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but the latter were unaware that the Germans were operating from a different theological foundation.<sup>17</sup> By allowing evolution as an acceptable or even preferred replacement for Genesis regarding the origin of the human race, Sasse was operating from the same principle: that theology is a reflection of the culture in which the church lives. We cannot go into the mind of the great man to determine whether he was aware that, by removing Genesis from the understanding of how the world and mankind came into existence, he removed the foundation on which all of Christian doctrine stood.

David P. Scaer  
David P. Scaer Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology  
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana  
david.scaer@ctsfw.edu

### T. S. Eliot—Pilgrim in the Waste Land

It is the fifteenth of December of 2022 as I write this, the centenary of the publication of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in the United States.

During the height of the pandemic I found myself revisiting T. S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men." Reading that iconic poem again, but with pandemic eyes, reminded me of why I remain fascinated by Eliot—he captures both the darkness and the hope:

Sightless, unless  
The eyes reappear  
As the perpetual star  
Multifoliate rose  
Of death's twilight kingdom  
The hope only  
Of empty men.<sup>18</sup>

So well Eliot captures the interplay of darkness and light. And in the gloom, Eliot has something to say.

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<sup>17</sup> See F. E. Mayer, *The Story of Bad Boll: Building Theological Bridges* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1949); and Paul M. B[retscher], "Professor D. Dr. Werner Elert, 1885–1954," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 26 (March 1955): 211–214.

<sup>18</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," in *English Masterpieces: An Anthology of Imaginative Literature from Chaucer to T. S. Eliot*, vol. 7, *Modern Poetry*, ed. Maynard Mack, Leonard Dean, and William Frost, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 164.

### Eliot's Conversion to Christianity

Eliot's conversion to the Christian faith that led to his baptism and confirmation as an Anglo-Catholic on June 29, 1927, at the age of thirty-six (later that year he became a British citizen) is what drew me to him during the pandemic. Perhaps that he grew up in St. Louis from a Boston Brahmin family and later returned to Boston to study at Harvard is another reason for my fondness of him, since Providence, Rhode Island, and Boston are my ancestral roots and St. Louis is the home of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). Since 1969 I have not read Eliot often. His poetry is intentionally difficult, a conscious move away from nineteenth-century meter and rhyme. For many, his early poems are the consummation of modernism, which is why they still haunt me, for I came of age at the height of modernism. Eliot's poems, especially *The Waste Land*, haunted the twentieth century, and even now they haunt our postmodern twenty-first-century world. What strikes one about the historical and cultural context of this famous poem is that it sounds so much like our world today. On a number of occasions I have returned to Eliot's final poems, often ending a sermon with these enigmatic words from Part IV of East Coker in his *Four Quartets*:

The dripping blood our only drink  
The bloody flesh our only food:  
In spite of which we like to think  
That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood—  
Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.<sup>19</sup>

The story of T. S. Eliot as told by Russell Kirk is a conversion story. His conversion to Anglo-Catholicism was remarkable in his day, especially after his earlier poems about hell.<sup>20</sup> As one of the leading intellectuals of his day he watched as many of his literary colleagues were gravitating to communism, socialism, or fascism.<sup>21</sup> But Eliot was not alone in turning to Christianity in his era, for there was something brewing among intellectuals in the early twentieth century, especially in England, that led many to the church:

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<sup>19</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), 16. The copy I use is my father's from his undergraduate years at Yale University after the war, 1946–1949, three plus years after Eliot published his poems in the United States. His comments in pencil reflect a deeply Christian reading of the poem that must have reflected the interpretation of his professor at Yale. He studied this poem right after its publication, when there was still very little critical analysis of this poem.

<sup>20</sup> Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008), 48.

<sup>21</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 209, notes that Eliot would have affirmed Bertrand Russell's definition of an intellectual as "a person who thinks he knows more than he knows."

Eliot's journey toward Christian faith was no peculiar phenomenon in his time, of course: that pilgrimage had been made, or was being made, by men of letters so diverse as G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Roy Campbell, Charles Williams, Edwin Muir, Paul Elmer More, and Evelyn Waugh. Yet no two such seekers followed precisely the same path. In Eliot's instance there is nothing surprising about his recovery of belief (for a recovery it was, rather than a providential fall on the road to Damascus). It would have been strange if a man so much in love with English tradition, and so deeply read in Dryden, Johnson, and Coleridge, had not felt himself drawn toward the living and visible Church of England—and within that Church, toward a piety which was heir to the Oxford Movement.<sup>22</sup>

Eliot grew up as a Unitarian, but through his search for meaning before and after World War I he found himself studying both Eastern religions, Buddhism and Hinduism (he cites the Upanishads in his poems), as well as Christianity. His interests were religious, as is reflected by the writers who most influenced his thinking, especially Dante and Coleridge.<sup>23</sup> He was known to carry around in his pocket some part of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Even in his earlier poems when "he peered into the Abyss,"<sup>24</sup> such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917), "Gerontion" (1920), *The Waste Land* (1922), and "The Hollow Men" (1925), Eliot held out hope that the time would be redeemed.

