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Religion

Pericles Lewis

In T. S. Eliot's pageant-play *The Rock* (1934), the Chorus retells the biblical story of the creation of the world and the incarnation of Christ, and then pauses:

But it seems that something has happened that has never happened before: though we know not just when, or why, or how, or where.

Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before

That men both deny gods and worship gods, professing first Reason,

And then Money, and Power, and what they call Life, or Race, or Dialectic.

(Eliot 1952: 108)

Eliot bemoaned the rise of atheism, but also the replacement of the Christian God with new “gods,” the abstract intellectual forces like Dialectic and the earthly values like Money that seemed to him to have replaced religion for the modern age. Eliot's conversion to Christianity and baptism in the Church of England in 1927 offer the most famous example of the modernists' quest for religious alternatives to what Eliot himself had called “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history” (Eliot 1975: 177). Many modernists, like Eliot, adhered to traditional religious beliefs; among those who did not, the problem of what would replace revealed religion remained a pressing concern. Wallace Stevens, a Lutheran who is said to have converted to Roman Catholicism on his deathbed, wrote in 1940, “It is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion. . . . My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe” (Stevens 1997: 966). Modernists like Eliot and Stevens were participating in a crisis of institutional religion and a search for new forms of religious experience typical of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Accounts of the period often emphasize the influence of the forces of secularization and the diminished significance of organized religion for

many modern writers. It is equally important, however, to recognize the modernists' continued search for answers to traditional religious questions about the human condition, the nature of historical experience, sexuality, death, and ultimate realities. The search for "substitute[s] for religion" played a crucial role in the development of literary modernism because the most important substitute for religion that the modernists found was literature itself.

Poets and critics who worried about the effects of secularization often turned to poetry as an alternative to religion. On *Dover Beach* in the middle of the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold thought he could hear the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the "Sea of Faith" (Arnold 1979: 256). Later in his life, Arnold celebrated poetry as an alternative source of religious inspiration: "The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. . . . Most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry" (Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," in Buckler 1958: 501–2). Although the high moral and moralizing tone of Arnold's prose marks him indelibly as the kind of "eminent Victorian" that modernists like Lytton Strachey would love to debunk, his near-equation of poetry and religion prefigures much in Eliot, Stevens, and other moderns. Arnold was responding to a series of scientific discoveries that had begun to undermine belief in the literal truth of the Bible. As early as the 1830s, Sir Charles Lyell found geological and fossil evidence that contradicted the time-span of the biblical creation narrative. Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) proposed a theory of evolution through natural selection. Darwin's emphasis on the role of chance in evolution contradicted Christian beliefs that the universe had been designed by an intelligent, benevolent creator, while his emphasis on what his contemporary Herbert Spencer called "survival of the fittest" heightened Victorian anxieties about the violence of "nature, red in tooth and claw" (Tennyson). Perhaps the most significant blow to biblical literalism, however, came from the work of scholars who sought to explain biblical events through the techniques of modern historical scholarship and employed textual criticism to show the multiple authorship, over a long period of time, of the Bible itself. David Friedrich Strauss's *The Life of Jesus* (1835), Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1863), Benjamin Jowett's contribution to *Essays and Reviews* (1860), and *The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined* (1862–3) by John Colenso, the Anglican bishop of Natal, all contributed to doubts as to the literal truth and divine authorship of the Bible.

In the face of these scientific and historical discoveries, such Victorians as John Ruskin, George Eliot, Leslie Stephen (the father of Virginia Woolf), and Thomas Hardy underwent crises of faith that led them to agnosticism or outright atheism. Matthew Arnold tried to rescue the Bible as a sacred text by avoiding biblical literalism, interpreting the Bible like other (fictional) literature, and redefining religion as "morality touched by emotion" (Arnold 1960–77: 6.176). Although many clergymen defended literal belief in the Bible, the mainstream Protestant churches of Britain and the United States increasingly adopted views like Arnold's, which were associated

with theological liberalism. Theological liberals optimistically embraced the Victorian faith in progress and downplayed or denied traditional doctrines like original sin and predestination. In place of such dogmas, they emphasized the ethical teachings of Christ, whose divinity they sometimes doubted. Critics saw liberalism as valuing private religious experience and morality at the expense of communal participation in rituals and sacraments and the recognition of God's supernatural status.

