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The Rock

Christ, Church & World in T. S. Eliot's 1934 pageant: 'The Rock'

This article is sent with greetings to Juhász Tamás on his 65th birthday! We have warm memories of times with him at conferences and in his home with Erzsébet. He has shown an admirable way of combining faith and doctrine and I hope that this topic from Eliot, although coming from afar, will ring a harmonious note of common intention. Eliot took his own faith as well as his literary work very seriously, and so I trust that this article will add some joy to the book dedicated to Tamás Juhász.

In this article we shortly introduce T. S. Eliot, noting some major themes he addresses, particularly in relation to religious faith and the search for meaning in life. In the second and third sections our article concentrates on the 1934 church pageant, called *'The Rock'*. This drama was only published once and is hard to find. However, the poetry Eliot included in the drama, called '*Choruses from The Rock'*, have been reprinted and included in various volumes so that these are readily available. But among those people who have read some or all of the ten *Choruses from The Rock*, very few have ever found a copy of the play in which these poems were situated.[1] We present quotations from the ten choruses, with a few annotations at times concerning the context. In the fourth section we look at various aspects of Eliot's Christology as found in *The Rock*. Eliot's view is that Christ is the Light of the World, revealing divine action in history, which contrasts with human ideologies and provides a different life meaning. I make use of some references to Paul Tillich because like Eliot, he emphasizes the ambiguity of faith and life, church and world.

I.1. Eliot – introductory remarks

Thomas Stearns Eliot[2] was born in 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri. He moved to England in 1914, where he lived and worked as a writer and editor until his death in 1965. His early and deepest impression was made on his contemporaries through *The Waste Land* (1922). But many of his other works are still read with awe, such as *Four Quartets* (1943). He is further remembered for his plays, perhaps especially *Murder in the Cathedral*

[1] I thank my cousin, librarian Elizabeth Smith (Sawyer), for ordering a 1934 copy of *The Rock* for me.

[2] Cf. www.answers.com/topic/t-s-eliot. Ackroyd, Peter: *T. S. Eliot*. Hamish Hamilton, London 1984; Gordon, Lyndall: *T. S. Eliot – An Imperfect Life*. W. W. Norton, London 1998.

(1935), and in another way for his *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), which was adapted into a popular musical, called *Cats* (1982). In yet other ways he is remembered for his essays as a literary critic, and also for essays such as *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (1948). He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948 and he is considered to be one of the most influential poets and literary critics of the twentieth century.

The style of his poetry displays a great variety. He introduces elusive eloquence that tickles the mind, and then mixes in jocular vernacular that jars the ears. All his poems play with intellectually discordant thoughts, discordant sounds, and unexpected juxtapositions, often depending on word-plays and half-hidden meanings or pointers. His writing is heavy with allusions, often in very short echoes of numerous centuries of past literature mixed with thoughts about contemporary situations. Indeed, his style, themes, and rhythmic versatility continually charm, while his evasive irony frustrates the reader who wants to know exactly what the poet means. His understatement is unarming, just as his continual inner monologues and pastiches of half-statements jump without providing a logical bridge to anywhere (or so it seems). All this creates a labyrinth for many who first pick up his works. But he does this in part to echo the fragmentation of what since has been called the postmodern plight.

As for his basic concern, in *The Waste Land* (1925) and in *The Hollow Men* (1925) he presents the problem of a secularized loss of transcendent meaning. Then he gives an answer to this problem by speaking of turning points, as in *Journey of the Magi* (1927) and in *Ash Wednesday* (1930). Eliot reaches a kind of harmony in *Four Quartets*, which attempt to reconcile the temporal and the eternal. A number of basic themes are found throughout his works. These include: meaning and meaninglessness; the desert wasteland of the soul; complacency; a spiritual pilgrimage; time and eternity; words and the Word of God; estrangement and the search for peace and harmony. While all these are present in his works, they appear in different contexts and with different expressions, partly the same and partly adding new aspects.

Eliot seeks mystic moments of the immediate experience of the eternal, which however weakly, refracts its light upon all moments of time. He concludes *The Dry Salvages* by saying that all we have are "hints and guesses", but these need to be integrated into "prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action". The hint is the gift of insight into Incarnation, which is "the impossible union/Of spheres of existence".[3] In this mystical insight the pain, limitations, sins and failures of daily existence are overcome and redeemed. This may partly happen in the Hegelian style of thesis-antithesis-synthesis,

[3] Eliot, T. S.: *Four Quartets*. Faber & Faber, London 1999, 38. For more on this, see Revell, Peter: *Quest in Modern American Poetry*. Barnes & Noble, New Jersey 1981, ch. 4, 'Spirit unappeased: T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*', 137–170.

but it especially needs something like the Kierkegaardian 'moment' to redeem the moments of time. Already in *The Rock* we find the expression, "that moment of time gave the meaning" (50).

