


RELIGION AND MODERNITY: “THE FIRE SERMON”¹

WILLIAM PHILIP BOYCE

Faculty Advisor: Amy Koehlinger
Department of Religion

The progression of the modern age, in the form of modernization and the modernist artistic movement, presents a direct challenge to the historically rooted practices of man. Modernity, liberated from tradition, seeks constant innovation and enlightenment unfettered by customs or limitations. Caught in the crosshairs of this melee stands the institution of religion. This article explores the relationship between modernity and religion through the works of Karl Marx and T.S. Eliot. In a world where “all that is solid melts into air,” to quote Marx, does religion or the phenomenology of religion offer meaning for man? Can it provide worth in its own right? Both thinkers say yes, but qualify their assessments in remarkably differing ways.

nter the age of modernity. Whirling in a frenetic foxtrot of *theoria* and *praxis*, the last two centuries have expanded and excoriated the conditions for man in such a quickened society. Against the backdrop of the cataclysmic Industrial Revolution; the transformation of scientific discovery and technological achievements; the explosion of capitalism across the globe; the mass migrations into urban and suburban localities; the ratcheting up of socio-political power structures; the divestment of man from man's traditions and history; the growth of nationalistic imperialism and bureaucratic ossification; the demographic upheaval through innovative mass communication systems; the ascendancy of the world market; the dizzying

specialization of intellectual curiosity and research; the lionization of art and aesthetics; and the perpetuity of spiritual longings, awakenings, vili- fications, and reformations; against these, modernity—as discussed in this essay and understood in broader academic contexts—commences to bear meaning.

Grazing upon the long grass of modernity, theorists, artists, and intellectuals have operated as partici- pants and as critics simultaneously as they digest its triumphs and ca- tastrophes. But how has modernity grappled, principally through the acclamations and denunciations of social theorists and literary mod- ernists, with religion? The answers are as polyphonic as the individuals inquiring thereof. This paper will ex- plore that question first by defining modernity, then by delineating the perspectives of Karl Marx and T.S.

Eliot. The ambition of this paper is to illuminate the aforementioned en- treaty from the pronounced world- view of these two individuals but makes no pretense of ultimacy or of exposing the subject in entirety.

Modernity Defined

Modernity is the loosely bound variety of visions, values, and actions augmented by the world-historical processes mentioned above. The aim of modernity is “to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them.”² As a vague moniker for the fragile and fantastic realities engendered within this cir- cuitous period, modernity seeks to unveil the systemic and particular psychosis in all of man. To be mod- ern, according to intellectual histo- rian Marshall Berman, “is to find ourselves in an environment that

promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world”; that same milieu, concomitantly, “threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.” This “paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity” crashes in a constant “maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.”³ No one, according to Berman’s prognosis, can circumambulate this universal mantle, not even those diametrically opposed to its inceptive prejudices and resultants. In this sense of modernity, the timbre of its effects echoes across every ethnicity and ideology, every religion and geography, every class and nationality.

Modernity, thusly construed, is the “totality of fragmentary, centrifugal directions of existence” whereby “the concentric principle,

the monumental element is [nevertheless] not attained.”⁴ Simply put, modernity hinges on dialectical humanism; man is the center of his universe, but bears all the weight of his centrality. He must, like Atlas, shoulder his world—the aggregate of internal and external stimuli—to fashion meaning for himself. The symphony of human events, innovations, and musings couches the pandemonium within the soul of man. This atmosphere “of agitation and turbulence, psychic dizziness and drunkenness, expansion of experiential possibilities and destruction of moral boundaries and personal bonds, self-enlargement and self-derangement,” reflects and affects modern man’s sensibility.⁵ Per Berman’s rendering of modernity, each individual must resolve his own “concentric principle” or “monumental element” in reaction to the

awareness that no indwelling or cosmogenic principle unifies mankind.