What separates Eliot from many is that he was not just a poet. For a while he survived as a banker, a job he enjoyed and gave him time to write in the evenings. (As Anthony Lane writes in an article this year commemorating this anniversary, "Eliot . . . dressed like a banker because he was a banker."<sup>25</sup>) As editor of a literary magazine the *Criterion* (where *The Waste Land* was first published) he became deeply involved in politics as his writings often veered off into what was happening in Britain and the world. He was one of the founding editors of Faber and Faber who brought many significant authors to light at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was a prolific writer and critic, engaged in political and cultural observations, and two of his most important essays were about the relationship between church and world: *The Idea of a Christian Society* and *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*.

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<sup>22</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 115. See also Joseph Pearce, *Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999). His epigraph is from Evelyn Waugh, who is one of the many literary giants who converted to Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Waugh writes, "Conversion is like stepping across the chimney piece out of a Looking-Glass world, where everything is an absurd caricature, into the real world God made; and then begins the delicious process of exploring it limitlessly" (vi).

<sup>23</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 87.

<sup>24</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 108.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Lane, "The Shock and Aftershocks of 'The Waste Land,'" *The New Yorker*, October 3, 2022.

Eliot was the *First Things* of his day, and his engagement in both literary and political criticism put him in contact with intellectual luminaries in both England and the United States.<sup>26</sup> He traveled widely, gave many lectures, and was as well known and respected as any poet might be in his lifetime. Kirk summarizes the breadth of his impact in the chapter he entitled “The Poet, the Statesman, and the Rock” (the rock being a reference to the church, Saint Peter, and a play that Eliot wrote that is like a church pageant).<sup>27</sup> Eliot was also an accomplished playwright, known by more people for his plays than his poems, such as *Murder in the Cathedral* (about the martyrdom of Thomas Becket), *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, which Andrew Lloyd Webber turned into the musical *Cats*, and *The Cocktail Party*, which brought to light all the major Christian themes in Eliot’s life.

Not everyone embraced Eliot for his Christian conversion and witness. In his recent review of Robert Crawford’s *Eliot After “The Waste Land”* Micah Mattix notes that “[Eliot’s] religious conversion in 1927 ‘shocked’ Virginia Woolf. She wrote to her sister that Eliot ‘may be called dead to us all from this day forward. . . . I mean, there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.’”<sup>28</sup> But he was loved by the modernists for his earlier poems, and later, after his conversion, he was embraced by the Christian anti-modernists. But many of the themes from his poetry and his other writings witness to our day about the need to restore permanent things to the church and to the world.

Eliot’s “recovery” of his Christian identity was marked by his ascent from the desert to the Rose Garden: *The Waste Land* marks his dark journey through the darkness of his soul, *Ash-Wednesday* his turn to the faith through a purgatorial cleansing, and *Four Quartets* his entrance into the Rose Garden where time is redeemed. In some ways, these three poems follow the three parts of a rite of passage: separation (*The Waste Land*), transition (*Ash-Wednesday*), and reincorporation (*Four Quartets*). They also reflect Dante’s *Divine Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso*. Again, Mattix offers this insightful observation on how Eliot’s world changed after his conversion: “Christianity also gave Eliot what he had longed for since at least his first years in England: hope, order (he received Communion three times a week), meaning in suffering, and a foundation for his art. He told a friend that ‘only Christianity helps reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting,’ and he began to express in his lectures and his increasingly frequent BBC broadcasts that there could be no civilization without religious belief.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *First Things* is a journal that addresses the interaction between Christianity and public life (politics and culture).

<sup>27</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 151–189.

<sup>28</sup> Micah Mattix, “Old Possum Ain’t Dead,” in *First Things*, January 2023, 112.

<sup>29</sup> Micah Mattix, “Old Possum Ain’t Dead,” 112.

My rumination about Eliot and this centenary of *The Waste Land* will focus on his conversion to the faith and why he thought Christianity and the church are the only hope for fallen humankind.

