



T. S. ELIOT AS A PRECURSOR TO POSTSECULARISM

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Abstract: To the general readers, Eliot is a modernist poet who talked about religion and divinity, but, for the theorists and sociologists, he is a postsecularist who poetically captured the essence and urgency of postsecularism. The present paper analyses some of Eliot's verses in order to expose his postsecularist stance much before the advent of postsecularism as a theory.

Keywords: Postsecularism, Religion, Literature, Secularism

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What is Postsecularism?

Postsecularism is an epistemological departure from the practice and philosophy of secularism as espoused by the project of European modernity. While secularism is a political philosophy and promotes religion and ritualism as merely a private affair, postsecularism, on the other hand, emphasizes on religion not as a mere private religious belief but as an integral aspect of peoples' private as well as public living conditions. Postsecularism argues that we can live both in the city of God and the city of men at the same time. It believes in the sustenance and the continuation of religion and theological practices in the modern society. Adhering to the ideas of Emile Durkheim, postsecularists behold that religion plays a significant role in the functions and interactions in human world. Religion serves as a unifying agent for the stability, social control, social health, motivation and religious experiences of modern men.

Postsecularism is a global religious awakening that stands for recognition, inclusion and toleration of diverse religions, religious people, theologies, rituals and practices. It is an ortho-cultural condition of postmodern society almost akin to another new religious ideology. Critics read it as an analogue to postmodernism and binary to secularism. The project of secularism is a political process as it prepares "picture of a self-sufficient public realm fostering freedom and governance without recourse to a specific religious faith" (Connolly, 1999, p.21). While secularism relegates religion to private sphere, postsecularism promotes religious beliefs and practices in public sphere (Crockett, 2018, p. 6). In simple terms, we can opine that postsecularism freed religion from the secular traps. It is an undoing of what secularism did to people at the theological sphere.

In its vigorous resurrection and widespread movement from private to public, postsecularism decodes the normalising and hegemonic political motives of secularism that attempts to impose order, rationality, discipline, and universality on people and at the cost of their freedom and choice of religious beliefs and practices. Most significantly, the postsecular condition empowers us to ruminate whether secularism constricted religion and religious freedom at all? Whether religion can coexist, at the same time, in private as well as public? Whether we can practise religion in rational institutions like courts and universities? Whether science should embrace religion and vice versa? Whether religion is medieval or modern? Is there one religion or many? Is religion a site of power, hegemony, identity and culture? There are several such religious issues that have surfaced

because of the postsecular developments in our times.

Postsecularism decries the political overtones of secularism as civic, rational, and universal. It is a departure from the earlier normative definition of theism, monotheism, and secularism. Religion in its polysemic avatar is the core of postsecularism. In its ubiquitous presence across societies and cultures, Postsecularism as a theoretical philosophy espouses for both physical and ideological resurrections of religions across cultures.

T. S. Eliot and Postsecularism

It is against this backdrop that we notice T. S. Eliot, amongst several other poets and writers, raising his concerns against the decentring of God and the world as a 'Waste Land'. God was put in to questions, doubts, even tests too. The world had experienced the brutalities of wars, fascism, tyranny of temporal power and was increasingly becoming agnostic, sceptic and disillusioned. If Yeats had premonition of a religious apocalypse in his "The Second Coming" (1920), Eliot expressed this kind of moral crisis in his essay "Religion and Literature" (1935). Eliot vehemently grugged against European experimentations with literary creativity where realism and naturalism are experimented upon. Eliot was doubtful of such realistic experimentations in the literary forms and genres, especially in the absence of morality and ethics in them. Contrary to such forms and genres which many saw to be the mediums of realistic expressions, Eliot emphasised not on forms, but intentions, feelings and intuitions that might reveal the crises of a society. And to delve deep into such deep structures, we need poetry more as it deals with the concentricity of things than prose which deals with the eccentricity of things. His poetry drama or versa drama is actually a product to this urgency of deep understanding of modern society. Interestingly, he tinges such poetry with Christian ritualistic patterns. This is how his verse drama are more Christian and ritualistic. You can read his religious concerns in literature in the following quotation:

There have been three chief phases. In the first, the novel took the Faith, in its contemporary version, for granted, and omitted it from its picture of life... In the second, it doubted, worried about, or contested the Faith. To the third phase.... It is the phase of those who have never heard the Christian Faith spoken of as anything but an anachronism. (Eliot, 1975, p.100)

Eliot therefore appeals for inculcation of ethics and morality into literature meant for public reading. He argues how literature can strike a balance

between aesthetics and theism together, and, thereby, educate readers about the subject and object of their reading, i. e., what they should read and what they should not. This essay would also coincide with his writing of the religious play *The Murder in the Cathedral* for the Canterbury festival in 1935. The play was his public demonstration of his Anglicanism as he wrote the play to be staged during the 1935 Canterbury Festival. Thus, in both his essays and plays, Eliot overtly declared his religious concerns and philosophy-- his appeal to the European world to repose faith in God again, to embrace the Christian pattern of life.

At the personal level, in 1927, Eliot had converted himself into Anglicanism from Unitarianism. Before this religious conversion, his works such as "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock", "Preludes", and "Gerontion", mostly echoed spiritual barrenness and God's absence in the modern world. Like a modernist, he was pessimistic if people could salvage themselves from this kind of spiritual crisis at all. "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" from the *Waste Land* reflects on this (Eliot, 1969, p.62). It was all Prufrockian moments for Eliot and his society then to ponder on life and justification. The existential gaze on biological body, material pursuits, on one hand, and the working of Time and Fate on human beings, on the other, is best expressed through Prufrock.

I grow old . . . I grow old . . .

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. . .

Till human voices wake us up, and we drown. (Ibid, p.16)

The act of ending the poem with 'drown' does indicate a kind of apocalyptic imagination, much in the fashion of modernism. The irksome yet irrevocable gloominess that pervades the whole ambience of the poem presents mankind faced with a dead-end, an abyss-like spiritual crisis from which there's no coming back, resulting in numbing despair. However, his sense of despair emanating from religious scepticism changed in his later works, particularly post-27, when he considered religion as the source and saviour of a dying society. He envisioned for a community who would be bound by common belief, common practices, common rituals surrounding Christianity, a community of God's people that

would be with God together. God is universal and public rather than individual and private. Such postsecularist conception of society is seen in his own confession: "I have tried to restrict my ambition of a Christian society to a social minimum: to picture, not a society of saints, but of ordinary men, of men whose Christianity is communal before being individual" (Eliot, 2016, n.p.).

Similarly, his ritualistic plays and essays on religion, etc., reflect this spiritual optimism in T. S. Eliot. Such a change in him is symptomatic of the change from secularism to postsecularism that we are discoursing here. T. S. Eliot poignantly reminds us about our foolish modern life in his *Choruses from The Rock*:

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." (Eliot, 1969, p.147)

Eliot seems to critique the busy modern men's materialistic quest for a capitalistic world- a world of crude hands, muscles and physical power. Eliot questioned such mundane trust for establishing a utilitarian or capitalist society where equality would be judged on equal distribution and consumption of knowledge and information. Such a capitalistic world where religion would be despised for its negative impact on materialistic progress was something Eliot was repugnant of. He therefore was critical of Karl Marx who considered religion as the opium of the working people. Karl Marx's dystopic view of religion was reductive as he envisioned for socialism devoid of religion. Eliot vehemently criticised the secular approaches of Marx for a welfare society thus:

There are a very large number of people in the world today who believe that all ills are fundamentally economic. Some believe that various specific economic changes alone would be enough to set the world right; others demand more or less drastic changes in the social as well, changes chiefly of two opposed types. These changes demanded, and in some places carried out, are alike in one respect, that they hold the assumptions of what I call Secularism: they concern themselves only with changes of a temporal, material, and external nature; they concern themselves with morals only of a collective nature." (Eliot, 1975, p.106)