I.2. Dogma & doubt: the converted Eliot

Many literary contemporaries of Eliot were not interested in following him along the path of his conversion – which was specifically to the Anglican church (1927). He had worded so well the mind-set and searching of a generation in response to the First World War, a generation which looked into the mirror of its own alienation and could only see nihilistic-narcistic choices. But many could not follow him when he spoke of his new orientation, nor could everyone share Eliot's concern about the disappearance of a Christian society.

Yet there is a typical Eliot-style irony in all of this: he continued to speak of both dogma and doubt. As one analyst says,

> [Eliot presents] "[…] the absence, not exactly of faith, but of the God in Whom faith would believe – if only we had faith. […] I think Eliot never did truly believe and that his poetry is not about faith's wait for God but about the hollow man's wait for faith. Of course, he probably did believe, and many accounts of personal encounters with the poet describe the deep humility and sincerity of his faith. What we encounter in his late poetry, however, is a profound confusion of faith with a brilliant and learned man's rational understanding that he needs to have faith."[4]

However, further clarification is needed. Deep faith includes the processing of doubt. Paul Tillich states:

> "[…] there is a doubt that is an unavoidable implication of sin, both being expressions of the state of estrangement. But the problem is not that of doubt as a consequence of sin; the problem is that of doubt as an element of faith. […] The infinite distance between God and man is never bridged; it is identical with man's finitude. Therefore creative courage is an element of faith even in the state of perfection, and where there is courage, there is risk and the doubt implied in risk. Faith would not be faith but mystical union were it deprived of the element of doubt within in."[5]

Said in another way: faith is not simple, but complex. Faith rises beyond doubt, but does so by contemplating the nagging questions. Faith partly conquers them, but also always lives with them. This is part of our pilgrim's progress in sanctification. We find doubt in Moses, the Psalms, Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, Augustine – and to jump many centuries – also in Eliot.

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[4] Bottum, J.: What T. S. Eliot Almost Believed. In: *First Things* 55 (Aug./Sept. 1995), 25–30.

[5] Tillich, Paul: *Systematic Theology*. James Nisbet, Digswell Place 1968, Vol. III, 254.

So we can say that while those who do not like Christian *doctrine* have been repelled by the *converted* Eliot, those who do not like *doubt* are repelled by the *searching* Eliot. Before and after his conversion, Eliot was a great questioner. For this reason, Eliot continues to speak to the twenty-first century. He indeed speaks of the need to wait for faith, and moves back and forth between faith's search for understanding, and understanding's search for faith:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.[6]

Eliot's devotion always swung between the ultimate (questions) and the penultimate or proximate answers. He went deeply into the history of literature, philosophy and religion, including Eastern expressions. Belief, the need for conversion, the falling back into sin, the dark cast of mind, the glimmer of mystical hope – all of these were combined by Eliot into interpretations of experiences (empirical and ideal). By walking with deep thoughts he hoped to be pilgrimaging forward. Eliot was aware that literary folk like Robert Graves, Ezra Pound, and Irving Babbitt, were into Eastern religion, and he himself alludes to this kind of thought in many places, from lines in *The Wasteland* to lines in *Four Quartets*. He makes use especially of the eastern denial of desire, but does not wholly convert to this. Eliot had read William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and approached the leap of faith cautiously, indeed very hesitantly, and for that reason is a perennial partner in contemporary dialogue. He escorted many ideas from all the major world-views and ideologies, but confessed in *Four Quartets*: "We had the experience but missed the meaning." And so it was that as a Christian he said in his own way, "[…] that moment in time gave the meaning" (Chorus 7 from *The Rock*).

I.3. 'Objective correlative'

There are many aspects to Eliot's poetic techniques, which aim at density of thought along with a great richness in emotional tones and impressions, juxtapositioning ideas which are often paradoxical but are meant to wholistically include all our experiences in order to reach more awareness. We may draw attention here to Eliot's idea of using 'objective correlative'[7] statements, by which is meant that he describes something (an object, a situation, event, relationship, etc.) in such a way that the concrete example immediately produces the 'correlative' or analogical feeling in the reader. For

[6] Eliot, T. S.: East Coker. In: *Four Quartets*, Faber & Faber, London 1944; reprint 1989, 24, lines 124–127.

[7] See Matthiessen, F. O.: *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*. University Press, Oxford 1959, 58.

example, when we hear the words, *"I have measured out my life with coffee spoons"*, we feel the boredom and the hesitancy of the overcautious person who remains on the sidelines of life, hardly entering the game as an actor. We feel the nausea of noncommitance. There are endless phrases and words in Eliot's poetry which function as 'objects' (given signs) which produce the (subjective) 'correlative' feeling in us. For example, the often repeated words 'desert' and 'rocks' in *Ash-Wednesday*. Or, here in *Choruses from the Rock*, we find words like 'house' and 'light'. A typically objective correlative statement, would be: "The great snake lies ever half awake, at the bottom of/the pit of the world, curled […]." This produces the analogical feeling more directly than saying that evil is always there at the basis of our lives. The snake statement contains the horror of evil, while the second statement is abstractly true but impinges less upon us.

