



Research Project

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Politics vs Religion in T.S Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral

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Abstract

One of the most trustworthy historical sources is our written history, which has been documenting the many social, religious, and political events that have occurred throughout the ages. This analysis took a look at two different aspects of Eliot's work: his choice of subject matter and the use of historical context in **Murder in the Cathedral**. This research focused on the Politic-religious conflict during the last years of the life of Thomas Becket, the Cathedral's most prominent representative during his seven years in exile in France. This research demonstrated how conflicts effect on humans, church, even the whole country. (Al-Badri, 2021)

Keywords: Politics, Religion, History, Cathedral, Social.

Section One

1.1 Introduction

Murder in the Cathedral is one of the most well-written plays with a perfect blend of chaos and expectation of survival by T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) resulted in the revival of modern poetic drama.

Due to the religious detachment of the Victorian individual after the rise of Freudianism, Darwinism and other technological advancements, the world was in dire need of presenting a form of literature that is close to the reality of God and the universe in a variety of tenacities and aims. Through this play, Eliot has masterfully rendered the subject of religious divinity by the use of verse dividing the play into in two parts. Eliot almost uses every device to convey his intentions of making the society realize the irreversible damage done in the name of secularism. This poetic drama supports flexibility and emotional venting in a complex spiritual meaning on different levels of consciousness through verses.

Eliot starts the play with a very prominent Greek tradition of plays which is the chorus, that comprises of the ordinary women of Canterbury contradictory to Theban elders. These act as a congregation, mouthpiece and a critic responsible for setting the mood of the play and atmosphere in the church. This musical element in the play also symbolizes the anxieties and fears of a commoner exemplifying the

past and predicting the future. According to Eliot, “*The chorus tries to recreate the passions and suffering of martyrdom of Becket onstage through tool of objective correlative*”.ⁱ Through this chorus makes a clear depiction of the of the chain of events leading to the murder and also evoking the sensory elements to dwell the emotions. The inclusion of chorus serves as a warning when they say, “*There is not danger for us, and there is no safety in the cathedral*”. Chorus serves as an observer to unveil different layers of recognition and refusal. Eliot also calls he chorus as ‘mediator’ by stating, “*It mediates between the action and the audience; it intensifies the action by projecting its emotional consequences, so that we the audience see it doubly, by seeing it effect on other people*”. The chorus is an individual character in the play depicting the importance of spirituality in the community. (Ahmad, 2020)

1.2 An overview of *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Murder in the Cathedral is a tragic and religious play. It plays the crucial role of representing the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas Becket, who was later made a Saint. Becket could not afford to betray his conscience. He opted for death rather than submitting to the will of the authority that is not of God. He was focused on placing all his loyalty to the Law of God which far much exceeds the Law of Man by all standards.

The play is written during the modern age, plays written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which depicts all the progressions that occurred on the political, social, economic, religious and psychological level. It deals with real situations and also it deals with common man, an ordinary man who suffers the difficulties of life.

One of the characteristics of modern age is the Poetics plays, this age revives the trend of poetic plays. T.S Eliot was the main dramatist who gave importance to this kind of plays in *Murder in the Cathedral*.

The play is a historical fiction that has been affected by the Christian themes. It revolves around the story of Archbishop Thomas Beckett who lived between 1120 and 1170. While serving as the Archbishop, King Henry II attempted to reduce the power of the Catholic Church. Becket did not like the political movement and resisted it at all cost. Although the Church eventually accepted the changes, Becket never changed his stand on the matter leading to a rift between him and King Henry. The king convicted Becket after several attempts to win against him failed. He was accused of contempt of royal authority after which he fled to France. In response to the ruling of his conviction, he started excommunicating English court members from the church. He was tracked down by four knights and killed due to his tough stand. The Catholic Church considered him a martyr following his murder. Eliot's play is a mixture of tragedy and theology. The setting of the play was around Canterbury some few days after the return of Thomas who was in exile

in France for seven years. Although the story is based on historical records, it shuns political and psychological interpretation in favor of spiritual consideration of the sacrifice of martyrdom which is more serene. It is written to mirror the experience of the Catholic mass. (Mohammed & Hasan, 2017)

