

## Preface

T.S. Eliot's declaration of his Anglo-Catholicism was made in the 'Preface' to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928):

To make my present position clear... I have made bold to unite these occasional essays.... The general point of view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion. I am quite aware that the first term is completely vague, and easily lends itself to clap-trap; I am aware that the second term is at present without definition, and easily lends itself to what is almost worse than clap-trap, I mean temperate conservatism; the third term does not rest with me to define.<sup>1</sup>

His formulation was based on the description, fifteen years earlier, of Charles Maurras' counterrevolutionary convictions – '*classique, catholique, monarchique*' – in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (March, 1913), to which Eliot was then a subscriber,<sup>2</sup> and may also have been inspired by a similar triplicity of convictions uttered by the philosopher, T.E. Hulme (whose thought exercised considerable influence on Eliot), who, in 1912, intended to explain 'why I believe in original sin, why I can't stand romanticism, and why I am a certain kind of Tory'.<sup>3</sup>

The announcement had been born of genial provocation, as Eliot explained, many years after he had made it, in 'To Criticize the Critic' (1961). His 'old teacher and master' from Harvard, the Humanist, Irving Babbitt, had passed through London in the year (1927) of Eliot's baptism and confirmation. Eliot 'knew that it would come as a shock to him to learn that any disciple of his had so turned his coat' by defecting from Humanism to Christianity,

but all Babbitt said was: 'I think you should come out into the open'. I may have been a little nettled by this remark;

the quotable sentence turned up in the preface to the book of essays I had in preparation, swung into orbit, and has been circling my little world ever since.<sup>4</sup>

By the 1960s, Eliot found himself

constantly irritated by having my words, perhaps written thirty or forty years ago, quoted as if I had uttered them yesterday.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, he points out that the description of his religious beliefs, in the quotable sentence of 1928, remained accurate. Virginia Woolf's acerbic speculation that Eliot would 'drop Christianity with his wife, as one might empty the fishbones after the herring', was premature.<sup>6</sup> Those beliefs and, hence, that allegiance persisted 'unchanged'.<sup>7</sup> In his essay of 1955, 'Goethe as the Sage', Eliot (in another self-portrait) varied the tripartite formula, but retained the Catholicism, noting that he possessed

a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinistic heritage, and a Puritanical temperament.<sup>8</sup>

Although she had been a friend and generous supporter, Woolf remained cynical about Eliot's declared allegiance. Such critics of his conversion, he wrote (in 1929) to Paul Elmer More (a fellow-American whose religious journey was similar to Eliot's and who described Eliot as his 'intimate acquaintance'), interpreted it as 'an escape or an evasion, certainly a defeat'.<sup>10</sup> Even More was guarded in his support. He had written to his sister, late in 1928:

Eliot himself, in the preface of a new book of essays which he has sent me, comes out clearly on his new platform: classicism, royalism, and Anglo-Catholicism. This is the sort of thing that is going on in England. There is some claptrap mixed up in it, but they mean something serious too – at least there are elements of a wholesome reaction from the maelstrom of follies that has almost engulfed the world. With their classicism they contrive to mix the freest of free verse, with their royalism an ultra democracy, and with their Anglo-Catholicism a good dose of skepticism plus bravado; but they may come to terms with themselves later on.<sup>11</sup>

A year later, in a letter to Austin Warren, the New England critic, More focuses explicitly on the implications of Eliot's conversion for

his poetry – a matter of much concern to those who saw Eliot as the leader of the new movement in verse and who feared that his religious commitment would stifle that creativity:

I remember that last summer after reading his *Andrewes* with its prefatal program of classicism, royalism (the divine right of kings!) and Anglo-Catholicism, I asked him whether, when he returned to verse, he would write the same sort of stuff that he once called poetry, or whether he had seen a new light. His answer was: 'I am absolutely unconverted'.... He is avowedly and, no doubt, sincerely religious; but just what his religion means to him, I do not know.<sup>12</sup>

Eliot's fidelity not only to Christianity but to a particular variety of it, over a period of nearly forty years until his death in 1965, is the dominant element in his life and work, through those several decades. It

ultimately affected his imagination, his writing, and all the other categories that his life comprised. It gave Eliot the great relation, and the grand poetic, he had always sought.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, a third of a century ago, when I first undertook research, at Oxford, into Eliot's Christianity and proposed the title which this book bears for the subject of my thesis, my supervisor, Helen Gardner, *doyenne* of Eliot scholars, immediately objected to my use of Eliot's phrase. She complained that it conveyed an impression of his Christianity that was too narrow. Accordingly, I accepted her broader but blander proposal: 'Christian Faith and Practice in the later Life and Work of T.S. Eliot'. By the time we had finished working on my dissertation, however, Dame Helen conceded that Eliot was more of an Anglo-Catholic than she had supposed and that his own early description of his faith was accurate.