We can say that the word 'church', 'house of God', and 'faith' for Eliot are objective correlative symbols in these Choruses for all our best values and our cultural heritage. That is why he says,

> "To our Christian heritage we owe many things besides religious faith. Through it we trace the evolution of our arts, through it we have our conception of Roman Law which has done so much to shape the Western World, through it we have our conceptions of private and public morality. And through it we have our common standards of literature, in the literatures of Greece and Rome. The Western world has its unity in this heritage, in Christianity and in the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome and Israel, from which, owing to two thousand years of Christianity, we trace our decent."[8]

On the same page he says: "If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes". The reader can judge how true this may seem to be so many decades later (he wrote this in 1948). To feel what Eliot felt when he used words like 'church', we need to know this perspective which he held on 'faith' as the motor of culture.

II. The Rock – structure & themes

The Rock was commissioned in 1934 as a pageant play in order to raise funds for building churches in the new suburbs in the diocese of northern London. In the prefatory note Eliot says that he cannot be called the author of the play, since the historical scenes were planned by the committee and Eliot was asked to write a script for these scenes. We may especially mention E. Martin Browne, who was involved in this.[9] Of course, there were numerous people in the planning of the event and many more in the production of the

[8] From Eliot's *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*, cited in Kermode, Frank (ed.): *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. Harcourt Brace, New York 1975, 304.

[9] Browne, E. M.: *The Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays*. University Press, Cambridge 1969.

drama itself. It originally ran for two weeks, starting May 28, 1934, with an audience of 1500 each evening. There were 330 characters that participated in the scenes and each scene had its own colour scheme, so that "the full range of the spectrum" was used.[10] While the critics found flaws enough (it was a pageant making use of mainly amateur participants as such genre do), there were also some sparkling comments in the press. Later, Eliot allowed the play to go out of print, while maintaining the 'Choruses from the Rock' in his *Collected Poems*.

The various scenes are composed of action with dialogue and each is commented upon and expanded by the poetic chorus which fulfils the role of a chorus in Greek drama – although the chorus has also been called Hebraic because of its biblical sources. The chorus was a set of 16 masked men and women who were dressed in stylised robes and stood behind the 'Rock'. They were motionless – being a voice supporting the 'Rock' – and so full attention was focussed on their words. Voices from the chorus alternated between individuals, small groups, men and women, and the whole chorus. The play moves through church history, touching on the Roman and Saxon eras in Britain up to the consecration of Westminster Abbey. There are scenes from the Middle Ages (the crusades) and the Reformation, ending with an iconoclastic purge. But this is not the main theme; the major idea is that of the workers and all humanity applying craftsmanship (stonemasons, woodcarvers, metal-workers, painters) to the beautification of churches and of all of life *solo Dei gloria*. Mention is made of the consecration of Wren's St. Paul's Cathedral of the London diocese. Throughout there is meditation on the meaning of the church and what it means to build a 'house for God'. Numerous biblical references are found in the dialogues and the poetry. The last scene brings all the players of each historical era on stage together with contemporary representatives. St. Peter appears now as 'the rock' and blesses the new building.

The pageant is sometimes called a preaching to the converted, since it was about the renewal of church buildings and church life. However, Eliot included enough critique of religion to strike some notes that the 'unconverted' might also appreciate. The diction swings widely between street talk vernacular and Prayer Book jargon. Sometimes it seems too pedantic and preachy, but these lines illustrate common religious attitudes. Some remarks are trite. But the triteness is also meant to express common vernacular statements. The attitudes represented move all the way from alienation to admiration, with items of disinterest and scepticism mixed in as well.

Among the basic themes Eliot works into the play we may mention the church, both militant and suffering, the perfection of the will, and the interplay of eternity and time. The historical scenes remind us that, "The Church must

[10] Browne, *op. cit.*, 28.

forever building, for it is forever decaying within and attacked from without" (21). The 'rock' is the church, St. Peter, and finally Christ. We may think of Psalm 19,14: "The Lord is my rock and my redeemer", and several similar statements in a variety of Old Testament texts. For the New Testament we may refer to Paul's metaphor: "[…] the rock was Christ" (I Corinthians 10,4), as well as to the words of Jesus: "[…] on this rock I shall build my church" (Matthew 7,24).