Contrary to Marx, Eliot has a deeper and inclusive understanding of social milieu. Eliot believed in the inseparable and intrinsic relationship between society and religion, and, therefore, he confessed

that there could not be a total separation of us from our religion and imagination:

I am convinced that "we fail to realize how completely, and yet how irrationally, we separate our literary from our religious judgments. If there could be a complete separation, perhaps it might not matter: but the separation is not, and never can be, complete. (Eliot, 1975, p.100)

Eliot's religious faith converted his approach from gloomy ruminations to active quest. It is only after his conversion, he started re-establishing the 'sacred' in his poetic imagination. Habermas also bolsters a need to 'reinterpret' the sacred, which needs both religious and secular minded to work in unison. For this, the secular has to give up thinking in a 'post metaphysical' way. It is interesting to note that while Prufrock has a post-metaphysical way of thinking, *Choruses from the Rock* repeatedly harks back to metaphysics.

The same kind of existential onslaught is visible in *The Family Reunion* where Harry the family man attempts to escape from the shackle of domestic and worldly attachment. Harry finds the living world a waste land where people are indignant and ignorant. He reminds his family members about their ordinary understanding of time, sleep, events, life, nightmare, etc. As opposed to such ordinary understanding, Harry intends to resonate the Biblical echoes of these concepts that the modern families are blissfully ignorant of.

You are all people To whom nothing has happened, at most a continual impact Of external events. You have gone through life in sleep, Never woken to the nightmare. I tell you, life would be unendurable If you were wide awake. (Eliot, 1969, p. 293)

Harry's existential anguish here reflects Eliot's anxieties on the state of the modern world. Understanding such spiritual crisis in the European world, T, S, Eliot undertook a prophetic stance in his later poems and plays. He attempted to bridge this spiritual vacuum by not only reminding the disillusioned but also orchestrating the Christian religious plays like *The Murder in the Cathedral* in front of the Christian audience. Eliot as a poet turned the stagnant wheel of modern mentality into a movement towards remembering and reposing God. He advocated for the coexistence of God and city, orthodoxy and religious freedom. And then reminds us for rebuilding the ruined city of providence- reposing faith in God, returning to liturgy and educating the Christian theology to people. His prophetic vision is distinguishable in *Choruses from the Rock*:

In the vacant places We will build with new bricks
There are hands and machines...
There is work together A Church for all And a job
for each Every man to his work. (1969, p.149)

If postsecularism is the freedom of public performance of religion, Eliot did preach for such postsecularism in his *Choruses* as follows:

The lot of man is ceaseless labour, Or ceaseless idleness, which is still harder, Or irregular labour, which is not pleasant...

All men are ready to invest their money But most expect dividends.

I say to you: Make perfect your will

The desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you,
The desert is in the heart of your brother.

The good man is the builder, if he build what is good.

I will show you the things that are now being done,
And some of the things that were long ago done,
That you may take heart. Make perfect your will.

Let me show you the work of the humble. Listen.
(1969, pp.148-149)

Labour, idleness, harvest, ration and enlightened mind, southern tropics, tube-train, builder, etc., invoked in the above stanzas are the building vocabularies of modern men, the markers of modern society living on labour, machine, temporal time and opportunity. The religious overtone of postsecularism can also be best found in the chorus of the women of the Canterbury who are forced to march towards the canterbury church to witness the birth of a martyr from an ordinary man. The mundane survival of the women through doubts, fear and uncertainty is juxtaposed with the heavenly permanence and certainty of a martyr.

Some presage of an act Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has forced our feet Towards the cathedral. We are forced to bear witness....