Navigating these dialogues, modernity can be dissected into two autonomous and interrelated stations: *modernization*, the socio-political and economic branch of the tree, and *modernism*, the artistic, cultural, and literary branch. Each is intertwined at various points. Modernism, further defined, is “the literature that acknowledged and attempted to respond to a crisis of representation beginning in the mid-nineteenth century.” Modernism presented a response to a pervasive impression that “the ways of knowing and representing the world developed in the Renaissance...distorted the actual experience of reality, of art, and of literature.” Consequently, both “the content and the form of representation” were cast in suspicious light and subverted in the regenerative

apparatus of modernism, where new tools were crafted and old instruments were either ironically refurbished or repulsively dismissed.⁶

Under the expanding arch of modernity, with one leg being modernization and the other modernism, the relationship with religion can be explicated. In no way should it be suggested that modernity eradicated religion or the impulse of religion full-stop in the Western Hemisphere, the anchor of modernity. Even cursory observation today reveals that religion still obtains. On the other hand, modernity certainly complicates religion. For example, this convolution resounds within Christianity, if not theologically, then representationally in the institutions of politics, economics, art, philosophy, and the public domain. How religion is interwoven in the tapestry of modernity, both

perceived and instantiated, remains a preoccupation of social theorists and literary modernists. From the death of God to the empty casket at his funeral, the witness of religion in this period is intricate, arresting, and by no means settled law.

Marx

“The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself.”⁷ Karl Marx’s philosophy of history, often painted in too broad of strokes as it relates to religion, confounds simplistic narratives. Marx’s critique “is more complex and more interesting than the standard nineteenth-century materialist assertion that God does not exist.”⁸ Unlike Nietzsche, who pinned modernity’s predicament of moral illimitability and of nihilist estrangement on its progenitor—namely, the progressive march of “science, rationalism, the death of God”—Marx indicts the

bourgeoisie. The gilded accoutrements of religion, over against the religious impulse, accuse the “banal everyday workings of the bourgeoisie economic order—an order that equates our human value with our market price, no more, no less.”⁹ A proper reading of Marx must spotlight his appreciation for the spiritual impulse and, reciprocally, his acrimony for institutionalized religion. The source of Marx’s antipathy can be recognized in his profound mistrust *prima facie* of the institutions that influence the modern laborer. Religion, in one sense, is undistinguished in the long list of corrosive infrastructures; contrapuntally, because religion attempts to answer deeper soul-making questions and pervades Western culture, its stakes are higher for Marx. Based on that logic, it must be vanquished at the outset in order to foster the

apotheosis of the laborer.

The epitome of Marx's disdain for institutional religion is offered in *The Communist Manifesto*. The religious impulse, or the phenomenology of religion, was easily and gainfully seduced by the bourgeoisie out of the gate, as Marx reads history. "In the icy water of egotistical calculation" the bourgeoisie "drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism."¹⁰ The halo, which "splits life into sacred and profane," was quickly leveraged by the bourgeoisie in Marx's depiction. Coalescing "an aura of holy dread and radiance," the bourgeoisie substituted the innocence of religious fervor for the haloed positions of the religious institution. With this replacement, the bourgeoisie generated "cash payment" or the resolving of "personal worth into exchange

value." In this economic machination, the bourgeoisie, "veiled by religious and political illusions," shamelessly and brutally exploited the working class and the sincerity of religious impulses along with them. The economizing of the metaphysical—or that "which asks what is worthwhile, what is honorable, even what is real"—is the root of the problem of institutional religion, as Marx sees it.¹¹

Picked over, the "priest, the poet, the man of science" are effectually "stripped of its halo" in a rigid conversion to "paid wage-labourers"; that is to say, the halo behaves purely as a pecuniary symbol of the bourgeoisie, rather than signaling the religious impulse.¹² While the exchange under capitalism of sacred stations like priest and poet in return for dehumanizing monetization policies is sour for Marx, it is not

inopportune. The haloed position and their corresponding institutions of “law, morality, religion” erupt with “so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests,” that their disintegration and demystification is welcomed by Marx.¹³ The former “aura of holiness” around priest and poet becomes the missing component in this equation of division, though Marx is by no means empathetic to this purging.¹⁴ The tearing of veils, which leaves priest and poet naked and with exposed wounds, concurrently introduces “new options and hopes.”¹⁵ A new paradise is gained, according to Marx’s narrative, through and despite the process of stripped haloes.

