

Religious Iconography in T. S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*

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Approximately halfway through Eliot's career, he shifts from a secular focus in his writings to a religious focus. This can partially be attributed to his baptism and confirmation in 1927, which marked his entrance into the Anglo-Saxon Catholic Church. All of his religious poems, written after his baptism and confirmation, express and struggle with doubt, but this paper focuses on *Ash Wednesday*. This paper discusses how religious iconography is manipulated and interrogated in T. S. Eliot's poem *Ash Wednesday*, and its relationship to religious doubt. The icons used include the image of the veiled Lady, whose identity is never revealed, though several critics have speculated that she is the Virgin Mary, Emily Hale, Beatrice, or any composite of the above. Forms of prayer are also investigated and integrated with new ideas. The speaker's personal doubts are revealed through the interrogation and the new images that he presents throughout the poem.



T. S. Eliot's early work is often characterized as primarily secular. Included under this umbrella of secular poetry are *Prufrock and Other Observations* and *The Waste Land*, both revolutionary in their own interrelated ways. After these publications, his later poetry, which was written after 1927 until his death in 1965, has come to be understood as latently religious. Specifically, the poetry in *The Ariel Poems*, *The Four Quartets*, and other poems he wrote in this time, has solicited critical consideration as explicitly Christian. In "T. S. Eliot's Poetry of Religious Desolation," Leitch explains:

Eliot begins, decidedly and deliberately, to write Christian poetry immediately after his baptism and confirmation in mid 1927. As Eliot's consciousness of the nature of existence changes around the time of his conversion, so his poetic expressions of experience alter (35).

Leitch's elaboration on the dramatic shift in subject matter and Eliot's poetic expression can

be viewed as an explanation of his religious doubt. Leitch also argues that "In *The Hollow Men*, 'Journey of the Magi,' and *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot dramatizes different phases of his religious consciousness," and that this sojourn encapsulates a "...gradual shift from a self- to God-centered world..." (Leitch 38). The speakers of these poems handle religious doubt in drastically different ways and must discover the best images to convey their individual struggles, which the speaker of *Ash-Wednesday* specifically seeks in religious iconography.

Doubt and iconography are inextricably intertwined throughout Eliot's religious poetry, particularly in *Ash Wednesday*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "iconography" as "The description or illustration of any subject by means of drawing or figures..." (*oed.com*). It follows that iconography is based in symbolism, as icons cannot explicitly be what they represent. As a result, questions can arise concerning the suitability of chosen icons. It is possible to discover the meaning of icons as symbols by attempting to modify or reduce those meanings, which tests whether an icon retains its meaning. For example, religion is often iconographic, as it deals

exclusively with matters that cannot known scientifically or sensually; therefore, it uses icons and other images and forms to invoke meaning. Eliot's extensive use of religious iconography, particularly that of the "Lady" and imitations of prayer forms in *Ash Wednesday*, allows the speaker to deliberate and cope with increased religious doubt, as the religious symbols are emptied of their meaning through constant twisting, by placing them in various contexts, which allows for shifts in their meanings.

Throughout *Ash Wednesday*, the sense of doubt is increased as the repetition of religious images overwhelms the meanings the images carry, such as that of the veiled Lady. The veiled Lady appears first in part II, which begins with a direct address to her: "Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree" (Eliot 87). The speaker describes her later in the section, when he writes, "The Lady is withdrawn/ In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown./ Let the whiteness of bones atone to forgetfulness" (Eliot 87). The color white often represents purity, innocence, and joy in religious celebrations, but the speaker requests that the whiteness of the bones will "atone to forgetfulness," a phrase that suggests forgiveness and forgetfulness, without giving either. Without forgiveness or forgetfulness, only remembrance and guilt are left, which opposes the conventional religious associations with white, inferring an increase of doubt and despair. The image of the Lady's white dress appears before the new symbol is recast, but it is retrospectively tainted.

