionalized religion, and that is what happened to Eliot, but an institutionalized religion is only one of the areas in which spirituality may manifest itself. Without his spiritual nature, man is not himself:

Indeed, there is a case for arguing that *Homo sapens* is also *Homo religious*. Men and women started to worship gods as soon
as they became recognizably human; they created religions at the same time as they created works of art. This was not simply because they wanted to propitiate powerful forces; these early faiths expressed the wonder and mystery that seem always to have been an essential component of the human experience of this beautiful yet terrifying world. Like art, religion has been an attempt to find meaning and value in life, despite the suffering that flesh is heir to.\footnote{4}

Religion, or some substitute for it is likely to stay for as long as human beings stay, for spirituality is something inherent to human nature. At the end of Chapter 10 (‘Death of God?’) of her book *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong recounts a story that illustrates the human craving for God. After witnessing the brutalities of the Nazi regime at Auschwitz where over a million Jews were put to death, it is said that one day a group of Jews put God on trial. It was to be decided whether he was not worthy of death. They found him guilty of extreme cruelty and betrayal:

\[\ldots\text{they found him guilty and, presumably, worthy of death. The Rabbi pronounced the verdict. Then he looked up and said that the trial was over: it was time for the evening prayer.}\]  

This can help us understand why some people, like Eliot, cannot do without God or religion or prayer. And, to understand the actual process of Eliot’s surrendering ‘individual judgment’ to the Church, we can briefly go back to his essay on Pascal again. There, in talking about the way in which the
'intelligent believer' comes to accept the authority of religion, he essentially tells us about the manner in which he himself must have been propelled towards belief:

He finds the world to be so and so; he finds its character inexplicable by any non-religious theory: among religions he finds Christianity, and Catholic Christianity, to account most satisfactorily for the world and especially for the moral world within; and thus, by what Newman calls 'powerful and concurrent' reasons, he finds himself inexorably committed to the dogma of the Incarnation.10

The young Eliot, writing in an unconventional style and deliberately choosing the dirty, sordid realities of life, was essentially expressing his dissatisfaction, even disgust, with the world. Then, in successive stages, he attempted to record in his poetry his attempt to find satisfaction in what seemed to him the only answer to all his questions: Catholic Christianity. When we talk of Eliot's ultimate satisfaction with Christianity, however, we need to note that he cannot be easily charged of being parochial or narrow-minded.

This point assumes special significance when we consider the charges of anti-Semitism against Eliot. Many of Eliot's critics have taken an adverse view about the supposed anti-Semitism of some of his verse and prose. Our concern here being with the poetry alone, we need not go into a discussion of the prose statements. Only, it may perhaps be pointed out that
if in some of his prose statements he has taken an anti-Semitic stance, there are other statements where he has supported Judaism. Even Anthony Julius, author of *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form*, who is uncompromising in his criticism of Eliot on this issue, acknowledges the fact that Eliot condemned anti-Semitism.\(^\text{11}\)

Just as the charge of anti-Semitism is not new, Eliot has always had defenders on this issue. Roger Kojecky, for example, has convincingly argued that the charge is not really very well-founded, and that some of Eliot's detractors have made a mountain out of a molehill.\(^\text{12}\) Jewel Spears Brooker, in a brilliant review of Anthony Julius's *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form*, has defended Eliot against almost all the charges that Julius has brought against him, and has shown Julius' method to be cantankerous and his conclusions highly questionable.\(^\text{13}\) One of the most powerful recent defences against the charge of anti-Semitism in Eliot is an article by Ronald Schuchard in *Modernism/modernity*.\(^\text{14}\) It should be noted, however, that Eliot cannot perhaps be absolved of all charges of anti-Semitism. Unpleasant references to Jews in poems like *Gerontion* and *Burbank with a Baedeker, Blistein with a Cigar* cannot be entirely forgotten, and though to read Eliot is to confront "the uncertainty of words", at least a part of the meaning of poems like the above-mentioned ones have an amount of anti-Semitic element.

The best of Eliot's poetry, however, cannot be charged with anti-Semitic or other parochial elements. The predominant tone of unbelief or
scepticism in the early poems is best read as an expression of despair at the contemporary situation in Europe and also despair at the level of personal experience. The poems of religious or spiritual quest, the *Ariel Poems* and *Ash Wednesday* are directly Christian in tone and theme, but the quest for something more than the material needs of life is an eternal quest of human beings, and the emphasis in these poems is not in the Christianity at all; the emphasis is in the quest itself, which, again, can be understood in terms the struggle between scepticism and belief. If the poet seems to stop at a certain attainment of belief in *Four Quartets*, the best example of his later poetry, it does not mean an end to all his doubts. Even in expressing attained belief in the later poetry, the note of doubt remains:

> If it attains a world of belief or a conviction of order, that conviction is won against the attacking strength of doubt and remains always subject to its corrosive power.\(^{15}\)

