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1987
WASTE LAND OR PROMISED LAND: T. S. ELIOT'S
THE IDEA OF A CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Amy Wallace
July 1987
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WASTE LAND OR PROMISED LAND: T. S. ELIOT'S
THE IDEA OF A CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

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In T. S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society*, the poet questions the nature of our society's foundations; he believes that Western culture is moving dangerously closer to the liberal and secular and that this shift could be disastrous. Instead, Eliot suggests that we return to what is at the very roots of Western tradition: Christianity. To facilitate this change in direction, Eliot stresses the importance of an educational system which takes a Christian perspective. Also important in his thinking is a Community of Christians, who would act as leaders, and the Christian community (encompassing most of the population), which would restore unity to what has become a depersonalized existence. The philosophical validity of Christianity is integral to Eliot's scheme, and is explained well by author C. S. Lewis. Historian Christopher Dawson outlines the intertwining of religion and culture and the debt Western civilization owes the Christian faith. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* is a picture of a society whose barrenness is ironic in light of the promise of life which surrounds it. Both the individuals and their society are blind to their own spiritual deaths. Also echoing Eliot's ideas concerning a Christian society, *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party* are plays of rejuvenation, in which a sacrificial death—whether literal or figurative—brings new life,
both to the individual characters and their broken relationships. As allegories of the family of man, Eliot uses the families in these plays to illustrate the change that could turn a waste land into a promised land.
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The Idea

On the eve of World War II, T. S. Eliot felt that he had something to say to the world. In his book *The Idea of a Christian Society*, published in 1939, we see Eliot's "doubt of the validity of a civilisation" of which the most steadfast beliefs were "Compound interest and the maintenance of dividends" (64). Why 1939? What was it about the times that spawned Eliot's ideas? The author himself identifies this crux in history as showing a very clear alternative between Christianity and paganism, and providing a sense of urgency for some type of "constructive thinking" before a crisis rather than in the middle of it (64).

Nearly half a century later, what relevance can we possibly find in such a work, which could not have avoided being caught in the winds of the moment? After all, we have chastised our species enough for those evils of which it alone among animals is capable. And we do not doubt that we should feel admiration for those who fought and won such a clear battle between good and evil (Were it not for one small bullet's finding its way into the leg of a young tail gunner, confining him to a hospital instead of his plane, which was shot down, these fingers would not be moving these keys, nor these ears listening to the late winter rain). What could we learn from a book whose title at first glance brings to mind ideas of loving thy neighbor, Sunday school, and apple pie? We are
reminded of the fifties—for those of us who know them only in
terms of television re-runs—a time when Mother vacuumed in pearls,
Father knew best, and children were content with quarters. This
sentimental picture, which might first come to the mind of the
reader when he encounters the title, is far from Eliot's intentions.
There is nothing tame about his propositions. Although he is
neither an economist nor a politician, Eliot speaks with authority
as a man of vision. And his idea of Christianity is not one of
pacification; rather, he believes it should be respected
intellectually as a philosophy and adhered to, even if inconvenient
(8).

The real gravity of this premise comes to light when we
consider the most basic parts of our society. This consideration
is the task which the poet sets before him as he asks, "What—if
any—is the 'idea' of the society in which we live? To what end
is it arranged?" (8). In answer to this question, Eliot says he
feels like "a petty usurer in a world manipulated largely by big
usurers" and that such "immorality of competition" as this was at
the heart of World War II and of all wars (98). For Eliot it is
not enough that Christianity is tolerated by society, when that
society is dominated by un-Christian institutions. Instead, he
believes the doctrine of Christianity should be the bones of
society, and that all other parts of the organism should be built
upon that skeleton (9-11). This calls into question all of the
"ism's" which Eliot examines philosophically in a society distant
from ours in years but not in its constitution.
At the top of his list is Liberalism, a philosophy which he thinks is not a philosophy at all, but a negative of sorts, which tends to release energy rather than accumulate it, to relax, rather than to fortify. It is a movement not so much defined by its end, as by its starting point; away from, rather than towards, something definite. Our point of departure is more real to us than our destination; and the destination is likely to present a very different picture when arrived at, from the vaguer image formed in imagination. By destroying traditional social habits of the people, by dissolving their natural collective consciousness into individual constituents, by licensing the opinions of the most foolish, by substituting instruction for education, by encouraging cleverness instead of wisdom, the upstart rather than the qualified, by fostering a notion of getting on to which the alternative is a hopeless apathy, Liberalism can prepare the way for that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanized or brutalized control which is a desperate remedy for its chaos. (15-16)

On the other hand, many would say that Liberalism is a philosophy, one which holds at its center the freedom of the individual, who should not be forced to contend with any religion if he chooses not to. After all, was not this country founded by people seeking freedom of religion? And does not the Constitution protect this precious freedom? Nevertheless, the document says nothing about freedom from religion, the freedom of a culture to be amoral, the freedom of Ku Klux Klan or other Nazi-like organizations to parade down main street as it they were nothing more harmless than girl scouts or the VFW. What draws us close to Eliot's writing is that he recognized the need to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. Does everyone have the right to do as he chooses? The key to this freedom of religion issue is to realize that Christianity is a freedom. It means
freedom for the dignity of the human spirit, for art, for love. Why should children not be taught Christian principles? Why should they be limited to a secular education, which leaves many of them confused and turning to dangerous ways to fill the emptiness inside of them?

According to Eliot, we clothe Liberalism in Democracy, a word with a definition that the author feels is ambiguous, defining it himself as "a dislike of everything maintained by Germany and/or Russia. . .a compost of newspaper sensations and prejudice" (19). It is this patriotism gone overboard that causes us to accept and reject ideas for the wrong reasons, in antithesis to certain countries. The fault in this pattern, Eliot feels, is that by condemning other countries we appease ourselves into feeling Christian, but our indignation does nothing to change our own materialism (20). This is not to say that other countries are legitimate in doing whatever they please. If we were to evaluate other philosophies in terms of Christianity, we would be able to take an evaluative stance, based on enduring truths. These can be lied to or compromised. But they themselves never lie. The question of peace is a difficult one to answer. In any case, we should treat whatever haven we have in this country as an only child, whom we would protect from the elements, whom we would not send out in the snow without galoshes.

Industrialization, which for Eliot goes hand in hand with materialism, has created a people "detached from tradition,
alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion: in other words, a mob" (21). The problem is that "paganism holds the most valuable advertising space," so that Christians are even unknowingly being de-Christianized (22). Although he says that our society "so far as it is positive, is still Christian" (13), Eliot believes that institutions are moving from neutral to non-Christian. And if we do not do something to change this course of events, we are headed for a decline, which could take the form of what he calls a "totalitarian democracy." This would mean a loss of the dignity of the human soul in a society built on conformity, moral efficiency, propaganda, and the politicizing of art. To prevent such happenings, the poet holds that "the only possibility of control and balance is a religious control and balance. . . . That prospect involves, at least, discipline, inconvenience and discomfort: but here as hereafter the alternative to hell is purgatory" (24). Eliot's statement implies two things: that a mindless progression of events in the same course would be an unforgivable sin on our part, and that he has no illusions of a heaven on earth; he sees "not a society of saints, but of ordinary men" (59). In this society of ordinary men, Eliot proposes three basic elements: the Christian state, the Christian community, and the Community of Christians (26).