The drama posits that God has been abandoned for the pseudo-gods of Money, Power, Life (Enjoyment), Race (Fascism), and Dialectic (Communism). In the modern man-made technological world, God is difficult to perceive. Yet without something greater than daily life, something holier and awesome, meaning slips away into a trivial pursuit of small ends. When worship and prayer disappear, meditation on our values is removed, and soon human love is exchanged for utilitarian goals. When the Christian symbols of the cross, the dove, rites of baptism, marriage and death, and meaningful ways of communal identity are lost, all of this is reduced to fragmented choices without a framework. Such is Eliot's perception and prophetic insight. He illustrates the illusion and isolation of the modern self, in search of itself. This is the anguish of the barren land and barren soul, as the poet had expressed in a way that captivated a generation, in his *Waste Land* and other early poems. His answer to the problem is transcendent, or theological, for like Augustine, Eliot perceives that only divine grace can revive us. The great contrast, as Augustine had said, is between the temporal and the eternal 'city' or society.[11] The answer to depersonalizing alienation is the return (regeneration) to the image of God. That is why the church is needed in the city. In contrast to the lack of will found in hollow people, Eliot (once again like Augustine), points to the 'perfection' of the will by means of the love of God. How else can the self be salvaged?

III. The ten 'Choruses from the Rock'

We shall summarize the major themes found in the choruses and indicate their setting in the pageant. While we will notice things Eliot says about Christ at a couple of intervals, we save the summarizing of this theme for section IV which deals with aspects of Eliot's Christology. Our quotations from the Choruses are representative, leaving much unsaid.

III.1. First chorus – Introduction to the problem and to the 'Rock'

The opening of the first chorus (7ff) establishes the major themes and contrasts:

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[11] This theme has been written on by Spender, Stephen: *T. S. Eliot*. Viking Press, New York 1975, ch. vi, 'The Temporal City of Total Conditioning', and ch. vii, 'Toward the City Outside of Time'.

The Eagle soars in the summit of Heaven,
The Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit.
O perpetual revolution of configured stars,
O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,
O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
[…]
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

The poet begins with abstract philosophical thoughts on whirling star patterns and cosmonomic cycles, which are then contrasted by speech moves into concrete experiences. This includes London, a city with less and less church bells and new suburbs where people read the newspaper rather than go to church on Sunday morning. London is already a 'timekept City' of commerce and shipping trade ('foreign flotations'). When 'the Rock' enters, he is called the Watcher, the Stranger, the Witness, the Critic, and "the God-shaken, in whom is the truth inborn" (8). All the choruses have allusions to biblical texts. One referred to in the first chorus is Matthew 6,34: "Take therefore no thought for the morrow". This is a way of contrasting our almost frantic working for success, with the blessings given while we lay aside our work and even sleep (Psalm 137,1–2). All our work is in vain if God is not the builder.

The Rock speaks and says that among all changes, the "perpetual struggle of Good and Evil" does not change. Therefore, "the good man is the builder, if he build what is good" – indeed, therefore "make perfect your will" (9). The scene then shows builders working on a church, and others unemployed. The refrain becomes: "A Church for all / And a job for each / Each man to his work" (10). Eliot's view on work in this pageant is the contrast between human works leading to a false salvation, and working with a view to eternity.

In the section following the first chorus, there are speeches and dialogues between the workmen building a church. One fellow says that whether he builds a bank or a church, "I draws me dough just the same so it's all the same to me" (11). In this dialogue and throughout the play there are remarks and lines that are humorous, including the following interpretation of the Bible: "[…] see what the Book says. There's David. One o' them fancy lads – a good soldier and fond o' the ladies – but a great one for 'is church. And what does it say. The Lord loved 'im 'cause 'e was a fine fellow on one side and as bad as them make 'em on the other" (13).

One way of summarizing the meaning of building a church went as follows: "It's God's 'ouse and it's the people's 'ouse and it's our 'ouse. You

and me […] are doin' somethin' for God and somethin' for 'umanity what always 'as to be done" (13).

An evaluation of the church is found throughout the play. Critique (and self-critique) of religion is frequently stated. We hear that the church could progress in the old days because people were more simple and there were less other cultural attractions, such as the theatre or science. "Then what's more, there wasn't any papers and people couldn't read nor write anyway. And what's more, there wasn't any charities nor gov'ment works o' no kind…there was nowheres else to go for 'elp but only to the church […]" (14).

We also hear: "Your gods, you say, fight for you and strengthen you in battle. But I tell you that God is not only your God but the God of all men. He does not fight for you except you fight for righteousness […]." (17–18).

III.2. Second chorus – The question of the cornerstone for society is raised

When the cornerstone given by God is rejected, we set about labouring for ourselves to the detriment of our neighbours. We turn to "imperial expansion […] industrial development […] intellectual enlightenment" and have no spiritual stamina to hold back "gluttony, pride, neglect of the Word of God" and all the sins that lead to inner decay (20). Therefore the second chorus (19ff), says:

> The Church must be forever building, for it is forever
> decaying within and attacked from without;
> For this is the law of life; and you must remember that
> while there is time of prosperity
> The people will neglect the Temple, and in time of
> adversity they will decry it.
>
> What life have you if you have not life together?
> There is no life that is not in community,
> And no community not lived in praise of God.
> Even the anchorite who meditates alone,
> For whom the days and nights repeat the praise of God,
> Prays for the Church, the Body of Christ incarnate.
> And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads,
> And no man knows or cares who is his neighbour
> Unless his neighbour makes too much disturbance
> But all dash to and fro in motor cars […].

