

Chapter Two

Towards Anglo-Catholicism (1917-1927)

1

The initial appearance of Eliot's interest in identifiably Anglo-Catholic matters is to be found in a letter of 1911, when (with the enthusiasm of a young man after his first visit to London) he lists the sights he has seen for a friend at home – his cousin, Eleanor Hinkley. Written on Eliot's return to Paris, he delights in recording that he avoided the conventional sightseer's destinations:

I have just discussed my trip with the prim but nice English lady at the pension. She said 'And did you go through the Tower? No! Madame Tussaud's? No! Westminster Abbey? No! ...'

What is striking is his account – emphatically, copiously listed – of what he did see:

I then said – do you know

St. Helens
St. Stephens
St. Bartholomew the Great
St. Sepulchre
St. Ethelreda [*sic*].¹

All but the last (St Etheldreda, the Roman Catholic church in Ely Place, Holborn, now a centre for the celebration of the traditional Latin Mass) are Anglican City churches, scattered about that famous one square mile.² Eliot was being mischievous, both to the 'English lady' and his cousin, for he later points out that he did indeed visit such predictable sights as the National Gallery and the British Museum, although, again, we notice that this later, less eccentric list includes the most important of City churches, St Paul's Cathedral.

While there may be something here, *in embryo*, of the Anglo-Catholic delight in church inspections, Eliot would have been even

less religiously prepared, we can only assume, for what St Helen's, Bishopsgate, and the rest, had to offer than the worldly visitor he envisaged at the tiny church at Little Gidding, more than thirty years later: 'if you came by day not knowing what you came for ...' ('Little Gidding', I).³ What is striking is that he visited the churches, and so many of them, at all.

Eliot's first encounter with several of these historic sacred places in the midst of the commercial heart of the capital was destined to develop, in the years of his work in the City at Lloyds Bank (from 1917 to 1925), into a deep appreciation, expressed in both prose and poetry – as in the choruses to *The Rock* of 1934 (see Chapter 7). Their unobtrusive but potentially redemptive presence amongst men and women who, like Phlebas the Phoenician in *The Waste Land*, were bound to 'turn the wheel' of commerce,⁴ stirred him to question whether (as he was to put it later)

our society, which had always been so assured of its superiority and rectitude, so confident of its unexamined premises, [was] assembled round anything more permanent than a congeries of banks, insurance companies and industries, and had it any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends?⁵

The churches' architect, Sir Christopher Wren, in his rebuilding of fifty-one of them after the fire of 1666, had himself represented and articulated the triplicity of affiliations which Eliot had admired in Charles Maurras and by which he was to define his own convictions. In 'the time of Wren', Sheila Kaye-Smith has written, 'the Church of England stood closer to Anglo-Catholic ideals than at almost any other time between the Reformation and the Oxford Movement'.⁶ Wren was a royalist, appointed by his friend Charles II to undertake this extraordinary task, the crowning achievement of which was St Paul's. He designed, furthermore, in the classical style, as the exteriors and interiors of dozens of his churches testify, the tall fluted Ionic columns supporting the barrel-vaulted nave of St Magnus the Martyr, London Bridge, being the feature that particularly caught Eliot's classical eye. And Wren was a high churchman: all of his designs give prominence to the font and altar, emphasising (as John Betjeman has noted in his book on *The City of London Churches*)

the two sacraments essential to salvation in the Catholic Church, baptism and Holy Communion.⁷

A decade after Eliot's initial encounter with the City churches – but six years before his own baptism and confirmation, admitting him to

that communion – he had strongly criticised a proposal to demolish nineteen of them:

They give to the business quarter of London a beauty which its hideous banks and commercial houses have not quite defaced.... the least precious redeems some vulgar street.... As the prosperity of London has increased, the City Churches have fallen into desuetude.... The loss of these towers, to meet the eye down a grimy lane, and of these empty naves, to receive the solitary visitor at noon from the dust and tumult of Lombard Street, will be irreparable and unforgotten.⁸