He wants the state to be Christian, but what does that mean? Does he want government officials to be clergy or vice versa? Even though Eliot thinks that being a Christian would make a person more qualified to serve the state, he thinks that the beliefs of
individual politicians would do little to change anything, because a politician's behavior is determined finally by the people. However, if the people wanted to, they could confine statesmen to a Christian framework. The most vital imperative would be to give those who would be in charge of our government a Christian education in order that they might be able "to think in Christian categories" (26-28). All in all, the most important function of men of state would be to conform to the Christian framework.

What Eliot has in mind for the large majority of people is what he calls the "Christian community," in which most everyone would play his part by believing in the ideas of Christianity through faith and unconscious behavior. For them religion would be a matter of weaving together religious and social life, because most people are "occupied mostly by their direct relation to the soil, or the sea, or the machine, and to a small number of persons, pleasures and duties" (28-29). Eliot advocates the formation of parish-like community units, which would serve as centers for everyone and provide the personal relationships that people in the community need. The problem, Eliot says, is that the church today is still organized around the agricultural society; therefore we must adapt Christianity's organization to modern life. Here, though, we must be careful not to simply accept the world as it is. Eliot thinks that the evil present in our institutions has arisen out of the transformation of the profit motive to a social philosophy, leading to vast exploitation of many things: natural resources, labor, the trade, finances, and lending. He even goes
so far as to say that many of our institutions are simply a guise for un-Christian goals. It is for this reason that Christians cannot be content with freedom of religion but must work to see that the basic structure of their society is Christian, not just the people in it (29-34).

So far, we have looked at Eliot's idea of Christianity as a system of government and as a system of behavior. Next, he advocates a sort of system of checks and balances to mediate between the first two: the "Community of Christians," a group consisting of "consciously and thoughtfully practicing Christians, especially those of intellectual and spiritual superiority," which would include those of great ability, even if they were not Christians (35-36). As to statesmen, education for these people is of the utmost importance. Instead of a "variety of unrelated subjects undertaken for special purposes or for none at all," Eliot prefers that education should provide a "Christian philosophy of life" (37). This does not mean that he advocates attempts to convert children or that they be taught by clergy. Although education is a high priority for Eliot, his Community of Christians will not include all teachers, unlike Coleridge's "clerisy" (37).

In a neutral society such as ours, the author claims that the arts suffer. Eliot does not want to confine the arts to religion, but neither does he want them to be without meaning. It is the poet's view that in a society organized around profit, the standards for art decline for several reasons: mass advertisement, the economic system, and the educational system, all of which lead
to the separation of art into two categories—art for the elite and art for the masses. Here, also, Eliot's basic remedy for the situation lies in education (38-41).

Where does the author stand on the question of church and state? He envisions the Church in his Christian society as "the final authority" on "matters of faith and morals" (47). As far as the separation of church and state is concerned, he believes that it is impossible, because it is not just that we are dealing with individuals who are not Christian; we are dealing with the institutions and systems of an entire society which are not Christian. At its most basic, the idea is for the Church to be recognized by the state, accepted by the community, and believed by the individual. In his Christian society, Eliot sees a necessary tension between the church and state, and a respect among the people for both—although the Church would come first. The Church has quite a claim on authority, because, according to Eliot, "theology has no frontiers" (50-55).

A Christian society would face many problems. On one hand, there is inertia at work, "the overwhelming pressure of mediocrity, sluggish and indomitable as a glacier" and, moreover, "many whose Christianity was spectral or superstitious or feigned, and many whose motives were primarily worldly and selfish" (60). But more dangerous are the problems of the neutral society on the road to paganism, our society, because in Eliot's way of thinking, the organization of society on the principle of private profit, as well as public destruction, is leading both
to the deformation of humanity by unregulated industrialism, and to the exhaustion of natural resources, and . . . a good deal of our material progress is a progress for which succeeding generations may have to pay dearly. (61)

One of our biggest failures lies in not seeing the whole picture; we look at education, agriculture, finance, industry, and other issues as "competing interests" instead of having a sound point of reference from which to view and reconcile them all (63).

Eliot is saying that we need a foundation on which to stand, which we now do not have. It is not enough to sanction absolute freedom for individuals, corporations, and countries to do as they will, and then let the chips fall where they may. Eventually, we are headed for chaos, and the author contends that to prevent this we need a system of beliefs, and what is more, the right system of beliefs: Christianity. We cannot deny the need of this society to choose something, and to that Eliot says, "If you will not have God (and He is a jealous God) you should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin" (63). The core of his message is that we return "to the eternal source of truth" in order to set our society straight (63).

The time has come to ask ourselves, as Eliot did, "To what purpose were we born? What is the end of Man?" (98).

Let us look then, for a moment, at ourselves and ask how closely Eliot's description of the world as he saw it fifty years ago resembles our own. If we examine the current state of affairs, we can say only that the situation we find ourselves in is probably much darker than Eliot saw at the end of the 1930's. We are a society of crowded isolation, in which most people live in busy
cities, yet do not know their neighbors across the hall or across the street. Gone is the sense of community. We try to fill the emptiness with a vast array of pleasures: drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, sex, cars, clothes, and food, to name a few. We gorge. We feel good. The people of this generation have been raised by televisions, and have learned that self-worth depends on the brands of cosmetics we use. Chaos among institutions is rampant. Agriculture loses to finance, and the American farmer loses all; science and religion can find no common ground, butting heads about evolution and creationism, as if the two were separate ideas. Ours is a time when education has lost its importance and the taste of the masses has become poor beyond belief. Most recently, the revived interest in the occult is evident in the phenomenon of "channelers" (or what used to be called "mediums"), who let their bodies act as "channels" for the spirits of the dead. At this point, people are so spiritually hungry that they are easily drawn into any kind of scam. Another case in point is the current fascination among teenagers with Satanic worship. Acting ability has become the most crucial factor in the election of a politician. The majority of people spend their lives putting some small part of a car or a hamburger together, without pride or tradition. We play our roles to keep the big machine turning, so that when our nine-to-five is over we can partake of the fruit of the big machine. In our surreal Garden of Eden, we have eaten of the tree. We have the knowledge to fulfill every appetite, every dream, but it seems that
somewhere along the way we have forgotten something. That something, as Eliot often reminds us, is God.
Two Supporters of Eliot

In a discussion of a Christian society it would be only logical to explore the basic ideas behind the philosophy of Christianity, as well as the relationship between religion and culture. For the former, we will consult one of Christianity's most eloquent spokesmen, C. S. Lewis; for the latter, we will look at historian Christopher Dawson's insights. Both of these men agree with Eliot that something is awry in our society. In his book *Mere Christianity* Lewis writes of the need for some sort of change:

There is nothing progressive about being pigheaded and refusing to admit a mistake. And I think if you look at the present state of the world, it is pretty plain that humanity has been making some big mistake. We are on the wrong road. And if that is so, we must go back. Going back is the quickest way on. (25)

A comparison of Lewis and Eliot includes differences as well as similarities. James Tetreault, in his "Parallel Lines: C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot," says that the two men had much in common: both were critics as well as poets, both recognized the decline of society, and most importantly, both of them became Christians in the late 1920's. Thereafter, both became voices for Christianity and were often criticized for this. Despite their shared interests Lewis and Eliot did not have much to do with each other. Eliot never mentions Lewis, although Lewis does discuss Eliot time and again, mostly in a negative light.
Expressing his anger towards Eliot, Lewis accuses him of "trying to make of Christianity itself one more high-brow, Chelsea, bourgeois-baiting fad" (Tetreault 258). Another qualm that Lewis has about Eliot is his elitism; Eliot's coldness is unacceptable to a humanitarian like Lewis. In his rather rash criticism, Lewis goes as far as to say he wonders "whether it is possible to distinguish poetry about squalor and chaos from squalid and chaotic poetry" (Tetreault 260-61). Eliot, especially in his earlier days, was to Lewis the typical postwar Modernist—full of cynicism—a stance which Lewis found disgusting. Lewis once said, "the world is full of impostors who claim to be disenchanted and are really unenchanted" (Tetreault 262). On top of all this, Eliot was an American.