### *The Waste Land*

*The Waste Land* in all its complexity is, in some ways, a very simple song of a pilgrim's ascent from the waste land to the peace that passes all understanding—*Shantih, Shantih, Shantih*.<sup>30</sup> This pilgrim in the waste land sees the fragmentation of the world all around him and yearns for wholeness and health from that peace which Eliot believed only the Great Tradition of the Christian faith was able to grant. What *The Waste Land* mourns is the loss of Western civilization, the loss of the classical tradition and its continuum, of the catholic faith with its capacity to make sense of the *Unreal City*.

Eliot is often portrayed as a man of the world who points to a truth that came from his ascent through the waste land. Yet Eliot's conversion was what defined his life. We often think of conversion as an instantaneous moment in which the Holy Spirit moves us from unbelief to faith, like Paul on the road to Damascus. In some ways this is true. At the font we move *instantaneously* from darkness to light, from death to life. But for many adults, to get to the font is a journey, a process. Perhaps we think of conversion as a single moment because we are under the sway of conversions from a decision-theology according to which a person in one dramatic moment answers some sort of altar call. What the early catechumenate teaches us is that *for most people* conversion is a process, a gradual ascent from the waste land to the promised land.

This is the genius of Eliot's poetry and his life, for we see in them a gradual movement from the Waste Land to the Rose Garden. Already in 1910 while studying in Paris at the Sorbonne at the age of twenty-two Eliot was attracted to "the genius of Christianity" as the best way for "cultural continuity."<sup>31</sup> But he had not yet become a Christian. But the germ of conversion was planted and would grow over the next seventeen years until his entrance into the Anglican church in 1927. *The Waste Land* (1922) is written at the midpoint of this ascent to faith, with *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) marking Eliot's literary arrival into the bosom of the Christian church. This movement from *The Waste Land* to *Ash-Wednesday* is his long ascent, and what many

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<sup>30</sup> This Sanskrit phrase from the Upanishads ends Eliot's epic poem. Eliot in the first edition of his notes writes, "Shantih. Repeated as here, a formal ending to an Upanishad. 'The Peace which passeth understanding' is a feeble translation of the content of the word." T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), 64. See the text of Phil 4:7: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

<sup>31</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 88.

critics miss in the *The Waste Land* is that this epic poem signals that Eliot's ascent has already begun. For *The Waste Land* is not a place but the human heart, and the human heart Eliot writes about is his own.

Too often Eliot is known, and defined, by *The Waste Land*, for it is the poem that made him famous. Yet so many interpreters miss that this poem is part of Eliot's journey to the Christian faith that Eliot the poet is undergoing at this point in his Christian pilgrimage. They do not see how the poem moves from the waste land to his eventual surrender and reconciliation in that peace that passes all understanding he found in the Christian church.

*The Waste Land* was a startling poem for its time, and it brought both praise and criticism, with some of its detractors coming from Christians like G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis who scorned its dark themes. Yet everyone knew that this poem was both impossible to ignore and even more impossible to understand.<sup>32</sup> In reading *The Waste Land* we may not be able to discern the meaning of its parts, yet even prep school students recognize what the poem is about—a search for meaning in life,<sup>33</sup> a desire to pass through the desert towards some sort of promised land, a longing for union and communion with God in a life that knows no end. It is about what the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno described in his book *The Tragic Sense of Life* as a desire for God and a longing for eternity, a book that was so influential on Eliot.<sup>34</sup> *The Waste Land* takes original sin seriously and believes in the presence of evil in the world. It affirms that in Adam's sin we all have sinned (Rom 5:12). And most importantly, Eliot believes that these fundamental biblical truths apply to every generation: "Human nature is a constant; the same vices and the same virtues are at work in every age."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 72, puts it this way: "This catacomb, layer upon layer, of evocation and suggestion in *The Waste Land* makes this poem subtle and strange and ambiguous as the Revelation of Saint John. Many lines are puzzling as the characters written by the sibyl on the leaves of the scattered. Yet the general meaning of *The Waste Land* is as clear as its particular lines are dark."

<sup>33</sup> All through the 1960s and 70s this was a common theme—what is the meaning of life—as existentialism was reaching its apex and such questions were all the rage. This may be true of every age, but the Vietnam War generation took this to a new level. At first, I did not understand this as a search for union and communion with Christ. But during those tumultuous years I always found my way to Sunday Eucharist at the local LCMS church, which quietly, and effectively, grounded me in Christ. As I always like to say, going to church is a good thing.

<sup>34</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 257. "The man who does not long passionately, and with a passion that triumphs over all the dictates of reason, for his own immortality, is the man who does not deserve it, and because he does not deserve it he does not long for it. . . . And perhaps the sin against the Holy Ghost—for which, according to the Evangelist, there is no remission—is none other than that of not desiring God, not longing to be made eternal." Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life: In Men and In Peoples*, trans. J. E. Crawford Fritch (London: MacMillan, 1921), 248–249.