Eliot's crucial words (and we should note the sequence) are 'beauty', 'redeems' and 'receive'. He speaks of the churches' aesthetic value amidst the hideousness of the profane world; then of the way each 'redeems' the 'vulgar street'. But, climactically and personally, he records that they 'receive' the 'visitor' – itself another significant word, for a visitor is not yet a member. Obviously, in this sense, *he* had been such a visitor. But in another meaning of the term there is the idea of churches being open to receive committed Christians who would visit them – indeed, seek them out – for private prayer (apart from public worship), reflecting the Catholic understanding of churches as consecrated buildings, places of special holiness. Particularly, if the Blessed Sacrament is 'reserved' in them, the devout experience not only the desire to make a visit, but are encouraged to do so, in Catholic and Anglo-Catholic spirituality. This is in order that the Real Presence of the Lord, thus reserved, might be acknowledged and its special inspiration for concentrating the mind on private prayer be drawn on, in addition to the formal occasions of public worship in the liturgy itself. As well, in Anglo-Catholic churches (unlike other Anglican churches), there are usually shrines to such as the Virgin Mary, before which the visitor will light a votive candle and make a brief prayer for her intercession in the course of a private visit of this kind. Eliot's concentration in his later poetry on the importance of particular times and places where a spiritual experience has occurred – 'you are here to kneel / where prayer has been valid' ('Little Gidding', I)⁹ – indicates that he placed a particular value on the availability of such places and opportunities, in churches and elsewhere.

The experience of witnessing visitors in church engaged in private prayer may have been of crucial importance. George Every recalled that he could remember only one occasion when Eliot 'gave something like a testimony to the motives of his conversion':



St Mary Woolnoth

What sticks in my mind is his description of the impression made on him by people praying, I think in a church, or it would not have been so obvious, but certainly outside a time of service. He suddenly realised that prayer still went on and could be made. It wasn't simply of historic and cultural interest. People did pray and he might.¹⁰

Eliot's reference to 'the solitary visitor at noon from the dust and tumult of Lombard Street' identifies the City church that was most

familiar to him, St Mary Woolnoth, on the corner of Lombard Street and King William Street, 'where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours' (*The Waste Land*, I).¹¹ Pre-dating the Norman Conquest, rebuilt by William the Conqueror, patched up after the Great Fire, St Mary Woolnoth was reconstructed from 1716 by Wren's pupil, Nicholas Hawksmoor, who, over ten years, built 'the most original church in the City',¹² with an interior of baroque elegance, marked by four rows of three slender Corinthian pillars forming a square. It has – Betjeman observed – a sumptuousness 'markedly different from the curves and lightness of Wren'.¹³ In his 'Notes on the Waste Land', Eliot points out that the 'dead sound' of the chime from St Mary Woolnoth, on the 'final stroke of nine', was 'a phenomenon which I have often noticed'.¹⁴ The dedication of the church to the Blessed Virgin Mary chimes also with Eliot's devotion to her veneration – yet another mark of his Anglo-Catholicism to which we will refer later – revealed in his own life of prayer and observance, and in his poetry.

Similarly, the other City church which Eliot was to single out for poetic treatment, St Magnus the Martyr, by Wren himself (1671-6), has an interior that is 'rich', Betjeman notes, by the standards of his other churches. Eliot was bound to celebrate it in the midst of the desiccated urban wasteland. 'The interior of St. Magnus Martyr', Eliot wrote five years before his baptism, 'is to my mind one of the finest among Wren's interiors'.¹⁵ To make this observation and, further, to go into print with it, indicates that Eliot had been studying these interiors. Moreover, this was one of the leading shrines of the Anglo-Catholic movement and it is very notable that Eliot should not only refer to it, but, in the midst of a poem of almost unrelieved negativity, present it so positively (if somewhat uncomprehendingly) in terms of the exquisite beauty of its interior: its 'Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold' (the liturgical colours, we should note, of Eastertide and resurrection, a concept otherwise denied repeatedly throughout *The Waste Land*).¹⁶ Its famous twentieth-century vicar, the Revd Henry Joy Fynes-Clinton (1876-1959), took on the living there in 1921 and remained at St Magnus until his death. From the beginning of his incumbency, the parish was the centre of the activities of the Catholic League (the principal Anglo-Papalist organisation in the Church of England, the most extreme form of Anglo-Catholicism¹⁷) and in 1922, the year of the publication of *The Waste Land* in which his church gained a literary fame he could scarcely have envisaged, Fynes-Clinton instituted the Fraternity of Our Lady de Salve Regina which held devotions there every day at midday.¹⁸ Daily Mass would have been celebrated, too, for the weekday City worker and visitor.