We might wonder, since Lewis had aspirations of being a poet himself, and since Eliot was one of the most remarkable poets of this century, if Lewis's hostility could have had something to do with jealousy. Tetreault holds that this is a possibility, especially since Lewis's style of romantic narrative was highly criticized by the Modernists. On the other hand, it could be that Eliot's work simply did not appeal to Lewis, more a man of romance. However, Lewis's feelings towards Eliot were not all negative. Says Lewis, "I agree with him about matters of such moment that all literary questions are, in comparison, trivial" (Tetreault 264-67). Even though Lewis takes issue with the "obscurity" of Eliot's poetry, he admits, "You know that I never cared for Eliot's poetry and criticism, but when we met I loved him at once" (Tetreault 279).
Thus an important bond unites them, the fact that two men of such capacity, such vision, such intelligence, embraced Christianity with all of their being. This alone should arouse our curiosity about the philosophy in question; we cannot know with what care and trepidation these great minds of our century approached the possibility of a revitalized faith. For them, Christianity had to work, first and foremost, as a solid argument. C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* presents a masterful expression of that argument, and in it, as in other writings, he constructs a case with a logic that satisfies demanding minds.

To answer some challenging questions, Lewis often uses brilliant metaphors and illustrations which somehow cut through misconceptions. An example is his answer to the question "Where is God?" Envisioning God as a playwright, Lewis thinks that looking for God in outer space or on the earth would be like reading Shakespeare's plays in hopes of finding the author as one of the characters. On the other hand, we do somehow sense the identity of Shakespeare in his plays (Lewis, *Reflections* 167). Lewis artfully extends the metaphor:

If there were an idiot who thought plays existed on their own, without an author (not to mention actors, producer, manager, stagehand and what not), our belief in Shakespeare would not be much affected by his saying, quite truly, that he had studied all the plays and never found Shakespeare in them. (Reflections 168)

And cleverly Lewis concludes this idea by saying, "When the author walks on to the stage the play is over" (*Mere Christianity* 56).

Since God created space and time, Lewis thinks it ridiculous to
look for God in His own creation; rather, Lewis feels that God actively searches us out when we are at a point of trying to listen to our own conscience (Reflections 168-69).

Lewis builds his case for Christianity on a foundation which he calls the "Law of Human Nature," or the "Moral Law," which is a universal standard of behavior that all societies and men have always had and broken. It is not just an instinct or a learned behavior; neither is it always convenient. And the Moral Law is something that man can know very intimately because it lives inside him. Here Lewis uses the analogy of a postman: we can safely say that he delivers letters to everyone because that is what he delivers to us (Mere Christianity 3-21). W. H. Auden agrees with Lewis, emphasizing the inescapability of these laws: "We are subject to the spiritual laws of good and evil. Trying to break them is like trying to break the laws of physiology by getting drunk" (273). For Lewis, the laws of good and evil are real. He explains that for awhile the problem of the existence of evil in this world kept him away from God; he was an atheist. Then he realized that the anger he felt at the injustice in the world meant that his idea of justice actually existed within him, that something actually did make sense after all. Lewis says that if there were no meaning in life, we would not be able to know it; in other words, "If there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know know it was dark. Dark would be without meaning" (Mere Christianity 34).
We live in a good world gone wrong, according to Lewis, but the possibility of going wrong is a necessary part of God's plan. Free will makes evil possible, but it also actualizes the only condition that makes love meaningful (Mere Christianity 37-42). The key to making things right again from the Christian perspective lies in Jesus Christ, who Lewis insists was not just a great teacher (a claim often heard); if Jesus was not the son of God, Lewis says that he was either crazy or demonic, and that we are left to choose one of these three possibilities and no others. The integral Christian concept, Lewis says, is that Christ's death has somehow reconciled us with God and has given us another chance (Mere Christianity 45-48). The author likens Christ's death not to a punishment that he took for us but to a debt which he paid, because "when one person has got himself into a hole, the trouble of getting him out usually falls on a kind friend" (Mere Christianity 49). Repentence is a process of "laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realising that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor" (Mere Christianity 49).

With that odd twist of truth that real things have, the idea of salvation parallels other unlikely processes which we can see in the universe around us, such as reproduction. Says Lewis, "He did not consult us when He invented sex: He has not consulted us either when He invented this" (Mere Christianity 53). Reminding us that we believe that certain geographical locations exist without ever going there and that we believe history without being able to
prove it with logic or mathematics, Lewis says we should allow ourselves to trust authority in a like manner concerning religious belief. Also, he points out that Christians do not try to be good to please God but that they are good because God lives inside them (Mere Christianity 54-55). Lewis stresses the urgency for us to make a choice now, while it is still possible:

There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing: it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realised it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last for ever. We must take it or leave it. (Mere Christianity 56)

In Lewis's view not only are we on the wrong road as individuals; our society is on the wrong road as well. In a cynical comment about our society, Lewis gives instructions for how to avoid God: "Avoid silence, avoid solitude. . . . Concentrate on money, sex, status, health and (above all) on your own grievances. Keep the radio on. Live in a crowd. Use plenty of sedation" (Reflections 169). If we think about it, we are as a society much like the picture Lewis paints. Much of the problem with our world is that it is an "enemy-occupied territory" of the forces of evil. Lewis believes that we are in a sort of "civil war, a rebellion, and that we are living in a part of the universe occupied by the rebel" (Mere Christianity 39-40). And the author defines human history as "the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy"; the machine of our
society always breaks down because we are "trying to run it on the
wrong juice" (Mere Christianity 43-44).

A scientific culture such as ours has trouble believing
anything that cannot be proven by experiment or mathematics. In
discussing the relationship belief has to our society, Lewis asks
the question of why believers are not simply of inferior
intelligence; in fact, some are geniuses and scientists themselves.
What has made them believe? The author makes the point that there
are so many cases against Christianity, the number of which give
some sort of credibility to the idea they are so violently trying
to quell. Science might also try to say that God is something
people have invented out of wishful thinking, but Lewis adds that
the wish goes both ways. The Christian can believe out of
evidence in the form of events in his life and his personal
knowledge of God, as well as out of the necessity of complete trust
to complete love (Essays 14-28). As Lewis puts it, "Our relation
to those who trusted us only after we were proved innocent in court
cannot be the same as our relation to those who trusted us all
through" (Essays 29).

