

T.S. Eliot's Interpretation of Culture

Hamedreza Kohzadi¹, Fatemeh Azizmohammadi²

^{1,2}Department of English Literature, Arak Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran

E-mails: ¹hamedreza_kohzadi_usa@yahoo.com, ²F-azizmohammadi@iau-arak.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

It is an accepted fact that Eliot's concept of culture was for the most part derived from Ezra Pound's *Guide to Kulchur*. But the origins of the philosophical formulations of the term culture are traceable in his earlier work. The idea of a Christian Society (1939) which preceded the publication of his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) by almost a decade. He maintains in the idea that liberalism would in course of time be replaced naturally by a positive Christian conception of society. In any society the larger number lead lives that are "spiritual" only in the sense they follow unconsciously the habits and forms of life enjoined upon the "religious" Christians. A life in which the behavior pattern is determined in the unquestioned acceptance of the "faith" is recommended; but even better would be the life in which the people feel or realize for themselves the inadequacy of their life as they lead it in practical contexts to the levels of idealism they are expected to reach as set forth by their religion.

KEYWORDS: Eliot, Culture, Religion, Christianity, Theology.

INTRODUCTION

For Eliot, religion is Christianity. In other words, a life of conformity to Christian religious ideals is Eliot's precondition for culture. Eliot envisages a stratified society in which the upper layer of citizens who believe in traditional Christianity will activate and determine the behavior patterns of the lower classes; in the long run, dynamics of such a give and take will pave the way for culture and its ongrowth. Eliot's avowed aim in his *Notes* is to define the word culture. For him (1948:27,31):

Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living....It includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar.

To start with, Eliot uses the term culture in three different senses: in the sense of the development of an individual, a class, or a whole society. Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1925), for instance, concerns itself with the first sense of the term, where culture is a growth toward perfection or the attainment of perfection of an individual so that he may rise above the class to which he belongs. In fact Eliot quarrels with Arnold for such a limited perception of culture without reference to the conditioning background of the class or society. Again Arnold is much too vague in his appeal to perfection -perfection in what area? Even in the individual's attainment of culture. There are different areas such as philosophy, learning, arts, music, etc. But a wholly cultured individual is an unrealizable ideal and so Eliot says that culture has to be seen as the relation of an individual to a larger social background. "We only mean that the culture of an individual cannot be isolated from that of the group and that the culture of the group cannot be abstracted from that of the whole society" (Eliot 1948:24).

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Eliot firmly asserts that "no culture can appear or develop except in relation to religion" (ibidem:27). The term relation is quite central to Eliot's assertion. He does not mean it in Arnold's sense where religion merely serves as the base for the growth of the superstructure of culture. For Eliot, culture "is the incarnation (so to speak) of the religion

of a people" (ibidem:28). Culture and religion are thus two sides of the same coin. Culture can never grow or develop in the absence of religion. That is why Eliot can say: "part of our culture is also a part of our religion" (ibidem:31). Religion provides the framework for culture. Next, Eliot takes up for discussion some really important conditions for culture. The basic necessity is the existence of an intelligentsia, the elite, who would provide an effective and unremitting transmission of culture. Since Eliot's view of culture is that it is not just a sum of activities but "a way of life," it is the function of the elite to communicate this way of life by precept and practice. The nucleus for such a transmission is the family" and when family life fails to play its part, we must expect our culture to deteriorate" (ibidem:43). Only the family can inculcate, for instance, "a piety towards the dead, however obscure, and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote" (ibidem:44).

Eliot pleads for a structure of society made of hierarchically graded levels of culture. He defends such a graded society where each cultural level will have its own responsibilities. And when these graded levels do not exist or function, no higher civilization is likely to be established. Eliot's stand is that culture should be capable of further splittings into local or regional cultures. "A people should be neither too united nor too divided, if its culture should flourish." Diversity promotes unity in culture. It is right for us to develop local loyalties which is only the first step towards developing a national loyalty. Thus it is that one major culture develops other satellite cultures. "A true satellite culture is one which, for geographical and other reasons, has a permanent relation to a stronger one" (ibidem:54). In other words, there should be a constellation of cultures, one nourishing the other and thus making way, all the while, for the emergence of a national culture. Some amount of friction among these cultures is a healthy sign. Eliot cites the example of India while exploring the question of the imposition of an alien culture on an indigenous one: "The only prospect of stability in India seems the alternative of a development, let us hope under peaceful conditions, into a loose federation of kingdoms, or to a mass uniformity attainable only at the price of the abolition of class distinctions and the abandonment of all religion -which would mean the disappearance of Indian culture" (ibidem:65).