Eliot continues to interrogate the religious associations of color and meaning, and the Lady herself becomes a cause of doubt as the poem proceeds. She appears next in Part IV, in the first lines:

Who walked between the violet and
the violet
Who walked between
The various ranks of varied green
Going in white and blue, in Mary's
colour, (Eliot 90)

The phrase "in Mary's colour" is repeated in line 10, "In blue of larkspur, blue of Mary's colour," which forms associations between the Virgin Mary, larkspur, and the Lady in Part II. Associations between the Virgin Mary and the Lady strengthen in line 15, "White light folded, sheathed about her, folded," as the Blessed Virgin is often pictured

surrounded by rays of light, which usually signify her divinity, and a folded white cloak. The Lady, who has strong associations to the Virgin Mary, is mentioned again in Part III, and her intentions are questioned:

Will the veiled sister pray for
Those in darkness, who chose thee and
oppose thee,
Those who are torn on the horn
between season and season, time and
time, between
Hour and hour, word and word, power
and power, those who wait
In darkness? (Eliot 92)

While the Lady is not accused of having bad intentions, her intention to serve as an intercessor is questioned. This role is primarily assigned to the Virgin Mary, and interrogating the Lady could be a form of questioning the Virgin's intentions to fulfill the duties assigned to that role, and expressing doubts about prayers being heard. If the most powerful intercessor does not hear prayers, then there would be little reason to pray, and prayer, in these poems, is the basis of the relationship between man and God. With this fundamental aspect of religion thrown into doubt, the speaker must find a positive answer if he is to continue to believe.

Although very serious doubts have been discovered through the interrogation of the Lady, she appears once more, in Part VI, when the speaker requests,

Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the
fountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with
falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still. (Eliot 95)

Although her intentions are questioned in the previous section, without resolution, she now serves as a symbol to cling to in desperation. Her original purpose is no longer relevant, but there is a residual comfort in knowing that she is a familiar figure. The Lady's identity is never explicitly given, despite the many associations made with the Virgin Mary, and

Jewel Spears Brooker, in "Our First World: Eliot and the Edenic Imagination," suggests that:

...throughout *Ash-Wednesday*, a lost love, a lady on the shore, calls him back to America. As Gordon (233-54) and Schuchard (148-61) have persuasively argued, the lady is both Emily Hale, the girl he left behind in 1914, with whom his friendship was renewed in 1927, and the Virgin Mary. (Brooker 158)

The associations between the Lady and the Virgin Mary are evident; however, in Part II, line 10, Eliot says, "She honours the Virgin in meditation," which eradicates the possibility of the Lady being the Virgin Mary, as it seems that the Virgin would have no need to honor herself.

Whether this memory is that of Emily Hale, the Virgin Mary, or of someone unknown, is irrelevant. As her identity is unknown, she can be anyone and no one, and serves as an icon of a pure woman, associated with the Virgin Mary, which makes her a suitable recipient of the speaker's questions. She answers none, and the speaker is left with more religious doubt, although he still clings to her as a retrospectively comforting image.

Throughout *Ash Wednesday*, forms of prayer are experimented with, to discover if they are inherently meaningful. At the end of Part I, the final line of the "Hail Mary" is written and then repeated with modification: "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death/ Pray for us now and at the hour of our death" (Eliot 86). Removing the word "sinners" is significant, as it can represent a repression of sin or a total acceptance, either of which would render the word meaningless in the phrase. Admissions of fault form the basis of religion, as a perfect person would have no need to be saved, so refusing to admit one is a sinner for any reason is a breach of traditional practice and casts doubt on the reasons people turn to religion.

The second section of Part II is constructed as a litany, with short phrases and repeated images; however, instead of singing the praises of and requesting supplications of a certain person or persons, it attempts to join opposing ideas. For

example, the Litany of the Blessed Virgin includes the following lines:

Virgin most prudent,
pray for us.
Virgin most venerable,
pray for us.
Virgin most renowned,
pray for us.

Whereas lines 26-32 in Part II proceed as follows:

Lady of silences
Calm and distressed
Torn and most whole
Rose of memory
Rose of forgetfulness
Exhausted and life-giving (Eliot 87-88).

