
Anglicanism in T. S. Eliot

Junichi Saito

This article is going to prove that there is a considerable difference between Eliot's earlier poems and his later ones. As a matter of fact, the way Eliot depicts his poems changed very much after he converted from his ancestors' Unitarianism to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927. His earlier poems such as "Prufrock," "Portrait of a Lady," and "Gerontion" deal with the theme of God's absence in the barren modern world in which humans are losing their meaning of life. It is impossible to read into the Eliot's poems of this period any sense of salvation, but only the sense of despair of his contemporaries. Eliot says in "Gerontion":

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain

There is little chance for humans to be saved from the bleak world in "Gerontion." The old man in the poem may be the persona of Eliot himself, representing his contemporary men who are in agony. It can also be argued that Eliot's spiritual intolerance towards other cultural values can be found

in his earlier poems. Eliot says:

My house is a decayed house,
And the Jew squats on the window-sill, the owner,
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.

One might say that Eliot's ancestors' Unitarianism has a great influence upon his earlier poems. Eliot's grandfather's strict views of life may have influenced his belief and thought.

Peter Ackroyd argues how great William Greenleaf Eliot's influence on his family was.

The persuasive and dominant presence in the household, however, was that of his Grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, who had died the year before Eliot was born. Eliot, even in old age, remembered his influence as that of one who 'rules his son and his son's sons from the grave', a Moses upon whose tablets were engraved the laws of public service. Eliot was always much possessed by the dead, and that sense of possession (or dispossession) was one which he learned early. William Greenleaf Eliot was a frail, hard-working man in whom duty was the central note: 'He wrote . . . in his student days, that principles were what his nature craved', or so explained Eliot's mother in a memoir of the man which she dedicated to her children 'lest they forget'.¹

It can be argued that Eliot's grandfather's religious belief cast a pessimistic shadow on the earlier poems. As a matter of fact, Unitarianism is an entirely different belief from the viewpoints of orthodox Christians. Ackroyd discusses the difference of dogma.

Unitarianism is, in fact, from the perspective of orthodoxy, an heretical, faith principally because it does not accept the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation-Christ becoming a sort of superior Emerson. It is essentially Puritanism drained of its theology, since it denies the central tenets of predestination and damnation; heaven and hell are of less account than the mundane space which we inhabit between them. The measure of Man is Man himself and a peculiar American optimism, about the progress and perfectibility of humankind, is thereby given a quasi-spiritual sanction. Unitarianism is earnest, intellectual, humanitarian, part of that high-minded 'ethical culture' which Eliot in later years distrusted and mocked.²

According to Ackroyd's explanation, Unitarians do not accept the basic orthodox teaching of Christ as the Incarnated Word. In a sense, Unitarianism can be called a pragmatic belief system stressing an ethical way of life which leads Unitarians toward a stage of human perfectibility. Eliot seems to have suffered with Unitarian sense of moral progress throughout his earlier writing years. The following passage reflects his sense of despair for the contemporary world.

I grow old . . . I grow old . . .
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat
a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers,
and walk down the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
I do not think that they will sing to me.
....
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea

By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us up, and we drown.

Is this really a passage about a man in his thirties? The tone sounds very pessimistic as if he had lost the meaning of life. The poet seems to be searching for the basic universal values that all humans, despite the differences in their religious beliefs, can normally rely on.

The contemporary world Eliot depicts in *Poems 1920* can be called a God-absent world in which materialism dominates in Europe.

But this or such was Bleistein's way:
A saggy blending of the knees
And elbows, with the palms turned out,
Chicago Semite Viennese.
....
The rats are underneath the piles.
The Jew is underneath the lot.
Money in furs.

Eliot seems to have searched out a scapegoat to which he can ascribe the barren atmosphere of human society at large. One might say that the Jews are figures of a rootless and materialistic people in the above-quoted passage. Eliot might regard Jews here as alien to his religious belief, because Jew remain separated from a Christian society to maintain their identity.

Eliot's intolerance towards other cultures may be accountable to his immature belief as a Christian. However, in his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, he argues, from a wider perspective, that exclusiveness may be needed by the Jews themselves to maintain their own culture. Eliot argues:

Since the diaspora, and the scattering of Jews amongst peoples holding the Christian Faith, it may have been unfortunate both for these peoples and for the Jews themselves, that the culture-contact between them has had to be within those neutral zones of culture in which religion could be ignored: and the effect may have been to strengthen the illusion that there can be culture without religion.³

It may be that Eliot searches for unity in a western society taking Christianity as its spiritual basis. However, this does not mean that Eliot hates other cultural values because of his strong faith in Christianity. His attitude in "The Unity of European Culture" is indicative of respect:

For the health of the culture of Europe two conditions are required: that the culture of each country should be unique, and that the different cultures should recognise their relationship to each other, so that each other should be susceptible of influence from the others. And this is possible because there is a common element in European culture, an interrelated history of thought and feeling and behavior, an interchange of arts and of ideas.⁴

It can be said that Eliot's posture towards different cultures here is very tolerant, compared with his posture in *Poems 1920*. There is no denying the fact that Eliot's conversion to the Anglican Church has a great influence on his posture.