Against the optimism of such mainstream beliefs, the prophetic blasts of Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoyevsky heralded the arrival of modernism. Nietzsche announced the "death of God" not in his own voice but in that of his fictional madman in *The Gay Science* (1882). The madman proclaims: "After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave – a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. – And we – we still have to vanquish his shadow, too" (Nietzsche 1974: 167). Similarly, Dostoyevsky does not directly state that God is dead, but has the characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) consider the possibility. Dmitry Karamazov asks, "But what's to become of man then? Without God and without a future life? Why, in that case everything is allowed. You can do anything you like!" (Dostoyevsky 1982: 691). These quotations illustrate two central issues for twentieth-century attitudes to religion: on the one hand, the death of God leaves humanity facing an abyss of moral relativism; on the other hand, God's "gruesome shadow" continues to haunt even those who proclaim their atheism. Both Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche articulated the sense that there could be no successful liberal compromise between God and the forces of modernity. Along with Søren Kierkegaard, they would come to be seen as the first representatives of existentialism, a philosophy that would achieve more formal systematization in the works of Martin Heidegger in the modernist period and Jean-Paul Sartre after the Second World War.

Far from being an age of irony or indifference toward religious experience, the early twentieth century witnessed a number of social, political, and intellectual conflicts over the status of religion in modern life. These conflicts often concerned the increasing privatization of religious life that had been a prime feature of nineteenth-century liberal theology. Within religious communities themselves, theologians began to criticize many of the premises of nineteenth-century liberal religious thought. In 1910, a distinguished group of theologians began publishing *The Fundamentals*, a series of booklets stating the conservative case for traditional Protestant theology. American fundamentalists attacked the teaching of evolution in the schools and liberal scholarship in the churches. Adventist and millenarian groups split off from the major Protestant denominations. Although conservative in theological outlook, such movements were radical in their rejection of mainstream theology, and they set the tone for the most successful American religious movements of the twentieth century, Protestant evangelicalism and fundamentalism.

In Europe, the term "modernism" itself, before being applied to literary or artistic experiments, referred to a liberal movement in the Catholic Church, modeled to some extent on nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism. The "modernist" crisis

exposed a deep rift in the Church between the Church hierarchy and those priests and theologians who embraced modern science and biblical criticism. The Church excommunicated a number of modernists, notably Father Alfred Loisy, who had applied textual criticism to the Bible, and Father George Tyrrell, who questioned the permanence of Church dogma and the doctrine of papal infallibility. Pope Pius X labeled these views heretical in the decree *Lamentabili* and the encyclical *Pascendi* of 1907; vigilance committees were formed to root out the heresy; and priests and theologians were required to swear an oath against “modernism.”

An entirely different sort of reaction against theological liberalism seemed more intellectually in tune with literary modernism. In Protestantism, a new “theology of crisis” arose after the First World War (Ahlstrom 1972: 934). Karl Barth’s *The Epistle to the Romans* ([1918] 1933) emphasized God’s transcendence and the principle, drawn from Kierkegaard, of the “infinite distinction” between God and man. The theologian H. Richard Niebuhr criticized what he took to be the liberals’ naive belief that “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross” (quoted in Ahlstrom 1972: 784). His brother Reinhold Niebuhr, the leading figure in Neo-orthodoxy, argued that “The ethic of Jesus does not deal at all with the immediate moral problem of every human life. . . . It transcends the possibilities of human life . . . as God transcends the world” (*Introduction to Christian Ethics* (1935), quoted in Ahlstrom 1972: 942). Such theologians provided a much more conflictual, and even tragic, account of religious life than that proposed by nineteenth-century liberals, one notably in tune with the vision of culture in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922).