1.3 Power struggle in 12th and 20th century

Since the days of William I, the sequence of stable and undisputed reigns was more a wish than a reality throughout the Anglo-Norman lineage. This was due to the misconception prevailing at the time between the dynastic succession, i.e., the public sphere, and the patrimonial inheritance, i.e., the private sphere. Confusion brought with it a vicious circle in which after the death of the king the eldest son would have to face his brothers if he wanted to retain the throne. Whoever emerged victorious, in turn, would engender a new generation of competitors who would once again follow in the footsteps of their ancestors to occupy the throne. In this way, the Conqueror died when his eldest son Robert was in full insurrection against him, for his part, William Rufus, the middle son, and successor to the throne of England, took over the Duchy of Normandy after getting rid of Robert, whereas Henry, the youngest, emerged victorious from the fraternal rivalry between his two older brothers, thus becoming the king of England and, eventually, by defeating his nephew William Clito, duke of Normandy.

Henry I, the first survivor of this recurring Anglo-Norman, was commonly regarded by the accounts of contemporary testimonies as a strong ruler and his kingdom as a long period of peace and stability even beyond the Channel. It should not be forgotten that perhaps the greatest political success of the reign of Henry I was the implementation throughout the kingdom of a solid administration of justice exercised by itinerant judges who, going from shire to shire, acted on behalf of the king with full powers.

Just as Henry I restored peace and order following the reign of his brother William Rufus, so Henry II's wish was to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather by endowing England with a period of stability and strengthening the royal power after the preceding nineteen years of winter. Initially, Thomas Becket seemed the perfect candidate to help him undertake this mission from his new privileged position. To begin with, it was a question of taking sides since the family of the new chancellor always remained loyal to the Angevin cause during the war. Besides, he was recommended by the archbishop of Canterbury Theobald of Bec whose relationship with the new king could be considered, at least, amicable, largely due to Theobald's long-standing quarrels with Stephen not to mention his essential role in the resolution of the Treaty of Wallingford which ensured Henry's succession to the throne.

For Henry II to achieve his purpose of keeping the peace and doing justice throughout the kingdom, the law of England would have to be uniform and enforceable over all his subjects without exception, including members of the Church. However, the relationship between the Anglo-Norman crown and the English Church was never harmonious. The deterioration of relations between the Crown and the Primate of the Church was not an isolated case but must be placed in the context of a broader antagonism derived from the Investiture Controversy, that, to a greater and lesser extent, affected both the feudal monarchies and the empire in their dealings with the papacy. This clash of competing interests was a direct consequence of one of the most controversial measures of the Gregorian reform; the one that implies the exclusive right of the Church to elect and appoint the holder of an ecclesiastical office and determine the attribution of its functions. In 1122 the Emperor Henry V and the Pope Calixtus II came to an agreement known as the Concordat of Worms whose resolutions were very similar to those reached in Westminster a few years previously. Taking into account the contrast between the relations of “the usurper” Stephen with the Church and those that were maintained in previous legitimate reigns, it is not surprising that sooner or later Henry’s attempts at centralization of power adopted a more hostile attitude towards the ecclesiastical establishment than that displayed by his predecessor.

In fact, King Stephen, only one year after his coronation, showed what was to be a policy of submission to the Church that would eventually weaken the power of the monarchy. The Church, consequently, was not slow to take advantage of the weak position of the king, given that he had taken the throne by decisive action (seizing the treasury). (López, 2023)

The population of Germany in 1933 was around 60 million. Almost all Germans were Christian, belonging either to the Roman Catholic or the Protestant churches. The Jewish community in Germany in 1933 was less than 1% of the total population of the country. The attitudes and actions of German Catholics and Protestants during the Nazi era were shaped not only by their religious beliefs, but by other factors as well, including Nationalism and Anti-Communism.