On another issue relevant to Eliot's ideas, the relationship
between religion and culture, historian Christopher Dawson offers
some of his thoughts from a perspective which is sometimes quite
similar to Eliot's and other times somewhat different. One of
the facets of his writing which closely parallels Eliot's The Idea
of a Christian Society can be found in Dawson's essay "The New
Leviathan," in which he, like Eliot, discusses the dangers of
liberalism, mass civilization, and idealism. Dawson reaffirms Eliot when he says that "the society which has lost its spiritual roots is a dying culture, however prosperous it may be externally" (Enquiries vi). Admitting that the idea of liberalism is good, he contends that what we have gotten is something very different: a dependency on industry and commerce, materialism, and mechanization. In what he calls our "mass-civilization," masses of people and money are clustered around certain companies and businesses. Impersonal economic forces have replaced the old European values of humanism and the intellectual life. On one hand, we have gained many modern conveniences, inventions, and forms of entertainment, while on the other we have lost our spiritual independence, as well as our personality and character. We live to serve the economic system, instead of the other way around. And Dawson believes the U. S. is the worst culprit of all because the new system was not hampered by tradition or politics. In its idealism, America has lost its respect for institutions, because of the loss of middle class influence. The machine has become our religion, according to Dawson, and collectivism has replaced individualism and has created a simple-minded, uncritical, receptive mob, which is looking for a leader (Enquiries 6-12). W. H. Auden emphasizes the passivity of the public, which, unlike a mob, is concerned mostly with sitting on the sidelines and observing: "A man has his distinctive personal scent which his wife, his children and his dog can recognize. A crowd has a generalized stink. The public is odorless" (82).
According to Dawson, our instability was accelerated to full speed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when a separation between the physical and spiritual world began and was, in fact, accepted by the philosophers of the time. The opposite was true in primitive cultures, which never looked on the world in the modern way, as a passive or, at most, mechanistic system, a background for human energies, mere matter for the human mind to mould. He saw the world as a living world of mysterious forces, greater than his own, in the placation and service of which his life consisted. (Dawson, Enquiries 96-97)

For primitive people, religious life was their social life, and their rulers were their priests. The connection between the city and everything that went on in it and the gods of that city was tight. Agriculture and the domestication of animals had their roots in religion. An example of such a society is Egypt, which was organized mainly around concerns of the afterlife—especially of tombs of its kings. What developed was a stability in the country and an advancement of art, astronomy, mathematics, and engineering. Only when the state rose to its peak did moral and intellectual problems begin; then grew the incongruity between the way things were and the way they ought to be. Along with power and responsibility comes disillusionment. When world religions swept over the world, they made a major change in religious thought—the division of reality into two worlds, the physical and the spiritual realms. This Platonic concept, which stressed the importance of the spiritual world over the material, was adopted by all the great ancient cultures. Although the new religions brought
advancement for literature and art, they were not conducive to economic and material well-being and caused these cultures to stagnate and decline (Dawson, Enquiries 96-108).

In a reaction to this Platonic notion, Humanism rose, says Dawson, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a time when "man turned away from the pure white light of eternity to the warmth and colour of the earth" (Enquiries 108). This was a time for nature, science, art, hard work, and experience, a time when politics was dominated by realism and reason, and science was dominated by mechanics instead of abstractions. The enlightenment of the eighteenth century continued the preoccupation with reason instead of and apart from religion, and the nineteenth century saw the blooming of industry and business (Enquiries 108-110). "But," Dawson interjects, "there was not a corresponding progress in spiritual things" (Enquiries 110). In place of spiritual unity came the distinction between classes--between races as well as between rich and poor. Also, there grew a ruthless economic imperialism, which was not limited ethically in any way by religious morals. One of the dangers of such a materialistic society that is divorced from its religion is the development of an attitude of revolution, which arises because men are so deeply angered by the structure which they feel the need to escape. Such was the case between the Roman Empire and the East; the Orientals thought their subjugators devoid of spiritual life (Dawson, Enquiries 110-115).

But Dawson thinks that reuniting our culture's physical and spiritual sides will not be easy. In his essay "T. S. Eliot and
the Meaning of Culture," Dawson agrees with Eliot's observations, speaking of the "impersonal tyranny of a mechanized order" and the idea that religion is the only safeguard to freedom. In one way the historian agrees with Eliot that religion and culture cannot be separated, but at the same time Dawson asserts the claim that the separation of religion and culture is at the very heart of Christianity: a dualism exists in that our culture is determined by external forces, while our religion is internal. Dawson argues that Christianity has the same Platonic vision that holds the spiritual world in much higher esteem than the here and now. To Dawson, a religion guides and informs a society but is not the society itself (Dynamics 103-109). Both Dawson and Eliot see the need for change; the difference is that Eliot thinks there is a chance to change the course of history before it happens, while Dawson seems to accept the necessity of the problem which can never be resolved. Eliot seems to think that miraculous change is possible, while Dawson sees only the chance of an improvement.

Instead of a revolution, Dawson thinks there has always been and will always be a continual tension between a culture and its religion, because religion will at once unify and revolutionize society. He adds that when the two forces are most tightly bound there will be the most reactions against religion, since the people would hold the religion at the backbone of the establishment responsible for the state of affairs (Dawson, Religion 197-205). A religious control of a culture always runs the risk of paralyzing the good parts of that society:
The marriage of religion and culture is equally fatal to either partner, since religion is so tied to the social order that it loses its spiritual character, and the free development of a culture is restricted by the bonds of religious tradition until the social organism becomes as rigid and lifeless as a mummy. (Dawson, Religion 206)

Dawson adds that all of the great religion-cultures, such as Egypt, fell because of this synthesis. Another danger of trying to merge religion with culture is that such a society would tend to reduce all problems to the religious level, avoiding real issues (Religion 206-09). Therefore, Dawson disagrees sharply with Eliot's view that Christianity is the only way to save society; in fact, Dawson says that "every social way of life may be a way to God," as long as it recognizes the "universal divine truths" (Religion 211). Pointing to history as proof, the historian notes that large scale attempts at spiritual unification fail because they lead to the development of religious sects and internal disputes (Religion 211-212).

Eliot and Dawson have some real gulfs between them, yet they share many of the same ideas. For one thing, even though Dawson makes drastic statements at times, such as that he sees "either the end of human history or a turning point in it" (Religion 215), he also says that he thinks the present secularization might just be a trend which will be evened out by a sort of "spiritual integration," as has been the trend throughout history (Religion 216). In 1931, some eight years before Eliot wrote The Idea of a Christian Society, he appeared to agree more with Dawson's idea
that religion and culture could never be perfectly united. Eliot wrote:

The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse . . . so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization." (Essays 342)

What are we to make of such paradoxes, such fluctuation in basic points of view? The difference is clear in Eliot's vision, which not only identified the problem but proposed a solution for it. To be sure, Eliot was not a historian; despite the fear taught by the lessons of the past, Eliot refused to give up on faith, hope, and love, as well as reason. As time passed, Eliot found strength in his conviction that Christianity could actually change society instead of consoling it.