Interior of St Magnus the Martyr

Eliot's initial attraction to (and commemoration of) St Mary Woolnoth and St Magnus the Martyr was at least partly an aesthetic response to their high degree of decoration. 'Yes, I should love to write a book on Wren', he wrote to Richard Aldington in 1921 (at the time when Eliot was suffering extreme depression and was being treated by an eminent nerve specialist) 'or at least on the *églises assassinées* [murdered churches] of London',¹⁹ quoting Marcel Proust who coined the phrase in *En mémoire des églises assassinées* to describe the French cathedrals wrecked by the Germans during the First World War. In 1926, before Eliot had officially become a member of the Church of England,

he and Bonamy Dobrée had led a hymn-chanting procession through the streets, in protest against schemes to pull down 'redundant' City churches, and they had succeeded in preventing that atrocity.²⁰

Eliot's aesthetic delight was a compelling ingredient in the genesis of his Anglo-Catholicism. Writing (in 1936) to Paul Elmer More that More's pilgrimage from Calvinism, through Harvard Humanism, to Anglicanism was a 'spiritual biography. . . oddly, even grotesquely, more like my own, so far as I can see, than that of any human being I have known', Eliot noted that his friend had journeyed from 'a form of worship from which the office of the imagination and the aesthetic emotions had . . . been so ruthlessly evicted' to one where they were satisfied.²¹ This, too, was Eliot's journey.

But for Eric Sigg to comment that his 'Christianity was that of an aesthete', meeting 'the needs his aestheticism had once addressed', is inadequate.²² The original aesthetic stimulus was combined, in the case of the City churches, for example, with an appreciation of their historical significance (as representative of the Restoration of the seventeenth-century Church of England) and, ultimately, with Eliot's response to the moral and spiritual importance of their abiding presence and, no doubt, his growing understanding that, within some of them, at least – the explicitly Anglo-Catholic ones – there was reserved the sacramental presence of the Lord before which he had seen people praying.²³ Once this multi-layered degree of comprehension (aesthetic, historical, moral, theological and spiritual) had been attained, he would have recognised that the churches' beauty was not merely artistically satisfying. More importantly, it was expressive of Anglo-Catholic teaching about the extension of the Incarnation in the sacraments (especially the sacrament of the altar, the Mass) and the appropriate beauty of the architectural and richly liturgical setting of their celebration, in consecrated buildings with solemn worship, as outward and visible signs expressing the inward and spiritual grace of God:

We thank Thee for the lights that we have kindled,
The light of altar and of sanctuary
O Light Invisible, we give thanks to Thee for Thy great
glory!²⁴

The 'light . . . of sanctuary' to which Eliot refers is the white or red sanctuary light indicating the reservation of the sacrament, acknowledged by the visitor, on entering the church, by his or her bending of

the right knee in genuflection – another practice, in Anglicanism, that is distinctively Anglo-Catholic. This is done in the direction of the reservation (either on the high altar or on the altar of a side-chapel). A bowing of the head to the altar cross is conventional when there is no reservation of the sacrament in tabernacle or aumbry. In a Roman Catholic church, of course, reservation (requiring genuflection) is usual. Eliot's explicit addition – referring to the light 'of sanctuary' – implies the Anglo-Catholic custom of reservation and, more generally, singles out the sacredness of that most holy part of the church where the altar is placed, the sacrifice of the Mass is offered and the tabernacle is centrally located.