The chorus also mentions the contrast of 'both in prosperity and adversity', a phrase found in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer and in many marriage liturgies.

III.3. Third chorus – The relation of the divine Word to our daily life

In this section a critique of religion is voiced on stage: the church represents "outworn superstition" and in an attitude of class betrayal the church and the wealthy "blokes what keeps the yoke o' religion on the shoulders o' the workin' man", together maintain repressive patterns (33). The chorus chants:

> Where there is no temple there shall be no homes,
> Though you have shelters and institutions
> Precarious lodgings while the rent is paid,
> Subsiding basements where the rat breeds
> Or sanitary dwellings with numbered doors
> Or a house a little better than your neighbour's;
> When the Stranger says: "What is the meaning of this city?
> Do you huddle close together because you love each other?"
> What will you answer? "We all dwell together
> To make money from each other"? or "This is a community"?
> And the Stranger will depart and return to the desert.
> O my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger,
> Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.
> [31]

A further thought in the chorus echoes Psalm 127: "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain" (NIV).

III.4. Fourth chorus – Nehemiah rebuilds Jerusalem after the return from Exile in Babylon

Since this section is historically focused we shall leave it aside here.

III.5. Fifth chorus – Deliver us from excellent intentions

> O Lord, deliver me from the man of excellent intention
> and impure heart…
> […]
> Preserve me from the enemy who has something to gain:
> […] and from the friend who has something to lose.
> […]
> If humility and purity be not in the heart, they are not in
> the home: and if they are not in the home, they are
> not in the City.
> [39]

III.6. Sixth chorus – Betrayal of faith in God turns modern complacency into violence

It is hard for those who have never known persecution,
And who have never known a Christian,
To believe these tales of Christian persecution.
It is hard for those who live near a Bank
To doubt the security of their money.
It is hard for those who live near a Police Station,
To believe in the triumph of violence.
Do you think that the Faith has conquered the World
And that lions no longer need keepers?
[…]
Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws?
She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget.
She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft.
She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.
They constantly try to escape
From the darkness outside and within
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.
[42]

The scene shows Redshirts and Blackshirts in military formation. They represent an alternative system of values compared to the 'system' of grace. Alternative systems create their own values, laws, and ethics and one can see that this is a historical reference to Fascism and Communism. Also: workers in the new industrial capitalist system focus on bread and beer, wine, coffee and sausage, and thereby parody the Church's bread and wine of the Eucharist.

III.7. Seventh chorus – Christ brought light to human history

In the beginning God created the world. Waste and
void. Waste and void. And darkness was upon the
face of the deep.
[…]
[Blindly men were…]
Worshipping snakes or trees, worshipping devils rather
than nothing: crying for life beyond life, for ecstasy
not of the flesh.
[…]
Then came […]
A moment in time but time was made through that
moment: for without the meaning there is no time,
and that moment of time gave the meaning.
[…]

Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness on the
face of the deep.
Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed
the Church?
When the Church is no longer regarded, not even
opposed, and men have forgotten
All gods except Usury, Lust and Power.
[51]

Part two of the pageant begins here. The new gods are reason, money, power, comfortable life, race, and consumerism. To avoid these we need to "Remember, living in time, you must live also now in Eternity" (52). The task of a saint is to "[…] apprehend/the point of intersection of the timeless/with time" (*The Dry Salvages*) – and here in Chorus VII the wheel of action at the beginning of the pageant is contrasted with the point of stillness, or in Aristotelian terms, the 'unmoved mover'. But Eliot seeks a synthesis of eternity and time, since we "[…] must serve as spirit and body" (76). Thus,

> "It is not one of the motives of *The Rock* to suggest to the audience a negative way of sanctity through contemplation or martyrdom. […] *The Rock* contains, in other words, a philosophy of using time rather than of escaping from it […] [and] the Incarnation […] has redeemed all the moments of time that meet and become eternal in it […]."[12]

The "negative way of sanctity" is found in Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*, which is a marvellous piece of writing about conversion: that is, the turning from the world toward God. But Eliot understood that such turning is not an end in itself; it is part of our pilgrimage in the world.[13]

III.8. Eighth chorus – Old crusades

This section portrays the dialectical value of the crusades:

[…]
Whole faith of a few,
Part faith of many.
Not avarice, lechery, treachery,
Envy, sloth, gluttony, jealousy, pride:
It was not these that made the Crusades,
But these that unmade them.

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[12] Smith, Grover: *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays. A Study in Sources and Meanings*. University Press, Chicago 1950.