The New Year waits, destiny waits for the coming.
(1969, p.239)

These lines do echo a quasi-Prufrockian gloominess and uncertainty. Yet, the walk towards the Cathedral is symbolic as well as symptomatic of the failure of secularization/ modernity. However, this realization is immediately followed by the rays of hope in the ordinary women of Canterbury:

We wait, we wait, And the saints and martyrs wait,
for those who shall be martyrs and saints.

Destiny waits in the hand of God, shaping the still unshapen:

I have seen these things in a shaft of sunlight.

Destiny waits in the hand of God, not in the hands of statesmen. (Ibid, p.240)

And then the resolution of their confusion fructified in the sacrifice of Becket and his subsequent sainthood.

I submit my cause to the judgement of Rome.

But if you kill me, I shall rise from my tomb To submit my cause before God's throne. (Ibid, p.269)

Thomas's words here not only celebrate religious martyrdom but also signifies Eliot's rebellion against the secular world.

The same kind of spiritual purgation is shown in the character of Harry in *The Family Reunion*. Harry is like any one of us struggling with life and identity. The futility of mundane life, material attachments are all resolved when he declares his path towards embracing God: This way the pilgrimage Of expiation Round and round the circle Completing the charm So the knot be unknotted (Ibid, p. 350)

Again, in his *Waste Land*, Eliot invokes *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata*. Shantih, Shantih, Shantih, from the *Birhadaranyaka Upanishd*, as divine intervention and solution for the modern hollow men. Even in Prufrock there is a momentary reflection on escape from severity of pessimism and religious agnosticism. Prufrock introspects and realises how still there will be time to believe in God and work for the God to justify his ways:

And indeed there will be time For the yellow smoke that slides along the street, Rubbing its back upon the window-panes; There will be time, there will be time To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet; There will be time to murder and create, And time for all the works and days of hands... (1969, pp.13-14)

Eliot's such invocation to God in his poetry was a resurrection of spirituality and reposition of faith in God. His ritualistic dramas were orthopraxis of Christianity, as these plays embodied Christian pattern in them to be called as ritualistic plays. Thomas Becket in *The Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) was the Christ in dramatic persona and underwent same stages of coming, temptation, suffering, patience, and sacrifice that Christ himself underwent. Eliot's intention to bring in a religious intervention to modern man's shallow knowledge and living is best depicted in the 'Interlude' of the same play. Here, Eliot problematises the modern men's understanding of Peace, Sacrifice and justification of life by comparing these with that of Biblical/scriptural understating of these divine virtues. For example: Reflect now, how Our Lord Himself spoke of Peace. He said to His disciples 'My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.' Did He mean peace as we think of it...?

.... If you ask that, remember then that He said also, 'Not as the world gives, give I unto you.' So then, He gave to His disciples peace, but not peace as the world gives. (1969, pp.260-261)

Eliot was not only deciphering the varied sacrileges and blasphemies committed by the modern men, equally he was dissecting the secular or irreligious mentalities of the modern society.

His poetry reflects how agnosticism or scepticism had pervaded into the very modern psyche. Spiritual crisis was a neurotic condition for the modern men- a Prufrockian paradox of "To believe or not to believe".

Conclusion

To the general readers, Eliot is a modernist poet who talked about religion and divinity, but, for the theorists and sociologists, he is a postsecularist who poetically captured the essence and urgency of postsecularism. His creative career was intersected with politics, philosophy and religion, and he would go on to declare himself as a "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (Eliot, 1928, p. ix). However, it would be wrong to consider that he was construing any new orthodox religion modelled on any religious tenets, but, certainly, he was trying to resurrect religions which were endangered by Bourgeoisism and Capitalism. Eliot's writings aimed at the continuity of tradition and modernity, and unification of secular and religious spirits. He poetically recreated human conditions where "religious communities continue to exist in a context of ongoing secularization" (Habermas, 2003, p. 104). And this is how, in his creative philosophy and principles, T. S. Eliot is undoubtedly a precursor to the theory of 'Postsecularism'.

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