As his solution, Dawson proposes an educational system which teaches the Christian heritage of Western culture. This is the only way to save what we have accomplished. He focuses on the many problems of our educational systems today, which are quantitative (instead of qualitative), political, practical, and specialized. Since education guides the coming generation and transmits culture, instruction must incorporate beliefs and standards (Understanding Europe 3-9). Dawson admits that studying Western culture would be a difficult task, because it is a large and complex organism. Throughout the history of Europe, Christianity has been an accepted fact; today, however, most historians and sociologists explain history in terms of economics and material concerns—instead of religious development. For the
first time in history, there is strong opposition to Christianity. Some appear to be setting the progress of the last two hundred years in retrograde (Understanding Europe 13-18). Dawson comments:

> Instead of going downstairs step by step, neo-paganism jumps out of the top-storey window, and whether one jumps out of the right-hand window or the left makes very little difference by the time one reaches the pavement. (Understanding Europe 19-20)

What has been lost is the entire heritage of Western culture. Dawson, like Eliot, sees Western history in terms of Christianity, beginning with Mediterranean foreshadowing in Greece and Rome. Other major divisions in Western history are the formation of Christendom, which lasted until the eleventh century; Medieval Christendom, which ended in the fifteenth century; religious division and humanism, which ran from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries; revolution and secularism, which began in the late eighteenth century and lasted through the nineteenth; and finally, disintegration, in the twentieth century, both the cause and the result of world wars (Understanding Europe 26).

Much can be learned, Dawson explains, from examining the two centuries preceding those of medieval unity. In the ninth and tenth centuries we see the struggle which the Church eventually won. The main reason for the decline of the Carolingian Empire of ninth century Europe was its lack of a unifying force; its Christianity was mixed with barbaric and Roman traditions. However, its Christian ideals were carried on by the Church, which was quite involved in government; advisers and ministers of government were members of the clergy, and the Church even went so far as to depose Lewis the Pious
in 833 for tampering with unity in order to ensure his son Charles a kingdom. In fact, the State was then considered more a part of the Church. During the second half of the ninth century, Dawson observes, the Empire was divided between Lewis's sons, so the Church took on the role of being a judge to mediate between the princes. The power of the Papacy strengthened (The Making of Europe 256-65).

Unlike the rest of the century preceding it, the later part of the ninth century brought decay to the Carolingians. The Church was in total despair. With ruin came the separation of the states and the descent of power into the hands of the strong, making it necessary for everyone to have a protector. Such were the beginnings of the feudal system. During this time, the Church preserved culture, taking over the old cities, which the now agrarian society no longer needed. As a provider of social services, the Church preserved the worth of the individual, where the feudal state considered most people as livestock. The Church stood for peace, culture, and tradition, while feudal society embraced war, violence, and social order. Princes and nobles took advantage of wealth, status, and land belonging to the Church. Yet through the years of turmoil, the Carolingian tradition lived on to be revived by kings of Wessex and Saxon emperors. Interaction with Italy brought a cultural revival, but also moral and religious decline. Eventually, Dawson adds, Rome was restored as the Christian center and tradition came together with a new culture (The Making of Europe 256-81).
This was the beginning of modern Europe: in Dawson's view, Carolingian tradition is at the heart of Western civilization. In the synthesis of culture and religion came the Crusades, which combined the Nordic war hero with Christian ideals and also the concept of knighthood, combining Nordic tradition with Christianity. Then Europe began to flourish like never before (*The Making of Europe* 284-89). What are we to learn by this example? Not only is our heritage inseparable from Christianity, but we can see a clear link between the Church and the blooming of Western culture; we can also see that forces opposing the Church have brought ruin. It is for this highly practical reason as well that we should look to Christianity to revive a drowning culture once more. Therefore Dawson's analysis of cultural epochs as definable in terms of the Christian presence offers important support for Eliot's stand in the domain of literature. While there are differences between Eliot and Dawson, both men agree that the survival of our freedoms and our spiritual richness depends upon the ability of the Church to control secular forces and to sanctify individual lives. For both men, a Christian society is the supreme product of Western culture, and its only safeguard.
The Waste Land

Written some eleven years earlier than The Waste Land, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" differs from the later work in many ways but leads toward it. Probably the most important difference is in the scope of the two poems: "Prufrock," though prophetic, is still one man's monologue, while The Waste Land roams over all of history. In fact, "Prufrock" could almost be a facet of The Waste Land—another of the scenarios encountered by the reader—if it were not for a major discrepancy between Prufrock and the people of Eliot's waste land: Prufrock at the end sees himself as he really is, but the waste land's people are blind to their dead lives. While Prufrock recognizes himself as "pinned and wriggling on the wall," and says, "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons," the typist living in the waste land simply puts another record on the gramophone, the rich woman brushes her hair, and Albert and Lil bake a ham as a final solution to their problems. Prufrock's dénouement foretells his own spiritual drowning. Northrop Frye contends that Eliot sees three ways of living: not knowing you are spiritually dead, knowing of this death and trying to overcome it, and understanding the reality of hell and this world (51). Prufrock is one who fits into the second category, struggling with his wretchedness, although never reaching a full understanding of any solution.
However, there are many points at which the two poems meet. Grover Smith suggests that although Prufrock's self-recognition is a partial wisdom, he has a tragic flaw: "he is incapable of action," "aware of beauty and faced with sordidness" (15). We see this idea exemplified at the end of the poem, with Prufrock's "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me." His numbing despair opposes the hyacinth girl passage from The Waste Land:

--yet when we came back, late from the Hyacinth garden, Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (37-41)

The character speaking here seems to be broaching Prufrock's self-knowledge. This paralysis in the face of unspeakable beauty acts as a counterpoint to Prufrock, who is "tortured by unappeased desires" (Smith 15). Prufrock is similar to the rich woman of "A Game of Chess," who is surrounded by things genteel, for whom the game of chess has about as much significance as the "talking of Michelangelo" in "Prufrock": being apropos is an effort to camouflage not being alive.

Even though these two poems are similar, there is one gap that surely separates them. In "Prufrock" there is no April (although the people of the waste land consider it cruel), no corpse planted in the garden, waiting to bloom (although the people of the waste land try to dig it up), no overflowing Thames (although the people defile it), no sky pregnant with rain (although the people hear thunder). Even though we see a few Christian allusions in the
love song, they are ones of failure—not of hope; we see John the Baptist's head on a platter, and a Lazarus who cannot rise. Perhaps the eleven years between "Prufrock" and The Waste Land brought Eliot himself closer to the answer, and although he was not publicly to renounce his atheism until 1927, some five years after completing The Waste Land (Tetreault 256), the roots of his faith could be seen forming. Eliot's The Idea of a Christian Society represents the solidifying of the answer we see in The Waste Land.

Many prominent critics disagree with the idea of strong optimism being found in The Waste Land. Among them is Stephen Spender, who thinks that the fragmented style of the poem reflects our broken civilization (107-08). He also says that the idea of the quest is at the heart of The Waste Land and of Eliot's poetry in general (Spender 121). Up to this point, Spender's beliefs are not objectionable. Then he continues to say that the quest is a search for redemption—a state which is not possible. So Spender sees Eliot's poem as having "a certain hollowness" because it "is like an argument in logic with the middle term left out, which explains the hysteria" (121-22). Spender questions how a search for "the eternal city" can be satisfied at all "in terms of the temporal city" (122). But in a poem which breaches the rules of time and space as The Waste Land does, could it not be possible—or even probable—that Eliot is bringing unity to the human experience by presenting both of these cities at once, the temporal and the eternal?
Like Spender, F. R. Leavis asserts that the confusions and allusions of *The Waste Land* "reflect the present state of civilization" (89). According to Leavis, the theme of the poem is anthropological: the "Machine Age" has meant "the uprooting of life," and Eliot tries to return society to a time when it was unified by vegetation cults and fertility rituals, around birth, death, and reproduction (90). Leavis thinks the futility he sees in the poem is typical of modern literature. In his eyes, modern man is the victim of his industrialized society, which precludes any unity of culture and leaves him with hallucinations, neuroses, visions, and nightmares (91-95). Moreover, Leavis holds that "the unity of *The Waste Land* is no more 'metaphysical' than it is narrative or dramatic... The unity the poem aims at is that of an inclusive consciousness." Much like music, Leavis believes, the poem creates variations on a theme, with no progression (97). Leavis patronizes Eliot by saying that "there must be something limited about the kind of artistic achievement in our time: even Shakespeare in such conditions could hardly have been the 'universal' genius" (98). Among Leavis's other observations are that the work is not a "metaphysical whole," that most people expect too much from it, and that the "Death by Water" episode illustrates the power of death over salvation. To Leavis, the corpse in the garden is nothing more than a nightmare of urban life (99-102).