2

Eliot's early appreciation of the distinctive aestheticism of Anglo-Catholicism also needs to be placed in the context of his response to the artistic heritage of Western Christendom at large, even to its anthropological and sociological origins. More than ten years before his *soi-disant* conversion (still sometimes misrepresented as if it suddenly happened in 1927),²⁵ he had reviewed Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology* for the *Westminster Gazette*, focusing on 'ritual as organising and strengthening man'.²⁶ Derivations of 'ritual' – 'ritualism' and 'ritualists' – were terms (as he was probably aware) which had been used, usually derisively, of Anglo-Catholicism and Anglo-Catholics since the later nineteenth century (when ceremonial became a pronounced element in the previously doctrinally-preoccupied Catholic Revival). But Eliot, in the decade prior to his formal association with that tradition, was already placing importance upon ancient religious ceremony as a source of classical order in what he perceived to be the chaotic, post-Romantic world.

He had become a 'ritualist' long before he officially became an Anglo-Catholic. His study of Aristophanes, in F.N. Cornford's 1914 account, *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, prompted Eliot to be 'the first to reintroduce this ritual element into the theatre'²⁷ in his initial experimentation with poetic drama in *Sweeney Agonistes*, the origins of which are also to be dated from before his 'conversion', and in the later, fuller expression of the ritual dimension of the theatre in *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral* where the ceremonial component is more precisely Christian and liturgical.

Eliot's journey towards what he regarded as the true home of English Catholic Christianity drew its early aesthetic inspiration from the

larger Western Christian heritage. Writing to Conrad Aiken, in 1914, he effusively conveyed his enthusiasm for that European tradition:

O a wonderful Crucifixion of Antonello of Messina. There are three great St. Sebastians (so far as I know):

- 1) Mantegna (ca d'Oro) [Venice]
- 2) Antonello of Messina (Bergamo)
- 3) Memling (Brussels).

These prompted the poem 'The Love Song of St. Sebastian', sent to Aiken later that month, in draft form, with the comment:

The S. Sebastian title I feel almost sure of; I have studied S. Sebastians.²⁸

The use of 'S.' for 'St' is one of the customs of Anglo-Catholicism, indicating its bond with Latin Christianity. At this stage, Eliot was probably unaware of the particular significance of the usage, common in Anglo-Catholic circles until recent times (and signaling, again, an ethos separate from ordinary Anglicanism). His use of the Latin abbreviation here is a small sign of his attention to the traditions of Catholic culture – at this point, mediated only artistically – appealing to the meticulous personality, destined to be drawn to a movement scrupulous in the observance of ritual minutiae as well as the more substantial disciplines of the faith.

In Eliot's Baedeker, *London and Its Environs* (in his possession from 1910), he had marked Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna and Child with John the Baptist* and also Antonio Pollaiuolo's *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (both in the National Gallery).²⁹

He had also studied 'many a notable Descent from the Cross' (the most famous of which are by Rubens) in these years, toying with the idea of calling *Inventions of the March Hare*, 'Descent from the Cross', a title which Christopher Ricks argues would 'more pertain to certain of the poems, than to the collection'.³⁰ One of its undatable poems, 'The Little Passion', speaks of 'one inevitable cross'; and another, 'He said: This universe is very clever', of March, 1910, has

He said: 'this crucifixion was dramatic'.³¹

Sending a postcard to Ezra Pound from France in 1920, Eliot remarks of its depiction of the porch of the Collegiate Church of Saint-Ours at Loches, that

this is the best thing I have found.... Amboise has some of the best Renaissance Gothic I have ever seen.³²

And, in poetry, he wrote warmly, in July, 1917, of the basilica of Sant' Apollinare at Ravenna:

Et Saint Apollinaire, raide et ascétique,
Vieille usine désaffectée de Dieu, tient encore
Dans ses pierres écroulantes la forme précise de
Byzance.³³