The continuation of the argument from Idea to the Notes is very clear in Eliot's assertion that the higher religions can provide "a ground pattern of common belief and behavior, upon which a variety of local patterns can be embroidered" (ibidem:70). Once again the theological standpoint becomes clear. Eliot sums up his whole argument on the question of unity and diversity among culture and sub-cultures when he makes his pronouncement that Christendom should be one. Within it there should be "an endless conflict of ideas" so that orthodoxy might develop by a struggle against heresy: "And without a common faith, all efforts towards drawing nations closer in culture can produce only an illusion of unity" (ibidem:78).

In his concept of the term culture, Eliot is obviously a Christian apologist. For instance, he closes the essay "Modern Education and the Classics" (Eliot 1932:516) thus: As the world at large becomes more completely secularized, the need becomes more-urgent that professedly Christian people should have a Christian education, which should be an education both for this world and for a prayer in this world, Despite Eliot's attempt to formulate the term culture in all its possible ramifications, one is up against some difficulties that present themselves even to an ordinary reader of Notes.

Eliot's side a of culture seems to erect a dichotomy between at least two orders-of culture-the one based on belief and the other based on behavior Of, to use more commodious terms, "conscious" and unconscious." It seems to be the duty of the "conscious" order to distil the "unconscious." Such a view seems to be rather simplistic in that it presupposes that the whole force denoted by culture is static, How can anyone agree with Eliot's view?"A democracy in which everybody had an equal responsibility in everything would be oppressive for the conscientious and licentious for the rest" (Eliot 1948:48). The word culture is used by Eliot in two ways -one to mean what the anthropologists 'imply when they say the way of life of a people, and another to refer to, the value-based qualitative life in terms of arts, philosophy, music, etc. On both these counts Eliot's legitimization of the transmission of cultures can be questioned. The organic, common culture that Eliot seems to believe in becomes all too exclusive (if not snobbish) in such a transmission. When he places his faith in the family as the primary agent of transmission he exposes the weakness in his not being able to think of wider and bigger institutions as the transmitters of culture. His culture is, in a sense, a coterie term, mostly personal and "aristocratic:" Eliot seems to believe in particular smaller units as being responsible for spreading culture; Another inherent weakness In Eliot's argument is his intention of removing the whole world of "politics" a way from his culture. Whether one likes it or not there is or ought to be a dialectical relationship between the values of culture and their embodiment in political and social structures.

Eliot's culture is an abstraction that exists outside the domain of social reality in this sense. Political world becomes vulgar and false and so it is far removed from the," highly sensitized, elite. However true it might be, Eliot's culture is not comprehensive enough to accommodate wider features in it. The total exclusion of "politics" from his culture leaves his definition 'rather 'limping. That is why Raymond Williams (Culture and Society) and Terry Eagleton have taken serious exception to Eliot's definition. To quote Eagleton (1970:294): "The conservative

version of a stable and stratified society, with given degrees and relations of culture, and the 'liberal minority' version with its faith in the 'few just men sustaining a personal tradition within an impersonal' and unchanging 'mass' society, both end by doing this."

The term culture, as generally understood in the context of human development can be considered both as a process and as a state. It is a process because it is in, a state of constant evolution from the time man saw himself on the earth. Anthropologists trace, several stages of development and are busy guessing the content and factors that go into the development of culture. As state, culture may be looked upon as the possession of individuals, societies or groups of varying degrees of sensibility deriving from the continuous impact of the value systems of various groups and individuals. From Eliot's point of view, culture is rooted in religion.

His approach to Christianity is not theologically warranted. Eliot's Religio-Eurocentric culture ignores various factors which tell against the conception of Europe as a single cultural whole. The emergence of Soviet Russia and its allies in Eastern Europe elsewhere is one of the strongest blows dealt against the concept of a Christian Europe. Earlier, the Reformation with its exposure of the corruption of the Church and the Renaissance with its revival of powerful pre-Christian influences, the recurrent internecine war involving the myriad-handed murder of the multitudes of human beings cannot be reconciled with the doctrine of human brotherhood implicit in Eliot's Christian conception of God as the father of mankind.

Similarly, Eliot's view of Hindu civilization is marked by a profound failure to take account of the diversity and the multiplicity of Hindu views and approaches. He refers to the particular case of India where almost every complication is found to "defeat the culture-planner," and he has in mind the major malady "Ossification into caste." Purushasukta and The Bhagavad Gita, which supposedly make claims for caste, strangely enough point to the same dhrishti as the work of a time Panditha. In so far as a vertical or horizontal division of human beings is part of the history of human evolution, caste and culture seem to go together not merely in Hindu India but the world over. To conclude: Eliot's Royalism is a commitment to an outworn superstition; Eliot's Anglo-Catholicism, a commitment to an outworn theology. This concept of culture rests upon a grievous failure to recognize what may be called the ineluctable facts of life.

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