<sup>35</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 69.



My recollections of our prep school discussions are vague at best, but what I do not recall is any overt Christian interpretation of the poem. Not that it was anti-Christian, but we focused on Eliot's portrayal of the waste land and not on his ascent as pilgrim to that peace that passes all understanding. Perhaps the academy had already determined that Eliot's epic poem must be seen in light of the existential angst of modernism that climaxed in the 1960s. But just as Eliot wanted to redeem the time, many Christian interpreters of this groundbreaking poem have redeemed Eliot's vision of his ascent to the Christian faith. Like secular critics of the New Testament, interpretation depends on where you stand, the baggage you bring to the text, the presuppositions you hold. Eliot's whole life is a conversion story, and a fundamental part of that story is the longing for tradition in the church catholic that is reflected in the movement from "The Burial of the Dead" to "What the Thunder Said," the first and last parts of *The Waste Land*.

The context in which he wrote his poem still speaks to our postmodern, post-pandemic generation. The loss of belief in original sin goes on and has reached chronic proportions. How does one evangelize in a world that does not recognize a need for salvation, when people do not believe there is anything from which to be saved because there is no hell and therefore no life after death, no heaven?<sup>36</sup> It is startling that such a literary luminary as Eliot grounds his first poems in the reality of sin and evil. They are poems about hell, the hell that we have made for ourselves by our conscious separation from God, the hell that is nothing other than the waste land of our hearts. And this poem comes to us from someone who knows that waste land, lives in that waste land, and knows that there is something more than "fear in a handful of dust."

Like our generation, Eliot's generation was turned in on itself. What possessed Eliot and what he struggled against was "the Hell of the solipsist,"<sup>37</sup> first in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917), his first major poem of renown coming right after the end of World War I, and later in *The Waste Land*. In these first poems Eliot describes the modern narcissist who is centered in his own ego yet whose experience

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<sup>36</sup> During the pandemic I was also reading N. T. Wright, whose particular hobby horse seems to be deconstructing the obsession of Evangelicalism that speaks of Christianity as nothing more than obtaining a ticket to heaven. Although I am sympathetic with this impulse, especially in light of what I consider to be central to the Christian vision and the means by which we attain our final heavenly destiny—namely, inaugurated eschatology, heaven on earth, the centrality of the Eucharist. But in reading Eliot you see that in his world, the need to believe in both original sin (*The Waste Land*) and the goal of eternal life in the Rose Garden (*Four Quartets*) were critical issues that for him were essential to what it means to be Christian. In our postmodern world, we would do well to reclaim both original sin and paradise as fundamental to the Christian vision, since they form the bookends of Scripture—Genesis and Revelation. Perhaps the Evangelicals are more right than I would like to admit!

<sup>37</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 48.

of the emptiness and vacuousness of the waste land turns him to search for something outside himself, knowing that the self is not the only thing knowable and verifiable. Although Eliot chose poetry as his way out of solipsism to faith and the moral imagination,<sup>38</sup> his pilgrimage to the Rose Garden was by way of suffering, and he had to pass through poems about hell before he could behold the “Multifoliate rose / Of death’s twilight kingdom / The hope only / Of empty men.”<sup>39</sup>

*The Waste Land* was written while Eliot was recovering from a nervous breakdown and needing rest. He was miserable, and his marriage was falling apart. So, while on leave from his bank job, during a time of inner turmoil, he completed *The Waste Land* (which he worked on over a period of years), first in Margate, Kent, while convalescing with his wife Vivienne, and later in Lausanne, Switzerland, while his wife was in a sanatorium in Paris. Eliot’s life was reflected in *The Waste Land*. The trajectory of the poem is the trajectory of the poet. Kirk describes Eliot’s state of mind as he was writing this monumental poem: “Eliot the Seeker seems to have been experiencing a crisis of the Self about 1921. He perceived that decadent rationalism and liberalism could not sustain a man concerned with ultimate questions. Yet though in ‘Gerontion,’ and even in ‘Prufrock,’ he had delineated the Great Refusal, still he could not submit himself to religious doctrine. He thought as much of becoming a Buddhist as of professing Christian belief.”<sup>40</sup>