[13] Cf. Sawyer, F.: 'A reading of T. S. Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*'. *KOERS* – Bulletin For Christian Scholarship, Vol. 75. No. 1, Potchefstroom 2010.

Remember the faith that took men from home
At the call of a wandering preacher.
Our age is an age of moderate virtue
And of moderate vice
When men will not lay down the Cross
Because they will never assume it.
Yet nothing is impossible, nothing,
To men of faith and conviction.
Let us therefore make perfect our will.
O God, help us.
[57]

Eliot recognizes the two sides, positive and negative, of the Crusades. The motive was not necessarily born out of the sins he mentions, but what might have been a regeneration became a degeneration and indeed ruined any good to the Crusades. While we now understand the combination of the sword and the cross to be wrong, we must remember that this was also the way politics and nations functioned at that time. For the majority of people there was no separation between political, religious and ethnic identity. The situation was monolithic, not pluralistic as in today's societies. Today we have reached a stage in history when civic civilization no longer is monolithically identified with one religion. Both religion and politics should have peace as the priority on their agendas. Eliot, however, does draw attention to the opposite problem today: we do not go forth in 'holy wars' any more (most of us don't), but neither do we take up the cross – in other words, we live with little conviction and little earnest defence of truth.

III.9. Ninth chorus – Bringing gifts to the House of the Lord

[…]
Out of the formless stone, when the artist unites himself
with stone,
Spring always new forms of life...
[…]
Out of the slimy mud of words...
[…]
There spring the perfect order of speech, and the beauty
of incantation.

Lord, shall we not bring these gifts to Your service?
[…]
For man is joined spirit and body,
And therefore must serve as spirit and body.
Visible and invisible, two worlds meet in Man;
Visible and invisible must meet in His Temple;

You must not deny the body.
[75–76]

Eliot posits that all our life should return praise to our Creator, represented here by the creative arts and crafts (but he also mentions "all our powers/For life, for dignity, grace and order,/And intellectual pleasures of the senses"). The logic of 'spirit and body' is that we must serve God in all dimensions. When he says, "You must not deny the body", he means that our material life is also spiritual, to be offered to God. But the other meaning of course, is that we should not deny the Body of Christ (those who gather to worship in the temple). Also: temple can be the church building; but also the Body of Christ, sacrificed for us. The main point is that the sacral dimension of life must be recognized.

There has been considerable debate about interpreting 'body' (*soma*) and 'flesh' (*sarx*) in the New Testament and throughout the history of philosophy and theology. Eliot deals with this throughout his works. Like Augustine and so many others, Eliot came to realize that the negative use of 'flesh' in the Bible refers sometimes to our finiteness, but also often to the ethical category of rebellion against the will of God. 'Body' is positive and should not be confused with the special use of the word 'flesh' (which is both individual and collective) as humanity rejecting God.

III.10. Tenth chorus – One church built

When we reach the end of the play the final theme is that of divine Light, but first there is the warning that besides the light, there is also darkness, besides good, also evil:

The great snake lies ever awake, at the bottom of the
pit of the world, curled
In folds of himself until he awakens in hunger and
moving his head to right and to left prepares for his
hour to devour.
But the Mystery of Iniquity is a pit too deep for mortal
eyes to plumb. Come
Ye out from among those who prize the serpent's golden
eyes,
The worshippers, self-given sacrifice of the snake. Take
Your way and be ye separate.
Be not too curious of Good and Evil;
Seek not to count the future waves of Time;
But be ye satisfied that you have light
Enough to take your step and find your foothold.

O Light Invisible, we praise Thee!
Too bright for mortal vision.

O Greater Light, we praise Thee for the less;
The eastern light our spires touch at morning,
The light that slants upon our western doors at evening,
The twilight over stagnant pools at batflight,
Moon light and star light, owl and moth light,
Glow-worm glowlight on a grassblade.
O Light Invisible, we worship Thee!
[84–85]

It has been commented,

> "Each of the light images is almost literally a reflection, decreasing in brightness, of the great Light that illumines the world. Thus, because the visible Church most perfectly mirrors as much of the invisible order as it is possible for fallen man to see, the Church ought to be that institution which gives structure and meaning to man's otherwise chaotic life. […] Because of the breadth of the Church, no man can be excluded from its organization so long as he recognizes God as the head of the whole. However, and this is most important, this system – of which the Church is only the external manifestation – exists whether man chooses to recognize it or not."[14]

At the end of the pageant one church building has been added. Little altar lights represent the great light:

And when we have built an altar to the Invisible Light,
we may set thereon the little lights for which our
bodily vision is made.
And we thank Thee that darkness reminds us of light.
O Light Invisible, we give Thee thanks for Thy great
glory!
[85]

The choruses end on a reference again to the Book of Common Prayer: "we give thanks to thee for thy great glory".