These were some of the reasons why most Christians in Germany welcomed the rise of Nazism in 1933. They were also persuaded by the statement on “positive Christianity” in Article 24 of the 1920 Nazi Party Platform, which read:

"We demand the freedom of all religious confessions in the state, insofar as they do not jeopardize the state's existence or conflict with the manners and moral sentiments of the Germanic race. The Party as such upholds the point of view of a positive Christianity without tying itself confessionally to any one confession. It combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit at home and abroad and is convinced that a

permanent recovery of our people can only be achieved from within on the basis of the common good before individual good."

The largest Protestant church in Germany in the 1930s was the German Evangelical Church, comprised of 28 regional churches or *Landeskirchen* that included the three major theological traditions that had emerged from the Reformation: Lutheran, Reformed, and United. Most of Germany's 40 million Protestants were members of this church, although there were smaller so-called "free" Protestant churches, such as Methodist and Baptist churches.

Historically the German Evangelical Church viewed itself as one of the pillars of German culture and society, with a theologically grounded tradition of loyalty to the state. During the 1920s, a movement emerged within the German Evangelical Church called the *Deutsche Christen*, or "German Christians." The "German Christians" embraced many of the nationalistic and racial aspects of Nazi ideology. Once the Nazis came to power, this group sought the creation of a national "Reich Church" and supported a "nazified" version of Christianity.

The "Bekennende Kirche" - the "Confessing Church" - emerged in opposition to the "German Christians." Its founding document, the Barmen Confession of Faith, declared that the church's allegiance was to God and scripture, not a worldly Führer. Both the Confessing Church and the "German Christians" remained part of

the German Evangelical Church, and the result was a “Kirchenkampf”, or "church struggle" within German Protestantism—an ongoing debate and struggle for control between those who sought a "nazified" church, those who opposed it, and the so-called "neutral" church leaders whose priority was the avoidance both of church schism and any kind of conflict with the Nazi state.

The Catholic Church was not as sharply divided by different ideological factions as the Protestant church. Before 1933, in fact, some bishops prohibited Catholics in their dioceses from joining the Nazi Party. This ban was dropped after Hitler's March 23, 1933, speech to the Reichstag in which he described Christianity as the “foundation” for German values. The Centre Party was dissolved as part of the signing of a 1933 Concordat between the Vatican and Nazi governmental representatives, and several of its leaders were murdered in the *Röhm purge* in July 1934.

The general tactic by the leadership of both Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany was caution with respect to protest and compromise with the Nazi state leadership where possible. There was criticism within both churches of Nazi racialized ideology and notions of "Aryanism," and movements emerged in both churches to defend church members who were considered "non-Aryan" under Nazi racial laws (e.g., Jews who had converted). Yet throughout this period there was virtually no public opposition to antisemitism or any readiness by church leaders to

publicly oppose the regime on the issues of antisemitism and state-sanctioned violence against the Jews. There were individual Catholics and Protestants who spoke out on behalf of Jews, and small groups within both churches that became involved in rescue and resistance activities. (Memorial Museum)

Section Two

2.1 The interplay between politics and religion

From the onset, it must be understood that there are various definitions of religion. This problem is compounded by the rise of various religious groupings such as sects, cults and other spiritual movements. Furthermore, it is also worthwhile to note that religion has been defined from diverse perspectives. These have included anthropology, psychology, sociology, culture, theology, to mention but a few.

However, our understanding of what religion is can be guided by making recourse to the etymology of this term. According to McBrien (1981), the word religion is derived from Latin noun religion. Though this word is associated with different Latin verbs (relegere, religari, reeligere), it can reasonably be deduced that it ultimately suggests respect for what is sacred, reverence for the gods or God, and the bond between man and the gods or God.