In direct contrast to these two critics, Kristian Smidt, in his *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot*, believes that
the poet found a pattern when the man found a faith. For one of the main effects of Christianity in Eliot's poetry is the provision of a unifying principle to his vision . . . we must not mistake mood for philosophy. (191)

Furthermore, Smidt argues, "It would be absurd to think the whole truth could be found in a reduction to childhood impressions and literary reminiscences" (192). In Eliot's gardens, Smidt claims, we see a positive outlook existing alongside the negative; sometimes they represent the Garden of Eden, a return to innocence (the Hyacinth garden), and at other times they signify the Garden of Olives, a prelude to necessary suffering ("the frosty silence in the gardens" (323)) (Smidt 207-08). Purgatory becomes a central idea in Eliot's poetry, says Smidt (202). "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (426) and we are all forced to climb through the ruins. This penance will lead man "from individualism by way of Christianity to a search for social unity" (Smidt 209), therefore putting the broken pieces of our society back together. In The Waste Land then we can easily see the foreshadowing of what is to come in The Idea of a Christian Society, that change is possible, that salvation is possible. Hints of a productive Community of Christians do appear in The Waste Land, such as the fishermen near the church in harmony.

Such optimism about man's end is definitely to be found in The Tempest, one of Eliot's major structures in the poem. The implications are multifarious, because Shakespeare's play shows death as a rich transformation, and also brings to mind associations with legends of a drowned god ritual, in which an effigy is thrown
into the water and pulled out again to symbolize rebirth (Brooks 148). Both of these ideas are Christian in their sentiment.

Northrop Frye points out that in the play the characters gain "self-knowledge and repentance" and that Ferdinand is Christ-like in mourning his father: he is like a second Adam (Christ), who redeems the first Adam, "and is reconciled with his eternal Father" (69).

Why would The Waste Land contain so many references to The Tempest if Eliot were without hope? Some might argue that the aim is irony, that in the waste land no "sea-change" is possible. There is more power behind this irony than mere torpor; the people of the waste land are not victims of fate. They have chosen to make their lives deaths. What is aroused by The Waste Land is more than feelings of pathos. It is cosmic irony that the people choose death when they could have life. This possibility of transformation was what Eliot was considering in his allusions to The Tempest:

*Full fathom five thy father lies,*  
*Of his bones are coral made:*  
*Those are pearls that were his eyes:*  
*Nothing of him that doth fade,*  
*But doth suffer a sea-change*  
*Into something rich, and strange.* (I. ii. 400-05)

Like the God of the Old Testament, Prospero breaks his staff and drowns his book, deciding that "the rarer action is/ In virtue, than in vengeance" (V. i. 27-8).

Cleanth Brooks suggests that the paradoxical Christian concept of life versus death is at the center of The Waste Land. The precept is that "Life devoid of meaning is death; sacrifice, even
sacrificial death, may be life-giving, an awakening to life" (Brooks 136). The basic symbol of Eliot's poem comes from Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, which discusses legends where the land and its ruler, the Fisher King, are sterile, cursed (Brooks 136). The problem is that people have lost their understanding of good and evil; the world has become secularized. Madame Sosostris, blind like all the rest of the people in the waste land, tells the sailor to avoid death by water, not realizing that death may lead to life. Neither can she recognize The Hanged Man or the hooded figure, both of whom symbolize Christ (Brooks 137-42). Madame Sosostris is herself a personification of death in life. She is most closely associated with Sibyl, who is referred to before the body of the poem begins. Remembering to ask for eternal life, she forgets to ask for eternal youth, a predicament which illustrates that the quality of life is part of "life"'s definition (Frye 67).

Eliot's life and death paradox is also related to Baudelaire's "fourmillante cite," where dreams and reality mix, and to Dante's Limbo, the dwelling place of, as Dante calls them, "these wretches who never were alive" (142-43). Brooks sees Humanitarianism as the dog which Eliot says is trying to dig up the body in the garden, preventing rebirth through death (144-45), and this certainly goes along with Eliot's later comments about Humanitarianism in *The Idea of a Christian Society*. Another connection to this later book lies in Philomela, who is symbolic of the notion that secularization is a kind of rape. She also
echoes the dying god theme, that life comes from death (Brooks 146-47).

Appropriately, Brooks sees the theme of *The Waste Land* as "the conquest of death and time" (158), not the unavoidability of them. The hope that exists in the waste land is very much associated with Christianity. Violet not only signifies "the twilight of a civilization," but also it symbolizes the blood of Christ, the church, repentance, and baptism (Brooks 160). In fact, Brooks states that "Eliot has been continually, in the poem, linking up the Christian doctrine with the beliefs of as many peoples as he can" (161). This critic believes that *The Waste Land* is almost always interpreted incorrectly as a poem of "despair and disillusionment," of the "glorious past and the sordid present" (165). He sees the real theme as "the rehabilitation of a system of beliefs, known but now discredited" (Brooks 170). Brooks goes as far as to say that "the Christian material is at the center" of *The Waste Land*, although Eliot does not discuss it directly because the Christian terminology is for the poet a mass of cliches. However 'true' he may feel the terms to be, he is still sensitive to the fact that they operate superficially as cliches, and his method of necessity must be a process of bringing them to life again. (170)

Eliot strips the gold of the Christian philosophy from the mines of its rhetoric, creating fresh images that appeal to the discriminating intellect. Northrop Frye examines Eliot's imagery, emphasizing the Christian symbolism behind *The Waste Land*. To Frye, the Thames is such an image, deep with significance; it "carries the filth of London into the sea, where we meet Phlebas again, and
the healing waters return as rain at the end, reminding us of the symbolism of baptism in Christianity" (62). Although Frye says that the poem, as a vision of post-war London, is a look into hell and a descent into winter, "spiritually subterranean, a world of shadows, corpses and buried seeds" (64), he stresses that the structure of the poet's imagery is cyclical; antithesis is the undercurrent that pulls The Waste Land along—winter and spring, good and evil, heaven and hell, and innocence and experience (49-51). Indeed, the very structure of the poem suggests a rebirth of this waste land. Even though hell is the setting of the poem, Eliot's vision suggests a process of becoming instead of some linear fate from which the tide will never rise.