IV. Aspects of Eliot's Christology

The Apostle Paul, commenting on the Old Testament, said: "...they all drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ" (I Corinthians 10,4). This allegorical interpretation refers to the spiritual resources God gives: manna from the heavens and water from a rocky cliff in the desert, but also spiritually living water from Christ (John 7,37–39) and from God's Spirit. The point Eliot wants to make in *The Rock* is that we need

[14] Olshin, Toby A.: 'A Consideration of the Rock'. In: *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 39, University Press, Toronto 1970, 314.

the visible church as a sign of the invisible work of salvation by Christ. Said in another way: the invisible light must become apparent in daily life. Eliot believed that the way of regeneration would restore the individual person and society as well. A view of Christ in *The Rock* can be made via an extrapolation of the ecclesiological views of Eliot. The 'rock' in the play represents the divine foundation, and seems sometimes to be an Old Testament prophet, or a more modern saint, or the voice of the church, or the voice of Christ. The question is: what is the basic message, or in biblical language: what is the Spirit saying to the church and world?

Let us look at Eliot's Christology in this pageant. In general his views about Christ here run via ecclesiology, that is, his view on the church. Since Christ is the head of the church, the two are highly related, though not identical. The human historical expression of the church, as Paul Tillich says, may even become demonized and express the opposite of what Christ the head says and does. Eliot would recognize the following opinion of Tillich as important:

> "The churches which represent the Kingdom of God in its fight against the forces of profanization and demonization are themselves subject to the ambiguities of religion and are open to profanization and demonization."[15]

The answer Tillich gives to this problem is the "prophetic criticism of the churches by the churches". Eliot would say the same about faith and religion: there was be an on-going self-critique. Actually, Eliot's view on Christ includes this kind of sifting of faith.

IV.1. Christ the Light

This view on Christ is the culmination of the pageant. So we may ask: What do we learn about Christ the Light?

First, we should ask if the Light referred to in the tenth chorus really refers to Christ. We can say that it does, because Eliot ends the play (in the final words of St. Peter revealed as the rock) with a reference to the Lamb of God as a lamp (Revelation 21,22ff). Light is a parallel alternative to the 'objective correlative' or symbol of Christ as the rock. Yet Eliot did not have a muse that easily let him sing 'Rock of Ages, cleft for me', without first dashing his days against many rocks of experience. These rocks of pain, anguish, questions, and doubt also appear regularly in his poems.

IV.2. The light of Christ is brighter than our little lights.

The poem refers to the Greater Light, which is an analogy of the sun, but actually refers to the light of Christ which is brighter than the light in nature and also brighter than the little lights of our daily work and worship.

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[15] Tillich, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, 403.

IV.3. The Divine Light is invisible

For Eliot this could mean that the Divine Light – also of Christ – only becomes visible to "those who have eyes to see". This last expression was stated more than once by Jesus. We find this motif many times in Eliot. To give one example: in *The Hollow Men* (1925) he speaks of "Those who have crossed/With direct eyes, to death's other kingdom". The context has to do with 'seeing' false or true hope. We do not see or know everything about the Invisible Light, yet we have the mystical vision of God and of salvation.

As a side note we can remark that in the Old Testament the stones of the temple were not allowed to be engraved with designs or figures (Exodus 20,25). The temple points to the invisible divinity, and any human imaging is detractive of this. The less we see the better, because all concrete images and ideas, even when positive, also can easily detract from a true understanding of God. That is why the 'holy place' in the tabernacle and temple of the Old Testament did not have an image of God (in contrast to other nations). Eliot was well aware of this.

IV.4. The Divine Light cannot be captured

In its own sovereign way this light relates, at times ambiguously, to our little lights and to our need for more light. But it gives us comfort […] and changes our darkness so that even the "darkness reminds us of light" (85).

IV.5. The Invisible Light does not originate with us

This light is appropriated subjectively, but is not merely subjective. Thus there is the question as to the way Eliot creates new phrases to speak about the truths he adheres to.[16] We have already mentioned his penchant for engaging in, with, and also in critique of a variety of worldviews, philosophies, and religious insights. There is a dialectical movement in Eliot's thought between divine truth revealed (as in the Incarnation) and subjective truth experienced and only half-defined. Our subjective experience of truth is only half-definable, because it so often is a juxtaposition of a variety of presumed truths, especially in relation to time (finite experience) and the interpreting of these by the self and by society. And all of this in relation to the whole of reality, because of our need for a perspective beyond our selves. We see this in all his poetry, culminating in the *Four Quartets*. The point to be stated here, is that our subjective experience of divine light gives us something beyond our own light. Divine light may be called Invisible, but Eliot also assumes that it actually enlightens us.

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[16] See Olney, James: Four Quartets: 'Folded in a Single Party'. In: Bloom, Harold (ed.): *Modern Critical Reviews: T. S. Eliot*, Chelsea House Publishers, New York 1985, 36–39.