Written several years before Eliot’s conversion to Christianity, *The Waste Land* offers a good example of the role of religious crisis in modernism. The first section of the poem is titled “The Burial of the Dead,” after a central office of the Anglican Church. The poem establishes its air of crisis partly through the invocation of imagery from the prophetic books of the Old Testament:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock. . . .

(Eliot 1952: 38)

Although the biblical references here (to Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, and Ezekiel) may appear to the contemporary reader as no more than “a heap of broken images” (itself an image of destroyed idols from Ezekiel 6 : 4), the power of the passage derives directly from its biblical echoes. Despite Eliot’s rhetoric of modernity, the theme of civilization’s falling away from religious ideals is an old one, found already in Isaiah.

Eliot goes on to invoke the New Testament, the sermons of the Buddha, and the Hindu Upanishads, exemplifying the syncretic tendencies of modernist religious exploration (see below).

Eliot's reliance on biblical language is striking and somewhat unusual, but it is notable that many modernists write poems in the form of prayers. Despite his lack of interest in traditional Christianity, W. B. Yeats published four poems explicitly called "prayers" between 1917 and 1935. W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1939) invokes the older artist, while his "At the Grave of Henry James" (1941) ends with another prayerful invocation: "Master of nuance and scruple, / Pray for me and all writers, living or dead . . ." (Auden 1991: 310–12). The lines echo the Ave Maria or Hail Mary, the most famous prayer to the Virgin Mary, which Eliot had quoted directly in *Ash Wednesday* (1930): "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." In its most solemn moods, modernist poetry attempts to recapture the power of prayer. The relationship of modernist literature to traditional prayer is, however, conflictual. If the modernists write prayers, they are not for the most part appropriate for recitation in traditional Christian services. Rather, the modernists invoke the tone and imagery of Christian prayer in order to make their own poems serve the existential and aesthetic functions that prayer can no longer fulfill for many of their readers. If Matthew Arnold imagined poetry as an "ever surer and surer stay," a sort of consolation for the loss of religious faith, the modernists generally seek out the disturbing power of prophecy and do not attempt to comfort their readers. In "A Prayer for my Daughter," Yeats craves protection for his newborn daughter from a "haystack- and roof-levelling wind," bred out of "the murderous innocence of the sea" (Yeats 1989: 188). If the poem offers anything resembling religious consolation, it is only through the conservative power of social tradition ("custom" and "ceremony") and through the assertion of the self-sufficiency of the individual soul in a world unvisited by a redeeming god.

Modernist novelists sometimes aspire to a similar invocation of religious power in their representation of sermons. James Joyce, William Faulkner, James Baldwin, and Djuna Barnes all devote significant portions of their works to reproducing church services. In Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the adolescent Stephen Dedalus, having slept with a prostitute, experiences the fear of hell-fire as he listens to the sermon of the Catholic Father Arnall: "Every word of it was for him. Against his sin, foul and secret, the whole wrath of God was aimed" (Joyce 1992: 123). For several pages, Joyce reproduces the sermon, drawn sometimes word for word from a tract by a seventeenth-century Italian Jesuit, with its vivid description of the darkness, stench, and heat of hell and the various pains of the damned. That night, Stephen dreams of hell, "stinking, bestial, malignant, a hell of lecherous goatish fiends," then wakes up and vomits (149). In Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), the servant Dilsey and her mentally retarded charge Benjy listen to an Easter sermon by the Reverend Shegog on "the recollection and the Blood of the Lamb." Faulkner records Reverend Shegog's African-American dialect as he shouts: "I got de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb!" (Faulkner 1987: 341). Baldwin's *Go Tell it on*

the Mountain (1953), a text steeped in modernism, portrays African-American religious experience in Depression-era Harlem. The fourteen-year-old John Grimes, stepson of a preacher, undergoes a conversion at his stepfather's Pentecostal church, the Temple of the Fire Baptized. While listening to spirituals sung by "the saints" (the already converted members of the church) during a service, John falls down on the "threshing-floor" of the church, "astonished beneath the power of the Lord" (Baldwin 1998: 183). In the long fifth chapter of Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936), titled (after Isaiah 25 : 11) "Watchman, What of the Night?," the transvestite, homosexual gynaecologist Dr. Matthew O'Connor delivers an extended mock sermon on the night and claims: "Sleep demands of us a guilty immunity. There is not one of us who, given an eternal incognito, a thumbprint nowhere set against our souls, would not commit rape, murder, and all abominations" (Barnes 1961: 88).