Water continues its religious significance to the poem in the Biblical concept of Jonah and the whale, in which mankind is seen as being trapped in the water from which Christ must rescue the world. Frye also points out the symbolism of fishing in the Gospels, and that the connection of salvation with fishing parallels the idea of the fisher king, who "sitting gloomily on the shore at the end of the poem with his 'arid plain' behind him thus corresponds to Adam, or human nature that cannot redeem itself" (71). In addition to these meanings there is also the structure of the poem, which echoes the three-day pattern of Christ's death and resurrection, as well as the hyacinths, which are—as red and purple flowers—symbolic of a god's blood in the rites of Osiris, Adonis, and Atis (Frye 65). The chapel in the poem is symbolic of the tomb of the risen Christ, which
emphasizes the conquest of life over death (Frye 70). Frye encapsulates the faith that characterizes the poem:

In *The Waste Land* the coming of Christianity represents the turning of Classical culture from its winter into a new spring, for the natural cycle is also associated with the cycles of civilisation. This may be one reason for the prominence of the poets, Virgil and Ovid, who were contemporary with Christ. Whatever future faces us today would, then, logically be connected with a second coming of Christ. The second coming, however, is not a future but a present event, a confronting of man with an immediate demand for self-surrender, sympathy and control, virtues which are primarily social and moral, and are preliminary to the Christian faith, hope and love. The London churches, St Magnus Martyr, St Mary Woolnoth, and others, stand like sentinels to testify to the presence of the risen Christ in the ruins of Europe. (68)

Frye is shrewd to perceive these implications of the idea of a Christian society. These "ruins of Europe" act as barriers to the people, who are too self-oriented to be a community (Frye 64). Integral to an understanding of Eliot's idea of community, Frye explains, is an exploration of his belief in the decline of Western culture. In contrast to the Humanistic parabola of progress stands Eliot's framework, which pictures the Middle Ages as the peak of culture, and after that, decline. This decline directly relates to the Christian idea of the two selves—selfish and spiritual. Unlike Rousseau's concept of the noble savage, Eliot's foundation is that society is the natural state of things, preserving the spiritual side of man. According to Eliot, the extremely common egocentric point of view is inferior to the ideals of tradition and humility. Self-expression, Romanticism, and individual freedom, all part of the progressive historical view, are destructive, because
Romanticism leads to and from the ego (Frye 7-17). Although Frye contends that Eliot's mythology of decline is too simplistic, he believes that Eliot's concepts of society permeate Eliot's poetry (24).

If this is true, then Eliot is not wallowing in the melodramatic death scene of a culture. The very Romanticism (which he prefers to call heresy) that he condemns in *After Strange Gods* is certainly not one of his tendencies. In this book Eliot comments that without the concept of sin, of moral struggle, characters in literature are not real; the ideas of heaven and hell should hold dignity, responsibility, and relevance to the individual (45-46). Thus the poet confirms again the orthodoxy which is the backbone of *The Waste Land*, the promise of

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breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain. (1-4)
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In *After Strange Gods* he says, "in one's prose reflexions one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse one can only deal with actuality" (30). The clouds that cover the waste land are not painted on; at any moment they could let go their healing rain. It is the reality of such a possibility of change that Eliot outlines in *The Idea of a Christian Society*. The *Waste Land* should be seen, then, as a major elucidation of what Eliot envisions as a Christian community.
CORRECTION

PRECEDING IMAGE HAS BEEN REFILMED TO ASSURE LEGIBILITY OR TO CORRECT A POSSIBLE ERROR
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Season of Sacrifice

As in *The Waste Land*, in Eliot's plays *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party* we see the poet's effort to awaken the twentieth century to Christianity by expressing the ideas of that religion in a fresh way. The argot of Christianity has been used by too many of the wrong people in the wrong ways for too long. Therefore if Eliot had tried to explain spiritual concepts using a language that has lost much of its meaning, the audience would have an automatic response to think that whatever was behind the same dead words was also dead. Instead, Eliot lures the audience into situations which, although not explicitly religious in nature, convey what the poet considers to be the essential tenets of his faith. These two plays are a culmination of the poet's idea that Christianity is a force that can change not only the individual, but his society as well. They reaffirm Eliot's concept in *The Idea of a Christian Society* that Christianity is for all people—from the intellectually elite to the common man. Also in these plays we hear echoes from *The Waste Land* of a life which may not be real death, and of the spring which can overcome winter.

If we were to isolate some of the dialogue between Mary and Harry in *The Family Reunion*, we might very well conclude that we were reading sections from *The Waste Land*, especially when Mary says,
The cold spring now is the time
For the ache in the moving root
The agony in the dark
The slow flow throbbing the trunk
The pain of the breaking bud.

Harry answers,

Spring is an issue of blood
A season of sacrifice
And the wail of the new full tide
Returning the ghosts of the dead
Those whom the winter drowned. (82)

Such poetry is perhaps what limits The Family Reunion the most; extended sections of "dialogue" are obviously coming from Eliot's mouth and not from the characters'. He overcomes this problem in The Cocktail Party through a comedy which captures the audience and through more fully rounded characters.

The paradoxical view of life and death, which we find in The Waste Land, is important in these plays. Both of them center around families which are models of appropriateness in terms of society's standards, while being rotten at the core. Much as in "A Game of Chess," the Monchensey family in The Family Reunion are steeped in a tradition which they try desperately to preserve without understanding it. Edward and Lavinia in The Cocktail Party, although they move in the highest social circles, are reminiscent of "the typist home at teatime" and "the young man carbuncular" observed by Tiresias; Edward, an established lawyer, is a man incapable of loving, and Lavinia, a fashionable patron of the arts, is a woman who is unlovable. In each of the plays a central character, Harry in The Family Reunion and Celia in The Cocktail Party, undergoes a kind of death which is really a kind of life.
For Cecilia, the death is literal: as a missionary, she is crucified by the natives and placed near an ant hill. For Harry, the death is not a literal one; it consists of abdication of his right as the oldest son to be lord of the family estate and his departure for an unknown destination.

Other characters experience less dramatic transformations. For example, Edward and Lavinia reach a sincere reconciliation in their marriage. And Harry says that what would destroy him at Wishwood would in fact be a good life for his brother John. As allegories for the family of man, these two families exemplify Eliot's concept of the Christian community and the Community of Christians. Religious experience does not have to be exactly the same—and in fact cannot be the same—for all people. Both ways are depicted as difficult. The godlike Reilly in *The Cocktail Party* says that life in the Christian community (which includes the majority of people) consists of

Two people who know they do not understand each other,
Breeding children whom they do not understand
And who will never understand them. (189)

But a more committed spiritual life is certainly no easier. Reilly says for this life the future "is unknown, and so requires faith—/ The kind of faith that issues from despair" (190). Both ways are necessary and holy, as we find at the conclusion of *The Cocktail Party*. The Guardians, who, like angels, watch over the other characters, pronounce a benediction on them all at the end of the play. For those in the Christian community, the Guardians
give this blessing: "Let them build the hearth/ Under the protection of the stars" (194), and for those who choose a more difficult path, such as Celía, they ask that she be watched over in the trials that she will encounter.

We also find in the two plays the idea that the dilemma of the individual extends to the whole society, a belief which is the foundation of The Idea of a Christian Society. Reilly, in his role as psychologist, says, "...The single patient/ Who is ill by himself, is rather the exception" (177). Harry also says, "...It is not my conscience,/ Not my mind, that is diseased, but the world I have to live in" (67). It is evident that Eliot's solution to our lost society is specifically Christian. Twice in The Family Reunion Harry says as he is leaving, "Until I come again" (110, 115). And Reilly, in The Cocktail Party, says after completing his counseling sessions with the other characters, "It is finished" (192), and "Go in peace. And work out your salvation with diligence" (183, 192).