Eliot’s crisis of the Self led him to search for some way of explaining what he saw all around him—a land laid waste by a horrific war where hundreds of thousands of people died—French and British and Americans fighting Germans—Christians fighting Christians. The world was also reeling from the flu pandemic of 1918, so Eliot’s world was a world that confronted unimaginable death in the eight years that preceded this poem. Then after the war and as the pandemic shook the world, there was the rise of communism in Russia and fascism in Europe. As Kirk notes, for Eliot “the fundamental menace of Fascism and Communism . . . is that these ideologies attempt to supplant religious faith.”<sup>41</sup> That his search took him from the Upanishads to Buddhism to Saint John of the Cross shows the breadth of his search. At one point Eliot became convinced that the *via negativa* was the way forward. His disillusionment with humanity led him at one point to “the counsel of Saint John of the Cross that one must divest himself of the love of created beings . . . that John of the Cross meant this ‘divesting’ for people ‘seriously engaged in the Way of Contemplation.’”<sup>42</sup> Eliot was searching for something as he leaned over the abyss hoping

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<sup>38</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Eliot, “The Hollow Men,” 164.

<sup>40</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 59.

<sup>41</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 144.

to see something else besides what Kurtz saw in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—that is, “The horror! The horror!”<sup>43</sup>

Kirk describes *The Waste Land* as religious melancholy. How apt a description this is. The first haunting, often-quoted lines of *The Waste Land* confirm this, showing that “regeneration is a cruel process”<sup>44</sup>:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.<sup>45</sup>

Eliot begins his poem in April twilight—*madrugada* in Spanish—the “deep dawn” of the first Easter morning as it is described in Luke’s Gospel. B. B. Rogers in his commentary on Aristophanes describes the “deep dawn” as “the dim twilight that precedes the dawn . . . the thick dullness of night [that] has not yet yielded to the clear transparency of day’ (The Wasps of Aristophanes, 32, n. 216). *The Waste Land* lives in this perpetual twilight, this in betwixt and in between—that liminal space ‘between life and death, dreaming and awakening, a need to remember the days and a will to forget, a memory of death and a need to memorialize.’”<sup>46</sup> The women come to the tomb out of the waste land of the past three days—a world turned upside down by the horrific crucifixion, death, and burial of their Lord. This April in Jerusalem was the cruelest of months. For this April the women were at a tomb to anoint a dead body.

In these first lines of “The Burial of the Dead” Eliot describes what John Paul II later called “the culture of death.” For Eliot, however, the waste land was pointing beyond itself to another land where there is life. This culture of death needs to be buried as we ascend through the tradition to faith and the unity that a catholic worldview gives to the world. But before we reach the mountain to view, in Christ, the regeneration of all creation we must first behold the “heap of broken images” in the “Unreal City.”<sup>47</sup> The world is fragmented into pieces, and this poem of fragments from the literature of the Great Tradition embodies the very world Eliot wishes us to see as *The Waste Land*. It is a desert without the water of faith that only comes from the church that can bring all the fragments together in the flesh of Jesus. Eliot

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<sup>43</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 68, notes that “‘The horror! The horror!’ . . . was the epigraph Eliot first chose for *The Waste Land*; Pound persuaded him to supplant it with Petronius’ account of the bored sibyl.”

<sup>44</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 70.

<sup>45</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Modern Poetry*, 142–143.

<sup>46</sup> Carol Pawlowski, “Third Sunday of Easter—The Road to Emmaus: April 18, 2021,” April 14, 2021, Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart, <https://www.greynun.org/2021/04/third-sunday-of-easter-the-road-to-emmaus-april-18-2021/>.

<sup>47</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Modern Poetry*, 145–146.

begins with irony to hint at what is, in fact, “the hope only / Of empty men.”<sup>48</sup> April, the season of rebirth and renewal, the season of Pascha and resurrection, is a cruel month. April brings spring and Easter and new birth, even hope, yet for Eliot it is a cruel reminder that we are all like Marie,<sup>49</sup> who “represents Europe’s landed classes generally,” who represents the “melancholy voice of a ‘displaced person’” in whom “we see the modern Waste Land’s pathetic multitude of the dispossessed.”<sup>50</sup>

This dispossessed person is plunged into loneliness because of the isolation that is marked by separation from God that the “Unreal City” in the waste land brings with its broken images. There is a vacuum in modernity that, for Eliot in 1922, he tried to fill with his poetry, particularly by this remarkable poem. His poetry was necessary to his pilgrimage to conversion, for the only way to that peace which passes all understanding is through resignation and repentance.

His history of lust in “II. The Game of Chess” and “III. The Fire Sermon” is about the abuse of sex that is always the great impediment to faith, culminating in death by abortion in a culture of death that is calling us to repent of the waste land of our hearts. At the end of “The Fire Sermon” Eliot’s embodiment of this sexual decadence is Carthage and Augustine and his *Confessions*, and Buddha’s “Fire Sermon,” from which Eliot took the name for the third part of this poem, with its “Burning, burning, burning, burning.”<sup>51</sup> For Augustine said, “To Carthage then I came, where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about mine ears.”<sup>52</sup> But Augustine confesses to these sins in his *Confessions* and turns to God—“O Lord Thou pluckest me out / O Lord Thou pluckest.” But it is painful and full of suffering, as the final lines of “The Fire Sermon” testify:

To Carthage then I came  
 Burning, burning, burning, burning  
 O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
 O Lord Thou pluckest  
 burning<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Eliot, “The Hollow Men,” 164.