The “new options and hopes” must be grounded in the appropriately understood and demythologized religious life. In his doctorate,

Difference between the Democritean and the Epicurean Philosophy of Nature, Marx accredits philosophy with diametrically opposing “all heavenly and earthly Gods who do not acknowledge human self-consciousness as the highest divinity.”¹⁶ Thus, the consummation of the religious life, disconnected from the ruse constructed by the bourgeoisie, is part and parcel with proletariat experience and philosophy. In the frenzied modern world of reconfiguration and malleability, “philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat,” Marx writes in a letter to a fellow German philosopher, “so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapons in philosophy.”¹⁷

The bifurcation of modernity, for Marx, encompasses the desire for “clear and solid values to live by” and the desire to “embrace the limitless possibilities of modern life and

experience that obliterate all values.”¹⁸ Paradoxically, this requisite period of history comports itself to newer virtues in spiritual equality. “[A]ll that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind,” unmediated by the dogmatism or fanaticism of institutional religion.¹⁹ At the conclusive moment in history man freely fashions “a world after its own image,” alluding to God’s creation of man in Genesis.²⁰ New morality and religion, not founded on the principles of the bourgeoisie’s self-interest and self-propagation, espouse the unitive consciousness of man, thereby allowing each man to sculpt meaning for himself in himself; in so doing, he must never succumb to the pressure of satisfying his religious fervor with someone or something outside himself, such as

God, religion, or priest. As Berman qualifies, “to unmask phony claims of transcendence is to demand and fight for real transcendence,” or that of man’s inner transcendence.²¹

Marx appends this message by clarifying that if one balks at the notion of such revolutionary change—i.e. destroying the institution of religion—a conservative appeal to “notions of freedom, culture, law, &c” deceives the position fundamentally. “Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeoisie production.”²² The principles of “religious liberty and freedom of conscience, merely gave expression to the sway of free competition within the domain of knowledge.” As maintained by Marx, mere historical fluctuations, such as Christianity overcoming the religions of the ancient world in its last causal transmutation, only prove that those

movements are historical realities in flux at particular moments in space and time, nothing more. History is not sacramental or imbued with the divine, in any epoch, in any locality.

As Marx plainly expounds, it is but a “selfish misconception that induces you to transform into eternal laws of nature” what are merely “the social forms springing from your present mode of production.”²³ Even under the auspices of a liberal progressive “social Gospel”²⁴ or “Christian Socialism,” Marx refutes these self-deceptions or the “holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat.”²⁵ Communism by revolution, as per Marx, accelerates history, progresses mankind, and inaugurates a new religious impulse. Communism, hence, “abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis;

it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience.”²⁶

A modernity where “[a]ll that is solid melts into air”²⁷ cautions the proletariat of institutionalizing their religious impulses or fervor. Man is spiritual insofar as he is “linked to nature,” which is to say, “linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.” The religious impulse is nourished when man “makes his life-activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness.” With his own life as the object of his existence, man is a “Conscious Being” when absent of “estranged labour” that vocation transfigures “his *essential* being” into “a mere means to his *existence*.”²⁸ The religious impulse must be enveloped in the truth that man is the highest goal of this secularized and humanized spirituality, the highest divinity. “Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power

over man.”²⁹

Eliot

As a literary modernist, T.S. Eliot necessarily approached the challenges, sentiments, and anxieties of modernity from a wholly different perspective than Marx. Not only does Eliot distinguish himself from Marx by encapsulating his interpretation of the modern era through the medium of poetry, but by being the most modern, historically speaking; thus, the breadth of his views are nearer to contemporary society on the unfurling timeline of maturity within modernity. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, Eliot emigrated to England after his education at Harvard in philosophy and comparative literature.