Attempts to bring opposing ideas together in a dialectical litany may be seen an experiment to make prayer more poetic. However, the litany form is quickly abandoned and never attempted again, nor is any other prayer form. It is not unreasonable to think that, after this endeavor, the speaker decides the litany will not be successful in becoming a meaningful dialectical form, such as the ode, and might be cause for an increase in religious doubt, as the form itself holds little weight in his poem. Jacobson, in "T. S. Eliot: Modernism and Religion in *The Waste Land*, *Ash Wednesday* and *The Hollow Men*," intimates that these experiments "are incomplete as prayer – vital words are missing and so the communication with the divine will fail" (13). The speaker ultimately discovers that poetry and prayer forms, particularly the litany, cannot coexist meaningfully.

Beginning in Part III, there is a repetition of phrases from the Bible, such as, "Lord, I am not worthy" (Eliot 89), "And after this our exile" (Eliot 91), and "O my people" (Eliot 92-93), which become trivial mantras in Eliot's poetry, as they are scattered throughout, surrounded by more resonant images, such as the Lady. The more resonant images may serve as an experiment in improving religious iconography by finding a more enduring symbol

to replace traditional religious icons. For example, "O my people" is repeated three times throughout Part V (Eliot 92-93); however, in lines 10 and 30, it is followed by the phrase, "what have I done unto thee." This is a departure from the Biblical use of the phrase, "O my people," which is repeated several times in Ezekiel 37. In that chapter, God brings the prophet to "...the valley which was full of bones" (Ezekiel 37:1) and commands him to "Prophesy upon these bones" (Ezekiel 37:4), and God transforms the bones into full bodies. God later tells him to "Prophesy unto the wind" (Ezekiel 37:9), and brings the bodies to life, in order to increase Ezekiel's faith in Him and His power. These images are also echoed in *Ash Wednesday*, in Part II, lines 4-6, when Eliot says, "And God said/ Shall these bones live? Shall these/ Bones live?" (87), which is far removed from the phrase "O my people." By removing the phrase from the comforting images that echo a Resurrection story, the positive connotation of the phrase is cast in doubt. This doubt is increased as this phrase is surrounded by a silent Word that is "unspoken, unheard" (Eliot 92). The Word is often synonymous with God, so an unheard Word is unnerving. As the speaker is unable to pray himself, he seeks the intercession of the Lady, but receives no assurance that she will act on his behalf. The speaker is uncertain if being part of the group referred to as God's people is a comfort, so he turns to the Word, which is silent, and the Lady also does not answer. These lead to discomfort and religious doubt, as the most salient religious icons are manipulated into obscurity. Certain prayers are rendered useless in the experimentation, and the use of prayer form to join together ideas of worth is unsatisfactory, so religious doubt grows. Drew explains how this is possible when she argues:

The individual vision of his personal redeeming symbols comes and goes, but prayer is a technique of concentration to which he reverts throughout. The poem returns again and again to it; to the submission of the penitent, to the ordering power of a discipline, to the placing of the individual within the traditional corporate experience of the race (100).

The "personal redeeming symbols" of the speaker, such as the Lady, juniper tree, and desert,

are prevalent throughout *Ash Wednesday*, and they become rivals for traditional religious symbols and prayer. Although prayer is used as an ordering mechanism in *Ash Wednesday*, its form is significantly degraded by the replacement of the usual subject matter with juxtaposed ideas, which leads to increased religious doubt within the confessing speaker, reader, and, ultimately, the poem.

The religious iconography in *Ash Wednesday* loses meaning through its repetition and by being eclipsed by more striking symbols, and the prayer form is found unsatisfactory to explore and express relevant ideas. Through its exploration of the meaning of iconography, the poem ultimately suggests that the symbols themselves are inherently meaningless, which is sufficient cause for increased religious doubt. The doubt is not unbearable, however, as the icons still retain a residual comfort after they were manipulated. In addition, the speaker searches for possible improvements in the iconography, which allows him to grow in faith, rather than ultimately denying it.

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