<sup>49</sup> Marie is Countess Marie Larisch from Austria, who is a character in “The Burial of Dead” with whom Eliot had engaged in conversation at one time.

<sup>50</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 70.

<sup>51</sup> Some have compared Buddha’s “Fire Sermon” to the Sermon on the Mount. From *Modern Poetry*, 155n308: “Eliot’s note refers to ‘the complete text of the Buddha’s Fire Sermon (which corresponds in importance to the Sermon on the Mount) from which these words are taken.’ In this sermon, Buddha says that all things bodily and sensory are on fire with the fire of desire and passion, with the endless mortal burning from which it is the wish of the Buddhist to be set free.”

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Modern Poetry*, 155n307.

<sup>53</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Modern Poetry*, 155.

Augustine and Eliot yearned to be plucked out of the waste land by God—and they were. To portray this in a poem, Eliot uses the image of water that a thirsty *The Waste Land* desperately needs in “IV. Death By Water” and “V. What the Thunder Said.” Rebirth for *The Waste Land* comes by way of baptism—death by water—for water is better than the fire of lust. *The Waste Land* is dying of thirst because of lack of water—the water of Christ that flows from the rock—“For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4).<sup>54</sup> Eliot knows that living water only comes from Christ, but his lament in “What the Thunder Said” comes from a wrenched heart yearning for water where there is only rock, and his final line in this section is jarring in its pronouncement: “But there is no water.” Even mountains that are sources of water are now like a waste land.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God and him only shall you serve.’” (Matt 4:8–10)

Could Eliot be pointing to a greater water, the water of regeneration by the Holy Spirit—“if there were water. . .”? As he begins with life and death, could Eliot be pointing to the Christian confession that life comes only through death, the death of Christ and our death in him in the waters of baptism, then burial and resurrection, as in Paul’s baptismal theology of Romans 6?<sup>55</sup> Listen to Eliot’s lament (note how the following is much more accessible than the beginning of his poem—we can almost understand what he is saying!):

He who was living is now dead  
We who are living are now dying  
With a little patience.

Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water  
If there were water we should stop and drink  
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think  
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand

<sup>54</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the ESV.

<sup>55</sup> See Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 74: “Madame Sosostris had predicted death by water. Yet is this ‘dying’ really annihilation? May it not be rebirth, as by baptism? However that may be, a surrender to the element of water is better than endless torment in the fire of lust.”

If there were only water amongst the rock  
 Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit  
 Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit  
 There is not even silence in the mountains  
 But dry sterile thunder without rain  
 There is not even solitude in the mountains  
 But red sullen faces sneer and snarl  
 From doors of mudcracked houses

If there were water

And no rock  
 If there were rock  
 And also water  
 A spring  
 A pool among the rock  
 If there were the sound of water only  
 Not the cicada  
 And dry grass singing  
 But sound of water over a rock  
 Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees  
 Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop  
 But there is no water.<sup>56</sup>

“If there were. . . .” But there is! “For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” There is water from the Rock. Is this what Eliot hopes for, looks for in these words? But what immediately follows these lines about water and the rock? Emmaus! Could this mysterious third person who walks beside you be Christ, the Rock, who provides living water, who quenches the thirst of the waste land, who opens up Scripture to create burning hearts and then opens eyes in the breaking of the bread—*Opened Eyes in the Breaking of Bread!*

Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
 When I count, there are only you and I together  
 But when I look ahead up the white road  
 There is always another one walking beside you  
 Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
 I do not know whether a man or a woman  
 — But who is that on the other side of you?<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Modern Poetry*, 156–157.

<sup>57</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Modern Poetry*, 157.