As similarly observed about the notion of religion, the term politics is complex and difficult to define. Originally, the word "politics" was derived from the Greek word "πολιτικός" (politikos), meaning amongst others "of, for, or relating to citizens", "civil", "civic", "belonging to the State".

Generally, the term politics has come to be applied to the art or science of running governmental or State affairs. This involve various means that are employed in the management of these affairs. In reality, it refers to the behavior within civil governments in that it focuses on how governments interact with their own people and institutions.

Inherently, we can only fully comprehend the intimate relationship between religion and politics when we locate them in the holistic nature of the human person. The radical identity of the human person is that he/she is a spirit incarnate, an embodied spirit. This means that the human person is both body and spirit/soul. The human person is thus a composite of body and soul. In this sense, the human person is a unified totality, and there is no dichotomy between body and soul (Gula, 1989).

Even as a unified entity, the human person experiences himself/herself as both physical and spiritual or corporeal-spiritual. As corporeal, the human person is biological and historical; he/she is a living being like all animals. However, unlike

animals, the human person is much more than bodily. The soul, which the human person possesses, gives him/her the capacity for knowledge and freedom and because of these two elements the human person is able to know and choose. The human person is intelligent and can as a result deliberate and make choices. By virtue of the soul, the human person transcends his/her physical nature, and is able to project himself/herself into the future and the spiritual sphere.

From a religious point of view, the human person possesses the spirit because he or she was created in God's own image. Furthermore, having a natural end, it entails for Christians that the human person lives out earthly life as the duty to fulfil the potentialities that God has given him/her so as to become fully God's representative on earth. Incidentally, this project of self-realization can only be fulfilled in conditions of justice, hence the necessary role of political authority.

Albeit being body and spirit, the human person is constantly in relation with other human persons. He/she does not exist like an isolated atom, but is rather essentially social. There is always a communal dimension to being human as one's personal existence is always a shared existence.

Speaking specifically about politics, it should be recalled that, on the one hand, that religious conflicts caused several wars on the European continent, including the wars of the Reformation that came to an end with the Westphalia Treaty in 1648

(Chilufya, 2012). Even prior to this, religious goals had fueled the Crusades that were intended to win back Christian territory that had been taken by Muslims.

Politics, on the one hand, is a result of the fact that we exist in the world and that we are essentially relational. We live in groups, and we need to cooperate with one another in order to fulfil ourselves as individuals and to enjoy the common good.

Good politics represents an attempt by human beings to structure, construct and institutionalize our personal and interpersonal social relationships so that they could live humanly and justly. On the other hand, religion comes in because we are not self-made, but are rather creatures of God. All major religions, as we have noticed affirm this fact as well as our dependence on the Supreme God, the Creator. They both concern the same human person, and no one can be dispensed from them. Whereas religion deals with the spiritual needs of the human person, politics concerns itself with the secular or temporal welfare of the same human person in historical conditions in which he/she exists. (Chilufya, 2021)

2.2 A Psychoanalytical Study of Thomas Becket

This paper focuses on the protagonist *Murder in the Cathedral* to be studied through the critical prospective of psychoanalysis. The protagonist of the drama meets his death at the end of the play and his death is appreciated as martyrdom by the readers of the play without seeing critically their mottoes behind their death. Challenging that, this paper varies in the stance that Beckett's death is a suicide rather than martyrdom, thus questioning the traits of the personalities of the protagonist and his motto behind his death. Taking Freud's Psychoanalytical theory as a theoretical framework; Jung model of Psychoanalysis for conceptual terminologies and conducting close textual analysis.

Psychoanalysis has been very effective in the in-depth analysis of the characters created in the literature. The projected character is studied in relation to his creator and understanding about him leads to the universal phenomenon about human behaviors. Modern literary criticism uses Psychoanalysis to explore the behaviors of different characters projected as ideals of the author.