Over the period since I completed my initial, unpublished study there have been numerous biographical and literary-critical accounts of Eliot and his poetry and prose. All of them, in one way or another, have inevitably mentioned his Christianity. None of them has revealed an informed understanding of Anglo-Catholicism in general; of its character in the first half of the twentieth century when Eliot was drawn to it and became one of its best-known lay representatives; of the details of Eliot's adaptation of its beliefs and practices to his own circumstances; of how his formal adoption of it was the culmination of his intellectual, cultural, artistic, spiritual and personal develop-

ment to that point, and how it continued to shape his life and work until his death; or of its special influence on his poetry – for example, in detailed analysis of his appropriation of liturgical language and of his incorporation into his poetry of what he regarded as crucial doctrinal principles. As Edwin Muir has written, 'the first condition of any genuine criticism of Mr. Eliot's religion is that it should be understood'.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, such information that has been supplied about his Anglo-Catholicism has been usually ill-informed and cursory, and, often, simply erroneous. Observing that 'Eliot's considerable influence in Anglo-Catholic thinking has been underestimated by his biographers', Michael Yelton further remarked that they 'do not appear fully to understand the various groupings in the Church of England'.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, they do not always understand the 'various groupings' in Christianity at large and they can be all at sea in commentary on particular articles of belief which were vital for Eliot. In an essay on 'religion' in Eliot, 'the intercession of the Virgin' is called one of the 'articles of the Anglican creed'<sup>16</sup> when it is nothing of the kind, but, rather, an Anglo-Catholic (and, of course, Roman Catholic) belief, to which Eliot gives expression in *Ash-Wednesday* and in 'The Dry Salvages', IV.

Then, commentators on Eliot's faith confuse Anglo-Catholicism with Roman Catholicism (or, just, 'Catholicism'); present it as if it were another term for High Church Anglicanism, and, generally, shy away from coming to grips with what precisely it was.<sup>17</sup> Even otherwise reliable commentators can be misleading when they turn to Eliot's religion. One of them states, for example, that the dominant linguistic forms in *Ash-Wednesday* (Eliot's most liturgical poem) derive 'from the Catholic liturgy'.<sup>18</sup> In a general sense, this is true, to the extent that Anglo-Catholic liturgy derives from the liturgical usages of Latin Christianity. But most readers would assume, from this phrase, that Eliot's direct sources were the Roman Catholic liturgy (such as his contemporary, David Jones, uses in his richly liturgical poems), in its pre-conciliar Latin form. And this is wide of the mark, as they come, precisely, from the Anglo-Catholic liturgy (in English), from Anglo-Catholic prayer manuals and from such quintessentially English sources as the Authorized Version of the Bible, as in the use of the phrase 'the cool of the day' (Genesis 3:8; *Ash-Wednesday*, II).<sup>19</sup> David Moody states – as an example of Eliot's alleged biblical orientation – that the poet was drawn to the 'classic statement of the Incarnation, at the beginning of the Gospel according to John'. But, again, while this is based in truth, it is

misleading with regard to Eliot's Christianity. It was the liturgical presentation of this biblical material, in the 'Last Gospel' at the end of Mass, to which Eliot was 'drawn' and which (very importantly, for Anglo-Catholics) presented the doctrine of the Incarnation in the context of the offering of the sacrament of the altar. Moody is puzzled by the capitalisation of 'Word', in reference to that gospel, in *Ash-Wednesday*, V. 'Is the capital a typographical convention, or theological?' he wonders.<sup>20</sup> Had he consulted The English Missal, used in the Anglo-Catholic liturgy at Eliot's parish church, he would have found the answer to this mystery, where the capitalisation is plainly there: 'In the beginning was the Word...', as indeed it is in the Authorized Version from which the Missal translation is directly taken. And when Moody tells the uninformed reader that Eliot used the prayer 'to the Virgin after the Catholic Mass'<sup>21</sup> in the phrase, 'And after this our exile', that reader may then be led to assume that Eliot, as an Anglican, drew from prayers from another communion, not his own, when the source, precisely, is the prayer to the Virgin, *Salve Regina*, as he would have regularly encountered it in public and private Anglo-Catholic devotions (and not necessarily, or even usually 'after ... Mass'). Such are the errors into which ignorance of Anglo-Catholicism can lead even an otherwise meticulous scholar of Eliot's work.