IV.6. The Incarnation as point in time and point of enlightenment

The memory of the point in time of the Incarnation is enlightening in the sense of liberating. "This is the use of memory:/For liberation […]" (*Little Gidding*, III.156/7). Eliot understands this use of memory as including – indeed based on and enlightened by, the Memoria Sancta. The divine revelation of love changes our love, expanding it beyond mere desire. This, he restates, is liberating. Everything becomes "renewed, transfigured, in another pattern" (165). The basis for understanding these thoughts in *Little Gidding* are found clearly in *The Rock*, as well as numerous other places throughout Eliot's poetry. Perhaps especially in *Ash-Wednesday*, where the turning (conversion) is always a returning – to God and to our experience of life with the Memoria Sancta of the Incarnation as a liberating foothold. 'Light' in Eliot's perspective is very Christocentric, even when prismatically experienced, as it should be. The idea of Christ as the light is found, among many other places, in John 1: "The true light […] was coming into the world". Or, for example, in the Nicene Creed: 'Light of Light'.

IV.7. Christ saves us from ideologies and moral evils

There is much about morality in this church pageant, and the relatively recently converted (1927) Eliot could explore some lines here on faith as a moral dynamic – not only for people, but for society. Eliot perceives that ideologies easily become idolatries. The snake passage near the end of the play is a kind of up-date on the serpent in the Garden of Eden, just as the second half of the play starting at Chorus VII, revisits the meaning of the creation. The author is careful to make morality wide ranging, by mentioning a list of deadly sins (57) as we saw in regard to the passage on the Crusades. At other times, sins are lined up as "gods […] [of] Usury, Lust, Power" (51). He recognizes that some moral missteps are grievous and deadly, while others seem merely trivial: "And no man knows or cares who is his neighbour" (21), but this is a step towards "Am I my brother's keeper?", and ever since Cain this has been used to justify the grievous missteps, also. That is why the poet asks, "Do Lion's no longer need keepers?" (42), meaning: has the world become innocent? Has the time of the harmony of the lion and the calf, the wolf and the lamb, arrived (Isaiah 11,6)?

It is Eliot's view that Christ turns our focus toward the good (divine light), and without this we focus so strongly on things, ideas, achievements in life, that we are very much in danger of using immoral means to reach our idolatrized ideologies. We "prize the serpent's golden/ eyes" and are hypnotized by the power of evil. By way of contrast, we should turn to the divine light and be satisfied if we "have light/ Enough to take your step and find your foothold" (84).

IV.8. Christ the giver of meaning

All of what we have been saying places Christ at the centre. Eliot states in Chorus VII his cryptic summary of the Incarnation and its importance for our lives:

> Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness on the
> face of the deep.
> Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in
> time and of time,
> A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call
> history[…].
> A moment in time but time was made through that
> moment: for without the meaning there is no time,
> and that moment of time gave the meaning.

This "moment of time gave the meaning" to all time. Christ is at the centre of God's revelation. This can be expressed in many ways; let us see what Tillich says:

> "Whatever the rhythm of manifestations of the Kingdom of God in history may be, Christianity claims to be based on its central manifestation. Therefore it considers the appearance of Jesus as the Christ as the centre of history – if history is seen in its self-transcending character. […] In the very term 'centre' a critique of relativism is expressed. Faith dares to assert its dependence on that event which is the criterion of all revelatory events. [Through Christ] […] the maturity [of revelation] was reached; the time was fulfilled. This happened once in the original revelatory and saving stretch of history, but it happens again wherever the centre is received as centre."[17]

Eliot (and also Tillich and many others) apply this "centre of history" as also a new centre for our lives – that is, as a new way of giving meaning. The manifestation of what Tillich calls the "Spiritual Presence" (of God) happens again today when we meet Christ. And that is exactly what Eliot also was emphasizing.

Eliot sees the struggle to receive the divine light in our daily lives. Our metaphysical foothold is found in this 'moment of time'. This is his answer to the meaningless of a circular existence, with which he begins the Chorus series:

> The endless cycle of idea and action,
> Endless invention, endless experiment,
> […]
> All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
> All our ignorance brings us nearer to death […].
> [7]

[17] Tillich, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, Part II, 388.

Earlier he had portrayed the daily cycle of meaningless boredom in *The Wasteland*, where he points out the estrangement and failure of modernity. Then in *The Magi* Eliot points to the enigmatic challenge of conversion to Christ. Here in *The Rock* he points to the efficacy of the Invisible Light. The small moment of time we call the Incarnation, assures us of God's love, and therefore of the meaningfulness of our existence in time.[18]

We may conclude that *The Choruses from the Rock* address some basic life-questions on a variety of levels: personal, social, political and ethical. Eliot thinks of the church as a light on a hill, but he also knows that this light is often dimmed or wrongly focussed. So without hiding the problems, he testifies to the light that comes from above

[18] See Revell, *op.cit.*, 157.