His first poetic masterpiece, *The Waste Land*, would be composed while Eliot recovered from a neurotic breakdown after the First

World War. At the ominous age of thirty-three, Eliot was revived during his stay in a sanatorium in Lausanne, Switzerland by his poetic vision in *The Waste Land*: “the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life...just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.”³⁰ Ezra Pound, a fellow poet and close friend of Eliot’s, was hardly as modest in his praise: “Eliot’s *Waste Land* is I think the justification of the ‘movement,’ of our modern experiment, since 1900.”³¹ To many of his contemporaries, it incarnated the transcendent quality over personal situation and embodied the general crisis of faith and representation in Western civilization. Its symbolic manifestation culminated in reorienting the mythological parallels that he employed in the poem for modern life; it “offered a way to transform the ‘stammerings’ of the individual artist into

a broader sense of order, one that could link contemporary culture with the major concerns of the entire literary and cultural tradition.”³²

Eliot’s mystical revelation in *The Waste Land* harangued modern society from within it, but not from the social angle that Marx attacked. Barren and desperately groping for significance, the world after the Great War, for Eliot, was ontologically remodeled. The *telos* of history offered no redemption and no end to itself, in contravention to Marx’s prophesy about the end of history, which would fructify after the workers of the world united. Religion, for Eliot, could neither be reduced to religious fervor, as Marx had whittled it down, nor a mere catalyst of individuation and differentiation. Religion, like all the grand traditions of man’s historical heritage, tenders a glimpse of something entrenched

in the heart and soul of man; when gathered together with all the associative traditions, they bear a semblance of corporealized meaning: “A heap of broken images.”³³ Yet, not unlike the moral devolution articulated by Marx, Eliot’s man of the waste land, or the “Unreal City,”³⁴ can only beseech “O Lord Thou pluckest me out”³⁵ and “each in his prison/...Shantih shantih shantih,” or a pathetic peroration of peace, peace, peace.³⁶

The furious and timeless motion of the eternal present was ultimately an unsatisfying condition for man in Eliot’s mind. Fourteen years after the publication of *The Waste Land*, Eliot penned his final inimitable work, *Four Quartets*. In the fourteen-year intermission, he discovered a sacred vocation. Through baptism in the Church of England, Eliot translated his longing for a timeless

transcendence into a spiritual quest, and yet retained most of his previous skepticisms and provisos. As the *via media* between dispassionate Unitarianism (the religious heritage to which Eliot's parents had exposed him) and obdurate Catholicism, the Anglican tradition allowed Eliot to navigate amongst his suspicions and, simultaneously, direct his "intenser human feelings" to the ultimate "divine goal."³⁷ His conversion bridged "the point of intersection of the timeless [Divine Godhead] / With time."³⁸

Eliot's movement into the Church and into Christian faith essentialized this renaissance of unitive contemplation. To suggest that Eliot's conversion rectified, in some simplistic sense, the angst and be-reavement he set about exploring in *The Waste Land* would be to reduce Eliot's religious sincerity and artistic

sensibilities carelessly. Rather, Eliot's conversion "shifted the style of both his life and his art" quite simply because it complicated his life and his art.³⁹ On the precipice of the Second World War, Eliot excavated his yearning for liberation from pervasive evils in correspondence with a Christian apprehension of sin, propitiation, and regeneration in *Four Quartets*.

The antidote to the modern *geist* of alienation and estrangement was, for Eliot, the humility to walk forward in faith, moored by religion and tradition. Eliot remarks in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence....a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together."⁴⁰ Per Eliot, the liminality of the modern

world—“caught in the form of limitation/Between un-being and being”⁴¹—aches for the salvation of the Word incarnate whether it is comprehensively aware of this need or not; consonantly, Eliot could not have portended his metaphysical conversion when he first penned *The Waste Land*. Like the liminal stasis of life itself, art “never improves,” but rather “the material of art is never quite the same.”⁴² Altogether, the creative process mirrors soteriology and the denial of “human self-consciousness as the highest divinity.”⁴³ That is to say, Eliot interlocks human experience and salvation: “what happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment of something which is more valuable...a continual extinction of personality.”⁴⁴

The descent into the soul, into the world that is not the world, into a place destitute of property and

fancy and distractions, into a land not twittering with movement, Eliot exclaims, “This is the one way.”⁴⁵ In a world of chatter and transience, even the external influences of words and music decay and crack under the tension, refusing to “stay still.” There is but one word, “The Word in the desert,” which can transverberate or transfigure the soul.⁴⁶ The incarnated Christ becomes the “light.../ At the still point of the turning world.”⁴⁷ Thus, Eliot’s man walks the *via negativa*: “In order to arrive at what you are not / You must go through the way in which you are not.”⁴⁸ That way is the divine Incarnation, cross, and immanent Spirit of God.