This imprecision is especially ironic in the cases both of Anglo-Catholicism and T.S. Eliot himself. For what distinguishes that system of belief and practice, within Anglicanism (*just* within it), and what characterises Eliot, temperamentally (and especially when it came to matters of doctrine and spiritual observance), was precision. Indeed, this is one of the main reasons why Eliot was drawn to, and announced his allegiance to (precisely) Anglo-Catholicism, when the declaration that his position was that of an 'Anglican in religion' (or even a 'Christian in religion', for that matter) might otherwise have been considered sufficiently descriptive and provocative in the circumstances. And we note that he did not say 'Catholic in religion', which would have been true (doctrinally-speaking, from his perspective), but, again, not sufficiently precise. The Anglo-Catholicism to which he adhered was nothing if not dogmatic in its keenness to affirm its Catholic credentials in the non-ecumenical, absolutist climate of international, pre-conciliar Roman Catholicism – but also, as the coinage suggests, it was conscious of its Englishness. The characteristics of a crusade – with rallies and battle-cries, heroic exemplars and victories for the faith – mark the optimistic Anglo-Catholicism of the period '*entre deux guerres*', and differentiate it

sharply from the doctrinally evasive, morally defensive (some would say, chaotic) and numerically declining Anglo-Catholicism of today. It was comparably stringent in matters of moral behaviour and religious observance and, even, in nurturing and insisting upon seemingly trivial pious customs and mannerisms. Eliot was scrupulous with regard to the observance of all of these requirements and expectations of his religion (which responded to deep-seated characteristics of his personality) and we should at least pay him the compliment of being similarly precise in our presentation of it and in commentary on its role in his life and work.<sup>22</sup>

He also regarded the correct understanding of a writer's religious position as being an essential component in the process of the appreciation of his art. Obviously this is especially the case when the writer focuses on religious matters in his work. Summarising the biography of David Jones, his friend and fellow-poet, Eliot wrote

he is a Londoner of Welsh and English descent. He is decidedly a Briton. He is also a Roman Catholic, and he is a painter who has painted some beautiful pictures and designed some beautiful lettering. All these facts about him are important.<sup>23</sup>

The fact of Eliot's Anglo-Catholicism is similarly important, for the same reasons of interpretation and appreciation. Russell Kirk (who knew Eliot well over many years, and has written one of the best books about him and his achievement) has argued that leaving Christianity out of the discussion of Eliot's poetry and prose 'would be very like omitting any mention of Stoic philosophy from a criticism of Seneca ... or taking the gods away from the classical authors':

Life and letters cannot endure in little coffin-like compartments. How could one criticize Pascal or Coleridge, say, without taking into account their religion? How, then, Eliot?<sup>24</sup>

And in taking it into account, as we must, we also need to get it right.

It is the purpose of this book to explore and explain the genesis, development and character of Eliot's Christianity – the faith which, for forty years, was central to his life and a seminal influence in his work throughout that period. His widow, Mrs Valerie Eliot, has told me that her 'husband's religious side has been neglected by most writers, and a major book is badly needed'.<sup>25</sup> It is time that Eliot's challenge for the term 'Anglo-Catholic' to be defined, in relation to his own life and work, was met.

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I am grateful for advice about Eliot's faith and its practice to the late Dame Helen Gardner, who initially challenged me to probe and prove the Anglo-Catholic character of Eliot's Christianity, and to several other friends and associates of Eliot, clerical and lay, who are also now deceased. My indebtedness to them is revealed at the various points in the book where they are mentioned and their information is recorded. My particular gratitude to the late Mary Trevelyan, Eliot's fellow-worshipper at St Stephen's Gloucester Road in the 1940s and 50s and the late George Every (one-time Brother of the Society of the Sacred Mission, Kelham, which Eliot visited) is explained in the first two appendices. I also record my thanks to the late Professor Nigel Yates, who, a few months before his death in January, 2009, sent me his unpublished article, 'Walsingham and Inter-War Anglo-Catholicism'.

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