On a later visit to Italy, arriving at the Vatican in the summer of 1926, just months before his baptism and confirmation, Eliot fell to his knees at the entrance:

his sister-in-law remembered being with him and his first wife, Vivien, when they all together entered St. Peter's, Rome. Vivien, who wasn't easily impressed, said something like 'It's very fine', and then they suddenly saw that Tom was on his knees praying.... It was the first hint that his brother and sister-in-law had that his conversion was imminent, and they naturally misunderstood it. They thought he was going to Rome, and perhaps he thought so himself.... at this point his Christianity was becoming more than an interest, [rather] an experience which had to be practised.³⁴

3

It was to the English Catholic Church, however, that Eliot pledged his allegiance. As his enthusiasm for the Anglican City churches indicates, they embodied both the ancient Catholic faith of the land and the centuries-old bond with the history and traditions of English life which those churches, constructed in the heart of London, plainly affirm. We know that he regarded the two steps of becoming an English citizen and a member of the English Church as essentially one.³⁵

The problem with this familiar idea of the unity of Eliot's dual contemporary acts of joining the Church of England and becoming a British subject – expressive of his convictions about the necessary interdependency of a culture and religion of a people – is that it has led uninformed commentators into another misinterpretation of Eliot's Christianity. Alan Marshall, for example, speaks of the poet's membership of the 'national Church'.³⁶ In fact, Eliot (typically, for an Anglo-Catholic) was highly critical of this conception. He believed that the only way the 'national Church' could 'safeguard... the purity or the catholicity of its doctrine' would be by recognising that

'theology has no frontiers'.³⁷ In other words, the extent to which a Church was nationalistic impaired its validity, doctrinally. He rejected Middleton Murry's concept of a 'National Church' which 'degraded' Christianity to nationalism, rather than raising the nationalism to Christianity,³⁸ and repudiated the identification of the Church with an 'oligarchy or class', which was one of the dangers, he argued, of 'an established Church'.³⁹ Eliot criticised the conception of the 'Community of Christians' as

merely the nicest, most intelligent and public-spirited of the upper-middle-class⁴⁰

– as in his own family's Unitarian tradition with its air of social and moral superiority. Yet J.C.C. Mays accuses Eliot of mimicking 'upper-class English patterns of belief' by joining the Church of England,⁴¹ implying (one gathers) that Anglo-Catholicism was a species of high and dry Anglicanism, tending to the royalism and nationalism which Eliot favoured, socio-culturally. But, as a general rule, the higher one moves socially in England (up to the Royal Family), the lower the Anglicanism.⁴² Anglo-Catholicism, in its most admirable manifestations, was conspicuous in socially-deprived areas – on Tyneside, for example, and, in London: in Pimlico, Shoreditch, Holborn, Kennington and Paddington where many heroic Anglo-Catholic priests exercised their ministries and, indeed, were persecuted, even imprisoned, for their ritualism. A strong strain of Christian socialism, far removed from 'upper-class English patterns of belief' – religious or political – was a characteristic of Anglo-Catholicism for generations. Those aristocrats who publicly aligned themselves with the movement – such as, most notably, Viscount Halifax – did not confirm their position in high society, but sacrificed it. Any idea that Eliot joined the Church of England's Anglo-Catholic wing in order to secure a degree of 'upper-class' standing in the society at large cannot be sustained.

To the extent that he regarded the Church of England as the 'national Church', he did so very ambiguously:

I prefer to think of the Church [of England] as what I believe it is more and more coming to be, not the 'English Church', but national as 'the Catholic Church in England'.⁴³

Only insofar as Anglicanism could be regarded as Catholic, as a part of European Christendom, was it acceptable to Eliot, while he deeply appreciated its roots in English culture. W.H.S. Pickering's account of Anglo-Catholicism is subtitled 'a study in religious ambiguity'⁴⁴

and one element of that ambiguity was its combination of definite Englishness along with its identification with the international Catholic faith. This particular paradox was essential to its appeal to Eliot and he would have argued, no doubt, that it was typical of Catholic cultures worldwide. How similar are Dutch and Spanish Roman Catholicism? The various expressions of Catholic belief were united by the common doctrinal foundation and the 'inheritance from Greece and from Israel'. Catholicism 'is still,' Eliot wrote in 1933, 'as it always has been, the great repository of wisdom'.⁴⁵