When I returned to Eliot after fifty years, I did not remember that *The Waste Land* had this remarkable reference to Emmaus. But is it Jesus? Kirk suggests that we cannot be sure. “Someone walks beside him: the Fischer King, perhaps, who once guarded the Grail; and a mysterious third being, hooded. Is this the Christ, or the Tempter of the Wilderness, or some Hollow Man? In this delusory desert, the traveler can be certain of nothing.”<sup>58</sup>

“— But who is that on the other side of you?” How could it not be Christ? We are no longer in the twilight—the *madrugada*—but we are at the end of the day, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and like them, we are not alone. The risen Christ walks beside us in the desert. We may not immediately know who he is, for the waste land still clouds our vision, but if we engage him in conversation, he will open up the Scriptures to us, he will sit at table with us at our invitation, he will open our eyes in the breaking of the bread. Eliot surely knew the Emmaus story, knew who was on the other side of him, and Eliot’s heart was burning, burning, burning, burning, but his eyes were not yet open, for he was still on Camino, a pilgrim in the Waste Land still searching, still hoping. He had not yet undergone baptism nor received Christ’s flesh in the breaking of the bread. Perhaps like the Emmaus disciples, he was still walking away from Jerusalem sad-faced and gloomy—a pilgrim of the waste land (Luke 24:17).

Eliot knew the problem. His diagnosis was spot-on. The towers of Western civilization were crumbling. These great cities of our history were in Eliot’s age and now in ours the unreal ones in which the culture is artificial and fake, not grounded in the reality of the Great Tradition, of the church catholic. Instead, in these cities the culture of death is at home:

Falling towers  
 Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
 Vienna London  
 Unreal<sup>59</sup>

Yet Rome is not named here. It is not a “falling tower” because, for Eliot, it is the home of the church catholic. He might have said Canterbury instead of Rome, but even Eliot knew that his Anglo-Catholicism was simply a derivative. We might say Wittenberg, but it is poetry, so we get the point. The only city that remains is the City of God—Zion—the church where Christ dwells as the one who is beside us—

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<sup>58</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 74. Eliot himself in his notes suggests this as his source: “The following lines were stimulated by the account of one of the Antarctic expeditions (I forget which, but I think one of Shackleton’s): it was related that the party of explorers, at the extremity of their strength, had the constant delusion that there was *one more member* than could actually be counted.” *The Waste Land*, in *Modern Poetry*, 157n361.

<sup>59</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Modern Poetry*, 158.

whether that be Rome or Hippo or St. Louis—whether it be in a simple house church, a wind-blown chapel on the prairie, or Saint Peter’s in Rome.

“Then spoke the thunder / DA.”<sup>60</sup> This reference to Upanishads confuses many Christian readers who cannot understand why Eliot chooses Sanskrit texts from Hinduism to end his poem—“*Shantih, shantih, shantih.*” But as was suggested earlier, his Sanskrit references could as easily point to a scriptural text like Philippians 4. Kirk shows us that perhaps here Eliot is pointing us to the book of Exodus: “That the thunder is the voice of revealed wisdom: it is the Indo-European ‘DA,’ a root from which have sprung up many trunks; it is, if you will, the ‘I am that am’ from the Burning Bush. And the thunder of DA utters three sounds that are the answers—sibylline indeed—to the Seeker’s questions. They are ‘datta,’ ‘dayadhvam,’ and ‘damyata,’ from the Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad. And they signify ‘give,’ ‘sympathize,’ and ‘control.’”<sup>61</sup>

In the voice from the thunder Eliot is addressing the reader. He wants them to wrestle with these three very Christian precepts—“give,” “sympathize,” and “control.” But Eliot has been addressing his readers from the beginning, from “The Burial of the Dead,” the first part of the poem, for he wants the readers to see themselves as “pilgrims in the waste land.” As you, the reader, read these following lines, it is your shadow that Eliot is referring to, and he is citing from Isaiah 32:2, a reference to Christ’s coming when “a man shall be . . . as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land” (KJV)<sup>62</sup>:

Only

There is a shadow under this red rock,  
 (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
 And I will show you something different from either  
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust.<sup>63</sup>

Could the voice in the thunder, the voice from the burning bush, the “I AM Who I AM” be saying to us “be filled with fear for you are a waste land, a handful of dust,” or in the words of Ash Wednesday, “for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19)? The voice of thunder will show us something beyond ourselves, beyond our shadow in the morning and in the evening—he will show us that without

<sup>60</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Modern Poetry*, 159.

<sup>61</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 75.

<sup>62</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Modern Poetry*, 143.

<sup>63</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Modern Poetry*, 143.



the great “I AM” we are nothing but a handful of dust and to dust we shall return. Indeed, O reader, this is the burial of dead.

Yet there is more. Eliot is asking us through this poem to do what most of us are not able to do—to follow the fragmented pieces of his dense poetry and make something whole out of them—to follow the literary references to where they might point us. So let us take just one fragment from Part I, “The Burial of the Dead”—since we find ourselves at the beginning now that we have come to the end—to Eliot’s final words in Part I where he points to Baudelaire—Baudelaire!—who in the preface of his poem *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) entitled “To the Reader” catalogues the vices of the waste land and comes to the final one, “the dainty monster”—“Boredom.”