After the plum-line is set, Eliot purposefully complicates his gospel by escorting his reader through the realms of the soul; the way out is inward. The salvation of the soul is not the constituency of action

or inaction. Rather, it is “whatever sphere of being / The mind of man may be intent / At the time of death,” when one awakens to considering the time of death to be “every moment.”⁴⁹ Salvific humility at the every-moment juncture, Eliot posits, requires the abnegation of the self: “I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you.”⁵⁰ The soul need not “fare well / But fare forward” along this journey, grasping faith “between the hither and the farther shore.”⁵¹ Thus, the new means become the end of the old ends: “prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action” point attributively to the “Incarnation. / Here the impossible union.”⁵²

Rich is the inheritance of man, Eliot specifies, who declares “A people without history / Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern / Of timeless moments.”

The Church is the vanguard against a world “Distracted from distraction by distraction” and the most beautiful museum for the relics of tradition and faith. If anything is manifest in perpetuity for Eliot, it is “the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling” beckoning the soul of man “Quick now, here, now, always.”⁵³ Although “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality,”⁵⁴ the “dripping blood [and]... / The bloody flesh”⁵⁵ of the crucified Christ paves an ineffable “lifetime’s death in love”⁵⁶ for wearied humanity; whensoever and for whosoever this religious intersection occurs, “Costing not less than everything,” then the soul can exclaim “all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well.”⁵⁷

Summary

Modernity, through modernization and modernism, is the matrix of contemporary life where the

condition of man is paramount. The failures.

ways in which religion complicates this arithmetical formula, and in turn, is complicated by it, enhance and showcase the evolution and ascendancy of modern thought. The social theories of Karl Marx alongside the counterdistinctive voice of T.S. Eliot illumine the lightning rod of religious and spiritual representations in this period, though by no means elude its circumscription. Straining with the question of how to expropriate religion, each modern author uniquely ventured “a raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment,” and wagered the very cornerstone of their philosophy on it.⁵⁸ In so doing, they bequeathed a legacy of historical and psychological analysis, personal soul-searching, and a touchstone from which to better understand and contextualize modernity in all its feats and

- 1 T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ed. Michael North (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), 11
- 2 Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1999), 16.
- 3 Berman 15.
- 4 David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 39.
- 5 Berman 18.
- 6 Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xviii.
- 7 Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 31.
- 8 Berman 89.
- 9 Berman 111.
- 10 Marx and Engels 222.
- 11 Berman 111.
- 12 Marx and Engels 222.
- 13 Marx and Engels 232.
- 14 Berman 89.
- 15 Berman 109.
- 16 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 94.
- 17 Marx and Engels 119.
- 18 Berman 35.
- 19 Marx and Engels 223.
- 20 Marx and Engels 224.
- 21 Berman 120.
- 22 Marx and Engels 238.
- 23 Marx and Engels 239.
- 24 Marx and Engels 255.
- 25 Marx and Engels 247.
- 26 Marx and Engels 242.
- 27 Marx and Engels 223.
- 28 Marx 34.
- 29 Marx 35.
- 30 Lewis 129.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Lewis 124.
- 33 T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, "The Burial of the Dead," ln. 22.
- 34 T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, "The Fire Sermon," ln. 207.
- 35 T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, "The Fire Sermon," ln. 309.
- 36 T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, "What the Thunder Said," ln. 413 & 433.
- 37 Kenneth Paul Kramer, *Redeeming Time: T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets* (Cowley: 2007), 3-4.
- 38 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "The Dry Salvages," V.
- 39 Kramer 4.
- 40 T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 38.
- 41 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Burnt Norton," V.
- 42 T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 39.
- 43 See endnote 10
- 44 T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" 40.
- 45 "Burnt Norton," III.
- 46 "Burnt Norton," V.
- 47 "Burnt Norton," IV.
- 48 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "East Coker," III.
- 49 "The Dry Salvages," V.
- 50 "East Coker," III.
- 51 "The Dry Salvages," III.
- 52 "The Dry Salvages," V.
- 53 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding," V.
- 54 "Burnt Norton," I.
- 55 "East Coker," IV.
- 56 "The Dry Salvages," V.
- 57 "Little Gidding," V.
- 58 "East Coker," V.