
A Reconsideration of T. S. Eliot's Views on Education

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In a former paper, I discussed Eliot's assumption that the issues of education cover the whole view of human society ; one should not argue the issues as if they were irrelevant to the actual human society in which we live. Eliot also indicates to us that we should draw from our values of life when we wish seriously to discuss educational issues to the full extent of our capacities. From this, it follows that any discussion of these issues will have much to do with our culture and its place in human society.

Eliot himself points out in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* that the purpose of education is to transmit culture to the next generation.¹ In other words, the continuity of human culture is to be assured through education. He insists that the most important channel for the transmission of culture is the family. One might even argue that human and sincere communication can be possible only in the family. Eliot explains :

The primary channel of transmission of culture is the family ; no man wholly escapes from the kind, or wholly surpasses the degree, of culture which he acquired from his early environment.²

Eliot's emphasis on the family, not school, as the channel of transmission of culture is very instructive, even for readers in Japan, since the concept of "cultural breakdown" has been so widely raised by intellectuals since Eliot's time.³

Eliot further indicates that the family has become less able to give children a good upbringing because of individualism. The following passage has a significance for modern Japanese confronting serious educational issues.

Instead of congratulating ourselves on our progress, whenever the school assumes another responsibility hitherto left to parents, we might do better to admit that we have arrived at a stage of civilization at which the family is irresponsible, or incompetent, or helpless; at which parents cannot be expected to train their children properly; at which many parents cannot afford to feed them properly, and would not know how, even if they had the means; and that Education must step in and make the best of a bad job.⁴

This suggests that Eliot was already predicting that the family, as a minimum unit to bind people together, was on the path to collapse as a result of the advancement of commercialism and industrialism in contemporary society. It seems that, to Eliot, the family was preeminently the place where formation of character and training for the whole of human intercourse ought to take place.

It would thus be fatal for European society if the family ceased to function as it used to; in effect, the family is a kind of center for various primordial feelings such as religion. Eliot himself points out that issues of education also have something to do with religion at a deeper level of

human life. He argues :

If education today seems to deteriorate, if it seems to become more and more chaotic and meaningless, it is primarily because we have no settled and satisfactory arrangement of society, and because we have both vague and diverse opinions about the kind of society we want...to know what we want in education we must know what we want in general, we must derive our theory of education from our philosophy of life. The problem turns out to be a religious problem.⁵

Eliot as a Christian poet was aware of the fact that education in the rest of the world as well as in Europe was in a critical condition. Eliot writes :

One might almost speak of a *crisis* of education. There are particular problems for each country, for each civilization, just as there are particular problems for each parent ; but there is also a general problem for the whole civilized world, and for the uncivilized so far as it is being taught by its civilized superiors ; a problem which may be as acute in Japan, in China or in India as in Britain or Europe or America. The progress (I do not mean the extension) of education for several centuries has been from one aspect a drift, from another aspect a push ; for it has tended to be dominated by the idea of *getting on*. The individual wants more education, not as an aid to the acquisition of wisdom but in order to get on ; the nation wants more in order to get the better of other nations, the class wants it to get the better of other classes, or at least to hold its own against them. Education is associated therefore with technical efficiency on the one hand, and with rising in society on the other...⁶

He tries to keep the purposes of education away from aims such as social success or the filling of free time. As he regards education as a means to transmit culture, Eliot reiterates that education must be religious in a Christian society ; its aims will be directed by a Christian philosophy of life.⁷ One is able to see Eliot's strong commitment to Christianity in his

words here.

When we look back upon what Christianity has done for European society, however, a harsh remark of George Steiner in *In Bluebeard's Castle* is brought home to us.

It is to the ambiguous afterlife of religious feeling in Western culture that we must look, to the malignant energies released by the decay of natural religious forms. We know from the plans of those who built them and from the testimony of inmates, that the death camps constituted a complete, coherent world.⁸

Steiner further investigates the religious feeling which has been indwelling the heart of Western culture :

We are not, I believe, dealing with some monstrous accident in modern social history. The holocaust was not the result of merely individual pathology or of the neuroses of one nation-state....That intent takes us to the heart of certain instabilities in the fabric of Western culture, in the relations between instinctual and religious life.⁹

Eliot and Steiner have entirely different views of culture, however, they completely agree regarding the concept that religious feeling plays an important role at a very profound level of western culture. This means that religion and culture, like the two wheels on a single axle-shaft, move along coupled to each other in European society. The following passage indicates how much Steiner shares with Eliot regarding culture at large :

...I find Eliot's insistence on the religious character of genuine civilization, and his "conception of culture and religion as being, when each term

is taken in the right context, different aspects of the same thing," largely persuasive. It seems to me incontrovertible that the holocaust must be set in the framework of the psychology of religion, and that an understanding of this framework is vital to an argument on culture.¹⁰

If the purpose of education is to transmit inherited culture to the following generation, the question arises as to why we should not examine the failure of culture to prevent genocide from taking place in Europe. Steiner does not in fact go to such an extreme as to denounce the purpose of education to transmit culture, even though this culture itself might turn out to contain the seed of genocide. What Steiner does seem to be indicating is that religious feeling as contained in culture needs to be closely examined before education is allowed to perform this work of transmission.

Nobody would deny the fact that education is a means to make everybody happy. In other words, culture should be transmitted through education in such a way as to make people and society happy. As we lead our ordinary lives unconsciously, we may sometimes miss some matter of vital importance for the happiness of human life. Through his views on education, Eliot wishes in a sense to make us realize what the most important things are for achieving this aim of happiness.

Notes

- 1 T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York and London : Harcourt Brace & Company), p. 172.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.

- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- 5 T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essay* (London : Faber & Faber Limited, 1932), p. 507.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 507-508.
- 7 Eliot, *Christianity and Culture*, p. 30.
- 8 George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1971), p. 53.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 34.