In this work we have tried to show how this constant struggle between scepticism and belief enacted in his poetry makes the poetry much more than a mere statement of religious preference. If Eliot's poetry continues to be of enduring interest to many readers today, it is largely because of this wrestle between scepticism and belief which is an inseparable element of his poetry at all stages of his poetic career. The poems where his religious quest finds clear expression are beautiful expressions of the universal human yearning for something more than the material needs of life, and the poems supposed to be explicitly Christian in nature, including *Four*
Quartets also are not mere expressions of Christian piety, but are charged with powerful questions and doubts about the human condition, and are far too complex in nature to be categorized as religious poetry in any narrow sense. Although there is a discernible movement from a preponderance of doubt and despair towards an attainment of belief and assurance in Eliot's poetry, the different stages of his poetic activity are best not judged in terms of inferiority or superiority. Different readers respond to these stages in different ways, some preferring the early poetry where the sceptic voice is very clearly heard, and others seeing the later poems, particularly Four Quartets, as examples of the perfection of his poetic art. To a large extent, however, readers respond differently not because of real qualitative difference in the poems, but because of their particular preferences as readers or critics. It seems best to understand the various phases of Eliot's poetic activity as arising out of his need to express himself differently at different times.
NOTES

1. Eliot, T. S. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. 1933. London: Faber and Faber, 1964. 30. The poet has not, of course, been always so perceptive about the ‘meaning’ of poetry. He has, for example, very often rejected the idea that poetry conveyed any belief. In an essay, ‘Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca’ (1927), he has asserted that a poet merely makes use of the philosophy or thought that he or she encounters; whether the poet also believes in that philosophy does not matter at all. Helen Gardner takes up this issue in the first chapter (‘Concepts of Tragedy’) of her book *Religion and Literature* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971) and convincingly argues that “It is impossible to rest content with this conception of the poet as merely using a theory current in his age which meshes with his emotional impulses, as intellectually irresponsible and concerned only with truth of feeling.” She says that in fact this idea is inadequate to Eliot’s own practice as a poet, and that it also conflicts with the statements of many great poets and the experience of sensitive readers.


3. Perhaps this problem of personal bias will always be there. The issue once again reminds one of Helen Gardner’s *Religion and
Literature. What she says about tragedy there is pertinent for poetry and all other forms of art: “And ultimately, I think, we must accept that the way men read the image of life that a tragedy presents will depend on the bias of their temperaments.” (Gardner, Helen. *Religion and Literature*. London: Faber and Faber, 1971 34.)


9. Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God*. 376 In Chapter One of this thesis, we noted how Eliot behaved differently from many of his close friends and fellow-writers in accepting a set of religious beliefs. Eliot’s yearning for belief and assurance must be understood not as the personal eccentricity of an individual, but as the expression of the basic human need pointed out in Karen Armstrong’s story. Eliot’s surrendering his individual will to the will of the Church, his acceptance of the beliefs of the Anglican establishment, and his making use of his religious poetry to create
poetry of an enduring nature can all be understood as the expression
of this human desire for belief.

Faber and Faber, 1999. 408.

Fleissner recalls that Anthony Julius, one of the most vocal critics
of Eliot’s ‘anti-Semitism’, acknowledged, even in The Times
(August 9, 1988) that the poet ‘wrote publicly, and in stirring terms,
condemning anti-Semitism’. Fleissner also mentions a letter from
Eliot to A. L. Rowse in January 1934, in which Eliot talks of his
efforts to organize help for German Jewish refugees. Besides, he
says that if the presence of a few Jewish figures in rather
uncomplimentary ways in Eliot’s poetry were taken as sufficient
evidence for his ‘anti-Semitism’, then many great writers, judged
with the same yardstick, can be similarly accused of being anti-
Semitic. Eliot’s close association with the clearly anti-Semitic Ezra
Pound is also sometimes taken as some kind of ‘proof’ of his anti-
Semitism. Fleissner mentions having seen, in the material
assembled from Ezra Pound’s stay in St. Elizabeth’s Mental
Hospital in Washington, D. C., clear evidence of Eliot’s criticism of
his friend’s anti-Semitism. In a letter to Pound, Eliot had very
strongly deplored his friend’s anti-Semitism.

13. Brooker, Jewel Spears. ‘Eliot in the Dock: A Review Essay’ Rev. of *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* by Anthony Julius. *South Atlantic Review*. 61:4(Fall 1996): 107-14. Online www.missouri.edu 10 06 2003. As Brooker rightly points out, Anthony Julius, divorce attorney of Diana, Princess of Wales, is adversarial by profession, and he takes his adversarial reading of Eliot’s poetry to extreme limits in this book, by far the most virulent of attacks on Eliot’s ‘anti-Semitism’. Brooker says that ‘Julius, by profession a lawyer, can smell an offence a mile away’ and that he is ‘wrong in trying to persuade by epithet’ though he is not the first to do so. Besides, most readers would find it difficult to agree with Julius who maintains ‘that a poem is as propositional as a newspaper editorial or a scientific text.’ More seriously, Julius is intellectually dishonest, and his voice is not at all representative of Jewish sentiments. He shows how Julius has, in discussing poems like *Gerontion*, displaced his focus of attention from the poem’s context to the context of the history of anti-Semitism. Brooker ultimately finds Julius’s book a ‘deeply flawed’ document.

While most of Schuchard's arguments are acceptable, and are designed to show the error of making too much out of too little, he does not seem very convincing in trying to clear all charges of anti-Semitism against Eliot.