Baudelaire on “Boredom”:

You know him, reader, this dainty monster—  
Hypocrite reader—my double—my brother.<sup>64</sup>

Now Eliot on Baudelaire:

“Oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men,  
“Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!  
You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!”<sup>65</sup>

If we are the hypocrite reader to whom Eliot points his finger, if this poem is about us, about the waste land inside of our own hearts, if, like David and Jesus, the dogs of evil, violence, and death are pursuing us, then what are we to do?

“Give!” by surrendering in repentance and faith, now that there is something beyond your shadow in the waste land. Repent and humble yourself to your hypocrisy that your heart without Christ is nothing but a handful of dust! Be swept away by the life-giving waters of your baptism, return to the source of life in the desert of your heart. Open your eyes to Christ, that companion who walks alongside you, in the breaking of the bread. Know that you have in him, in body and blood, a peace that passes all understanding. “Can modern man humble himself enough to

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<sup>64</sup> Quoted in *Modern Poetry*, 146n76.

<sup>65</sup> “Hypocrite reader—my fellow—my brother.” Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Modern Poetry*, 146. *Modern Poetry*, 146n74, notes another reference to Scripture: “Psalm 22:20: ‘Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog.’” Jesus cites Psalm 22:1 from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). He likely recited the entire psalm, including this verse about “the power of the dog,” a reference to evil and death, dogs that hound Jesus with their violent intent to the point of despair that ends in his own agonizing death. The expression has become a cultural phenomenon from the highly acclaimed 2021 film by that name, winning an Oscar for its director, Jane Campion.

surrender unconditionally to the thunder from on high?”<sup>66</sup> *The Waste Land* does not provide the answer but simply points the way out for the pilgrim—charity!

“Sympathize!” after surrendering, by giving ear to the voice in the thunder, in the burning bush, and embodying our repentance in mercy. As the collect says, “O God, You declare Your almighty power above all in showing mercy and pity.”<sup>67</sup> Do we see this mercy, this charity, in a community of faith, the church? Do we see that only where Christ is present with his mercy are we able to show the mercy we have received? Do we see that this mercy of Christ for us is his love for his neighbor that reaches its telos, its end, on a cross, where Jesus loves his neighbors as himself by giving up his life for them? That we are a community—Christ’s body—and that body embodies the fruits of Spirit (Gal 5), fruits that are Christ’s, the first fruit of which is love? Love is the road for the pilgrim of the waste land.

“Control!” This is the final fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. We no longer belong to a community where the lusts of the flesh run wild, but we belong to a community where these lusts are controlled by the Spirit of love. Does Christ constrain us by his love and by our love for our neighbor? Do we have the discipline to control the fire of lust in the waste land?

### Conclusion

So, on this centenary of *The Waste Land* what might we learn from this enigmatic poem and this very strange poet? Although his manner and tone may not seem to address our cultural crisis, you cannot help but recognize that “The Waste Land” of the post-World War I, post-Spanish-flu world of Eliot is not that much different from ours. Much of what Eliot experienced and wrote about still resonates with us, even in the prim and proper style of this Anglophile. In *Murder in the Cathedral* Eliot wrote, as he did in a number of other places, that “humankind cannot bear very much reality.”<sup>68</sup> That should ring true among his readers even today, for what plagues our world is its refusal not just to face the reality of evil and original sin but to acknowledge that they even exist. When Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* the power of the dog was palpable, with violence and evil and death all around him. These things are still all around us, but today “The Power of the Dog” may be perceived by our secular culture as a dog that has lost its teeth.

Instead of an elite poet calling the world to repentance, we live in a world of scolds who have no idea the depth of the darkness and depravity of the human soul.

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<sup>66</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 75.

<sup>67</sup> Collect for the tenth Sunday after Trinity, in *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book*, ed. The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 919.

<sup>68</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 207.

But for Eliot to write about the murder and martyrdom of Thomas Becket means that he understood “we conquer by suffering; and Thomas will repay by his blood the blood that Christ shed.”<sup>69</sup> When Eliot writes the *Four Quartets*, his last great poem, he speaks about redeeming the time. He can only do so because first he was a pilgrim in the waste land and that “before a man may be healed, he must recognize his sickness.”<sup>70</sup> Eliot recognized his sickness and the world’s, and for him the medicine of immortality was found in receiving Holy Communion three times a week. For us to endure the sickness of our present age, we may do well to take this very same medicine.

Arthur A. Just Jr.  
Professor of Exegetical Theology  
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana  
arthur.just@ctsfw.edu

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<sup>69</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 207.

<sup>70</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 70.