4

Intimations of Eliot's theological development are apparent in the same period as the evolution of his aesthetic attraction to ritual, his artistic appreciation of the Western Church, and of the bonds between the English Church and English history and culture. Bracingly confronting his recognition of the 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'⁴⁶ were Anglo-Catholicism's systematic theology, its strict order of liturgical observance and its moral demands.

In 1916, in his Oxford lectures on French literature, Eliot criticised Rousseau for his opposition to 'Authority in matters of religion':

His great faults were

- 1) Intense egotism
- 2) Insincerity.

Anticipating, in the third person, his tripartite formula about himself of 1928, Eliot observed that

a classicist in art and literature will therefore be likely to adhere to a monarchical form of government, and to the Catholic Church.⁴⁷

In the poems and reviews he was writing in these years, moreover, Eliot engages familiarly with Christian texts and teachings, at the same time that he is promoting his doctrine of impersonality in art. The tone of Christian reference he adopts is usually wry and satirical, but the engagement is securely there. The epigraph to 'Burbank with a Baedeker', of 1918, for example, translates as

nothing stays if not divine; all else is smoke....⁴⁸

'The Hippopotamus', David Moody points out, contains echoes from the hymnals of Unitarianism, Methodism and Anglicanism.⁴⁹

Its epigraph addresses it to the Laodiceans, rebuked by God 'because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot' (Revelation 3:16). 'Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service' (1917) savages the Church for failing to preserve the knowledge of salvation in the incarnate Word. But that very negativity may be read as the expression of a regret at the failure of the preservation as much as a rejection of institutional Christianity. Similarly, in 1916, Eliot had criticised the Revd Hastings Rashdall, in a review of his *Conscience and Christ*, for attempting to make Christianity easier by focusing on ethical matters:

For Canon Rashdall the following of Christ is 'made easier' by thinking of him 'as the being in whom that union of God and man after which all ethical religion aspires is the most fully accomplished'.

Pondering this, Eliot observes that 'certain saints found the following of Christ very hard', but, he concludes sarcastically, 'modern methods have facilitated everything'.⁵⁰ The reader might have supposed that Canon Rashdall had Unitarian leanings and that Eliot was already ripe for Catholic orthodoxy.

In these years of the various intimations of his Anglo-Catholicism, however, Eliot was sensitive, in the literary *demi-monde*, about allegations of such propensities, as in this witty riposte of 1919 to Lytton Strachey:

You are very – ingenuous – if you can conceive me conversing with rural deans in the cathedral close. I do not go to cathedral towns but to centres of industry. My thoughts are absorbed in questions more important than ever enter the heads of deans – as why it is cheaper to buy steel bars from America than from Middlesbrough.⁵¹

He protests too much, mindful of the recipient of the letter, that militant atheist, with his satire of all religious personages and principles, and who had recently enjoyed a great success on the publication of *Eminent Victorians* (1918) with its scathing denunciation of theological controversy and superstition in the biography of Cardinal Manning. Strachey, after all, was named by Eliot as a leading figure in the irreligious 'generation of Mr. Shaw, and Mr. Wells, and Mr. Strachey, and Mr. Ernest Hemingway'.⁵² Yet only a year later, Eliot (so dismissive of cathedral towns) advises his mother, regarding her forthcoming visit from America, that 'we have made all sorts of plans for you when you come in the spring – both for London and

visiting other cathedral towns' ⁵³ and a few months on, he is more specific:

I should like to take you to some cathedral town like Exeter.⁵⁴

These places are singled out, as are no others (such as Stratford, for example, for the literary Mrs Eliot) as possible and agreeable destinations. This was a regime at least as suited to the son's developing interests as to the mother's tolerant Unitarian ecumenism.

SAMPLE