Generally, both the protagonists of the selected dramas are glorified and applauded as martyrs, clarifying further, firstly this paper has brought into consideration that what are the personality traits of the protagonist of the selected drama the governs his actions and finally forced him to die at the end of the drama. Secondly, it has

also highlighted that what are the impulsive components **the** are very influential in bringing the character to meet his respective death at the end of the play.

n the play *Murder in the Cathedral* by T.S Eliot, different characters also talk about the proud nature of Thomas Becket. When he comes back after exile, the messenger clearly says a dialogue about the pride of the Thomas Becket. He says and I quote:

“You are right to express a certain incredulity. He comes in pride and sorrow, affirming all his claims, Assured, beyond doubt, of the devotion of the people, Who receive him with scenes of frenzied enthusiasm, Lining the road and throwing down their capes, Strewing the way with their leaves and late flowers of the seasons”

(Eliot, 1935: 15)

Indicating the adverse consequence of his proud nature that are taking its decision from the very Id, the first priest talks about the nature of Thomas Becket that **“I know that the pride bred of sudden prosperity was but confirmed by bitter adversity”** (Eliot, 1935: 16). Here the priest is using two words “pride” and “prosperity” which indicate that pride is there in the personality of Thomas Becket and secondly this pride has been emerged due to the well luxurious and prosperous past life of Becket with the king.

prosperous past life of Becket with the king. Because humbleness never gives rise to pride it is the luxuries that soil the seed of pride and **develops** in the form of a proud man. And here the priest also says that pride is in the character of Thomas Becket. Not only has the priest but the tempter also talked the same about him. He also says that Thomas Becket's lordship is too proud. Quoting him, he says **that** "*If you go so fast, others may go faster your Lordship is too proud!*" (Eliot, 1935: 25).

Social life of Thomas Becket is exposed by characters like the tempter when he further takes us back to the past life of Thomas Becket when he was the Lord Chancellor. The unequal treatment and unfair dealing with different cases of various culprits is what exposed by the tempter when **he says that** "*you were not used to be so hard upon the sinners/when they were your friends. Be easy man!*" (Eliot, 1935: 25). It lies very far from rational understanding that a religious person can be **friend** of sinners and most important than that he can favor them while deciding cases in their favor. Secondly, the tempter speaks in the same way right after this dialogue and again takes us to the past life of Thomas Becket. He says "*I leave you to the pleasures of your high vices*" (Eliot, 1935: 25) where the phrase "high vices" undoubtedly refers to the socially luxurious life of Thomas Becket with the king, he is using "vices" in the phrase which indirectly clicks our sense of understanding regarding the sin of pride of Thomas Becket which is among the seven deadly sins in Christianity.

Additionally, the tempter knows the nature of Becket that he is thirsty for glory and pride that is why he is tempting Thomas Becket with his own tools of destruction that are confessed by Becket himself when he says **is** favor of the tempter thoughts. These words by **tempter** clearly indicate that Thomas Becket is hungry for pride. It shows that he is not only longing to be a famous and glorious man in his life but he also wants to be a famous and **pride** man in Christianity after his death. He says to Becket: *“Save what you know already, ask nothing of me. But think, Thomas, think of glory after death”* (Eliot, 1935: 37). Moreover, Thomas Becket has a glorious past life in the company of **king**. He ate, drank and enjoyed **in** the majesty of the king. He used the company of the king and **name** of Christianity to get worldly pride and to gain popularity among the people. He is not the true follower of Christianity and is not the true son of God. He confesses this fact himself when he says, *“while I ate out of the king’s dish to become **servant** of God was never my wish”* (45). In the dialogue, he himself confesses that to become the servant of God and to serve the religion and indirectly people was not his wish. He indirectly communicates with the reader that they are mistaken if they think that he is a servant of God. Thomas Becket wishes for martyrdom for getting glory and pride through this. His aims and purposes for martyrdom are not spiritual **rather** worldly. It is a tragic flaw of pride in his nature that causes his death incidentally, that is generally appreciated as martyrdom. (Ali et al., 2020)

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