Each of these sermons insists on the inherent sinfulness of humanity (in contrast with nineteenth-century liberal theology). In each case, although great parodic energy goes into the mimicking of the preacher's voice, the sermons are not quite parodies. The authors of these novels seem to stand in awe of the pure power of the preacher's words, and they incorporate the sermons as a way of channeling that power into their own works. To some extent, the modernists share a related fascination with political rhetoric, yet the sermons in these works also stand out as moments in which a clear normative message is articulated in contrast to the predominantly neutral representation of multiple perspectives in the remainder of the works. Although it is certainly not the case that the authors of these novels straightforwardly affirm the messages of their fictional preachers, they do tend to highlight the normative character of the preachers' utterances by positioning them in critical positions within their novels. The sermon in Joyce's *Portrait* takes up most of the middle chapter of the book; it marks the point of Stephen Dedalus's most complete immersion in religion and at least the potential for his spiritual rebirth from the slothfulness of the episode with the prostitute, although Stephen will turn away from Catholicism in the remainder of the book. In both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, church services appear in the final chapters of novels in which each chapter is told from a different perspective. The switch to a third-person narrator in *The Sound and the Fury* and to the protagonist John's perspective in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* lends these church services a certain air of authority as the ultimate statements of the reality the novelists are trying to describe. In a rather paradoxical way, Matthew's sermon in *Nightwood*, by virtue of its invective, its biblical cadences, and its extreme satirical content, similarly provides a normative moment in that novel.

The interest in representing religious experience is shared by modernists with widely differing religious affiliations. Eliot converted to Anglo-Catholicism. Auden, after losing his faith and discovering his vocation as a poet at age 15, returned to the Anglican church in his early thirties. Joyce was a lapsed Catholic. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, a period of Catholic renewal, a number of artists and intellectuals converted to Roman Catholicism, notably two young novelists influenced by modernism, Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene. Even the most agnostic of modern-

ists, like Virginia Woolf and Samuel Beckett, made the problem of religion central to some of their works. Woolf saw modern fiction as a return to the “spiritual” in response to the “materialism” of her Edwardian precursors (Woolf 1966–7: 2.107). Beckett, whose later works are often read in terms of existentialist philosophy and the absence of God, when asked in court whether he was Christian, Jewish, or atheist, replied “none of the three” (Bryden 1998: 1).

An interest in folktales, mythology, and “primitive” cultures in the modernist period was often linked to religious exploration. Major figures of the Harlem Renaissance, like Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston, tended to associate African-American religion with the south and with the “primitive” side of black culture, to which they had an ambivalent relationship, wanting to preserve it as a source of common myths, but also to distance themselves from its superstition. Hurston used African-American religion as a theme in her novels and collected information about African-American magical practices and voodoo in her anthropological work. W. B. Yeats and the poets and playwrights of the Celtic Twilight drew on Irish folklore and even collected tales of fairies. Joyce drew on Homer’s *Odyssey* to create parallels between his Dubliners and mythical Greek heroes in *Ulysses*. The method inspired such authors as Mary Butts and David Jones, who made use of the grail myth in their accounts of modern England and Wales.