Russell Kirk believes that Christianity is central in both plays. The Family Reunion, he says, is not only an attempt on Eliot's part to revive the verse-play, but more importantly, it is an effort to restore awareness of spirituality to a non-religious audience. Even though the quality of The Family Reunion is often criticized (and Eliot is here his own worst critic), Kirk emphasizes that most critics do not understand the extent to which Christianity is at the center of the play (261-65), that the play is "Christian teaching in the riddle of a mirror" (264). The fact that most
critics ignore Eliot's religion as an integral part of his work is ironic to Kirk, who proposes that those same critics would never think of studying other writers, such as Coleridge, without studying their beliefs (268). Eliot is a Christian and this is evident in his work. However, he knew that his audiences would reject an openly Christian theme, while they would accept a classical myth as legitimate and unthreatening. Says Kirk, "Let Christ or Saint Paul never be mentioned and those audiences might listen. Eliot will be all things to all men" (264). Sharing a common purpose, The Family Reunion and Greek drama both concern themselves with the state of the human soul (Kirk 267).

In The Quest for Salvation in an Ancient and a Modern Play, Maud Bodkin compares The Family Reunion to the Eumenides, which were written by Aeschylus in fifth-century Athens. Throughout the Greek trilogy, the Furies pursue a sinner as symbols of justice—not for the individual, but for all mankind. Bodkin further asserts that the Furies in The Family Reunion are the same evil forces that seem to hover over The Waste Land. Neither group of people has a sense of community. In Aeschylus' drama the redemption is for society as well as the individual (Bodkin 4-23). When Orestes holds Agamemnon's bloody robe, he cries, "I grieve for the crime, the penance, the whole race" (Bodkin 25). In both The Family Reunion and the Eumenides religion is based on the concept of personal relationships (Bodkin 41). Bodkin asks the same question that Eliot asks in The Idea of a Christian Society:
Dare we trust that divine grace, operating through such
deepening awareness of human relationships as these
plays symbolically express, shall find within our
community means for transforming the passions now
devasting the life both of individuals and of nations? (4)

More successful in many ways, The Cocktail Party is Eliot's
best play, according to Kirk, both because it shows the perfection
of the verse-drama and because it reached a much broader audience
because of its popularity (338). Behind the literal plot lies "a
deeper moral significance" of "an Other, a Power from which we flee
to our ruin, or which we welcome as deliverer" (Kirk 339). In this
play we see the Community of Christians at work as the Guardians,
who lead others to truth (Kirk 342). Unlike The Family Reunion,
The Cocktail Party uses comedy as one of its major techniques. Gary
Davenport suggests that the comedy in the play is not merely to
provide relief from seriousness; rather, it is a key to the salvation
process. This salvation requires that the characters be able to
laugh at themselves, to be separated from the self and see their own
absurdity (Davenport 301-02). Also linked to a sense of community,
the comedy in The Cocktail Party works as a remedy to isolation and
fits well with Eliot's ideas concerning the importance of a sense
of community to the salvation of society. Davenport goes on to
say that "this reading accords very well with the Christian meaning
of the play: in a state of isolation, man lacks perspective; when
reconciled to his fellows, his vision is whole again" (306).

According to Denis Donoghue, Eliot does a brilliant job of
ensnaring his audience in The Cocktail Party, but once this is done,
Eliot fails to convey anything meaningful because of the many problems in the play. Most importantly, Donoghue feels that Christianity is not presented as a viable alternative; one must either live as a sinner or a martyr, with no alternative present for the common man. Also, the characters in the play present a problem: they are not complex enough, are separated from each other by huge gaps in tone (either too comic or too serious), and often talk like Eliot instead of themselves (Donoghue 173-86).

The Family Reunion is seen by most critics as being less successful than The Cocktail Party. Grover Smith is one who has many criticisms of The Family Reunion, one of which is that it is in many ways unclear. Ambiguity can be found in Harry's vision, in the plot, and in the curse (Smith 200, 203). Smith thinks that Eliot's attempt at an allegory between Harry and Christ fails because Eliot tries to make Harry "both agent and sufferer" (203) and because Harry is not believable, likeable, or rational (209). Also presenting a problem are the Furies, because, although people today often believe in angels or demons, they simply do not believe in Greek Gods or Furies (Smith 204). Neither do these specters function as a substitute for the guilt that Harry might feel (Smith 209). Moreover, Harry remains isolated. The process of sin and repentance is absent from The Family Reunion, and this lack of the central Christian idea keeps the play from being a Christian one. On top of all that, Smith thinks that Eliot's symbolic imagery prevents the audience from being able to understand the meanings that the poet had in mind (209-13).
Perhaps the genre itself is not as well-suited to Eliot's metaphysical ideas as is poetry. But it is not fair to criticize his plays for not having believable characters when the author's goal was not plausibility. These are dramas of ideas. The plays are a link in one of the most exciting philosophical developments of this century: T. S. Eliot's embrace of Christianity. His particular eloquence has the power to change minds and to convince Christians that it is not enough to be guaranteed freedom of religion by our government when the framework of that government is built on ideas that may suffocate Christianity. The ideas of sacrifice and rebirth which we find in The Cocktail Party and The Family Reunion are undulations of an earlier stone cast in the water, The Idea of a Christian Society, which itself echoes the original stone: Christianity. Without a sound foundation, Eliot's philosophical views would be nothing more than a private cosmology, like those constructed by other great poets, such as Yeats. But in Eliot's work can we trace the concentric circles back to their source and not be disappointed. The waves may be beautiful, and when we travel out into the waters of a poet like Yeats in search of the stone, we find real gold; but at the center of all that has come from Eliot, we find a diamond, the light of an essential and timeless Christianity which Eliot considers the best hope, the only hope, for the individual and for civilization.

Recognizing that something is wrong with the way things are, we confirm the existence of another road. How do we follow that
road? As the plays illustrate, the awakening of the individual is of primary concern. He must realize that the Christianity of two thousand years ago is still alive today. For demanding intellects, Christian writers such as Eliot and Lewis bring a dead vocabulary back to life, and it is the minds of those who are hard to convince which are all-important to Eliot as potential members of his Community of Christians, the leaders of the faith. For the community at large, Christianity would bring unity and meaning in a society presently operating on principles which could destroy it. This would be terribly ironic in the light of much the Western world owes to the Christian tradition. Without these roots, according to Eliot, we will slide backward as a civilization, while technology advances to levels which require moral judgement.

Are the people of the waste land impervious to the promise which surrounds them? Eliot believes that, although they are breathing and walking, continuing in the living out of their day-to-day existence, they are not really alive. This paradox operates on many levels; a God who died is resurrected and a people who are dead can come back to life. However, the problem is not as Eliot sees it a God who is holding back, or who wants to see the waste land suffer. The forces of salvation, which go unrecognized are, in Eliot's scheme, ready to act.

Eliot's poems and plays make a brilliant analysis of a world gone wrong, and they suggest what might enable Western culture to regain integrity. A pattern must be restored, and a Community of Christians would be the best group to find that pattern. Most
intellectuals would agree with Eliot that something is dreadfully wrong. Because of Eliot's erudition and his support from men such as C. S. Lewis and Christopher Dawson, he has given intellectual respect to a sharply Christian solution to the growing cultural anarchy. But the dignity of the human soul leaves it alone with the ultimate choice in this universe—the choice between life and death, between a waste land and a promised land.
Works Cited