Before his conversion, however, we find Eliot struggling against boredom and spiritual barrenness in a world without God. Eliot's sense of boredom and despair for his contemporary world is still apparent in *The Waste Land*.

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Eliot depicts the scene of his contemporary men walking like ghosts bereft of the purpose of life. The tone of despair still dominates this whole poem, although there is a little room for salvation at the closing part:

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
.... Hieronymo's mad againe.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih

One might argue that Eliot here is trying to expand his personal agony into a more universal one. In other words, his personal voice represents ailing human society at large. In fact, however, Eliot had to struggle another 6 years to obtain a solid belief in Anglicanism.

Ackroyd says that Eliot fell to his knees in front of Michelangelo's *Pieta* when he was visiting Rome in 1926.⁵ Ackroyd also discusses how Eliot was finally converted to Anglicanism.

. . . before his formal conversion, he was undergoing regular training and attending early morning services in the Church of England. In an essay on Lancelot Andrewes, published in this year, he described the virtues of what he called the 'English Catholic Church', and indeed his confessor has recalled how Eliot saw his conversion as a return to the religion of his English ancestors. . . . He became attached to the Anglo-Catholic movement within the Church of England, precisely because he saw in it the continuation of such a tradition. Its emphasis upon the apostolic mission of the Church, and upon the importance of sacramental worship, afforded (for those who wished to look for it) the kind of historical and ritualistic continuity which were for Eliot the essential elements of faith. Furthermore, the ties of the English Church with the political and social life of the nation, as well as with the monarchy, encouraged him to believe that here, if anywhere, a formal synthesis was to be found. Eliot, in fact, brought with him a sense of tradition and an instinct for order which the English themselves rarely possess, and it may seem something of a sophistry to locate the glories of the Tudor polity within the Church of England of the nineteen-twenties. Eliot himself was quite aware of the fact, but that did not prevent him from making his own act of faith. His genuine desire for a national Church which retained its Catholic inheritance led him to do so and, if this seems to be the work of deliberation rather than instinct, that is because in part it was.⁶

Eliot's stance toward the Church of England becomes very stable in *Four Quartets*. The following passage demonstrates his self-confidence as an Anglican.

While the light fails
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.

Compared with his earlier poems, Eliot suggests here that human beings can be saved by the hand of God. One might say that Eliot was reaffirming an important role for the Church of England when he was writing this passage in “Little Gidding”. His strong sense of commitment to the Church of England can also be seen in the following passage:

... remembering also that while a sub-culture may suffer loss in being separated from the main body, the main body may also be mutilated by the loss of a member of itself. We must recognise next, that where a sub-culture has in time become established as the main culture of a *particular territory*, it tends to change places, for that territory, with the main European culture. In this respect it differs from those sub-cultures representing sects the members of which share a region with the main culture. In England, the main cultural tradition has for several centuries been Anglican. Roman Catholics in England are, of course, in a more central European tradition than are Anglicans; yet, because the main tradition of England has been Anglican, they are in another aspect more outside of the tradition than are Protestant dissenters. It is Protestant dissent which is, in relation to Anglicanism, a congeries of sub-cultures: or, when we regard Anglicanism itself as a sub-culture, we might refer to it as a congeries of “sub-sub-cultures” – as this term is too clownish to be admitted into good company, we can only say “secondary sub-cultures.”⁷

Eliot does not argue that the Roman Catholic Church is replaced by the Church of England; Anglicanism’s role is to act as the cornerstone of culture in England. However, Eliot’s attitude towards the temporal seems to be very tolerant, though he does stress the need for a Christian society.

. . . even in a Christian society as well organized as we can conceive possible in this world, the limit would be that our temporal and spiritual life should be harmonized: the temporal and spiritual would never be identified. There would always remain a dual allegiance, to the State and to the Church, to one's country-men and to one's fellow-Christians everywhere, and the latter would always have the primacy. There would always be a tension; and this tension is essential to the idea of a Christian society, and is a distinguishing mark between a Christian and a pagan society.⁸

The above-quoted passage indicates that Eliot comes to a mature state of mind as a Christian as well as a literary critic. Eliot's sense of tolerance towards the temporal can not be found in his early poems in which he suffers with such a sense of boredom and despair. Later, however, he is able to say:

And all shall be well and
All manners of things shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

If Eliot attained such an ultimate state of mind, it was only after struggling to find the meaning of life as a Christian poet. His conversion to the Church of England is a turning point allowing him to put behind him the chaotic state of mind observed in his earlier poems. One might say that Anglicanism makes him an integrated man of letters in the twentieth century.

Notes

- 1) Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p.16.
- 2) Ibid., p.17.
- 3) T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company), p.144.
- 4) Ibid., p.197.
- 5) Ackroyd, p.159.
- 6) Ibid., pp.159-160.
- 7) Eliot, op. cit., p.148-149.
- 8) Ibid., p.44.