Westernized versions of Buddhism and Hinduism appealed to the more mystical modernists. Yeats, a lifelong practitioner of magic, developed an interest in Theosophy, a syncretic movement led by the Russian-American medium Madame Blavatsky that sought to combine occult spiritualism with various Eastern religions and that enjoyed a vogue in the 1890s. Later, Yeats and his young friend Ezra Pound devoted themselves to promoting the reputation of the Bengali poet Rabindrinath Tagore, an Indian nationalist who wrote poems about mystical unity with God. Yeats assisted Tagore in translating his works into English, and took pride in Tagore’s winning the Nobel Prize in 1913. Signs of a backlash were apparent, however, when Pound and Wyndham Lewis published the first issue of the short-lived Vorticist literary journal *Blast* in 1914. Among the figures on their list of infamous people to blast were Rabindranath Tagore and Annie Besant, President of the Theosophical Society. Still, Eastern religion appealed to Eliot as a source of mythology for *The Waste Land*, and E. M. Forster’s novel *A Passage to India* links India to the unknowable through an echo in the Marabar caves, which is heard by the English Miss Adela Quested and causes her such confusion that the innocent Muslim Dr. Aziz winds up being arrested for assaulting her. Forster wrote of the echo: “In the cave it is *either* a man, *or* the supernatural, *or* an illusion. If I say, it becomes whatever the answer a different book. And even if I know! . . . *It’s a particular trick I felt justified in trying because my theme was India*” (Forster 1979: 26). Here, India becomes the source for an ineffable impression that may or may not have supernatural origins.

If the East represents the unknowable, often associated with a distant past, Jews often figure as deracinated agents of modernity. Several important modernists came from (often assimilated) Jewish families, notably Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, Italo

Svevo, Gertrude Stein, Nathanael West, and Virginia Woolf's husband Leonard. During the early twentieth century, Eastern European Judaism was experiencing a turn against the liberal, reform movement within Judaism somewhat similar to the Christian turn against liberalism. The tradition of Jewish existentialism, exemplified in the works of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, had an influence on modernism mainly through the work of Franz Kafka. English-language modernism features a number of assimilated Jewish characters. In Joyce's *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, though he has been baptized three times, continually meditates on his Jewish background, and Joyce frequently associates him with the Old Testament prophet Elijah. Although he is in many respects an anti-hero, most readers sympathize with Bloom and even admire him, but more stereotypical Jews represent the disagreeable aspects of modernity in works such as Eliot's "Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar," Langston Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The widespread anti-Semitism of the period was enthusiastically shared by some modernist writers, notably Eliot, who complained in *After Strange Gods* (1934) that society was not well served by having "any large number of free-thinking Jews" (quoted in Ricks 1988: 41). Although Yeats was not guilty of anti-Semitism, he was attracted to elements of fascism and, on the verge of the Second World War, wrote a screed in favor of eugenics in *On the Boiler* (1939). The worst anti-Semite of the group was certainly Ezra Pound, who, in his propaganda radio broadcasts for Mussolini during the war, spoke favorably of pogroms against the Jews, and railed in his *Cantos* against Jewish usury, "yidds," and "kikery."

Particularly in the later modernist period, it was the search for visionary alternatives to contemporary politics and society that often led the modernists to such reprehensible views. The spirit of religious crisis in the period is exemplified by the case of D. H. Lawrence, raised by his pious Congregationalist mother to read the Bible daily. Lawrence later criticized Christianity for its narrow morality but incorporated biblical themes and language in his works. He read Nietzsche, developed a fascination with Aztec religion, prophesied the imminent apocalypse of Western civilization, and created his own religious and mythical system to affirm the flesh in contrast with what he saw as the life-denying forces of traditional Christianity and modern civilization. Like some other modernists, Lawrence embraced anti-Semitic caricatures and authoritarian fantasies about hero worship and *Blutbrüderschaft* (blood-brotherhood). Lawrence's *Apocalypse* (1931), published posthumously, was an extended commentary on the Book of Revelation, in which he affirmed his religion of life. Ultimately, despite Lawrence's horror of the deadening effects of modernity, *Apocalypse* provides one of the most optimistic modernist accounts of religious life, one that finds the substitute for Christian religion not in Reason, Money, Power, Race, or Dialectic, but in Life: "The dead may look after the afterwards. But the magnificent here and now of life in the flesh is ours, and ours alone, and ours only for a time. We ought to dance with rapture that we should be alive and part of the

living incarnate cosmos" (Lawrence 1980: 149). Not all the modernists found such a joyful alternative to traditional religion.

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