

## ***The Idea of a Christian Society (1939)* as Christian Cultural Criticism**

“What does he [the Archbishop of York] mean by saying that the ideal mission (I do not know how an ideal mission differs from a mission) of the Church is not *saving souls alone* but of creating a divine society of Mankind upon earth? Is not saving of souls the only way to create a divine society upon Earth? I should like some assurance that by ‘the Kingdom of Heaven upon Earth’ your Theological Editor does not mean the National Dividend.”—Letter to *The New English Weekly*, 29 March 1934

“The phrase ‘reorganisation of society on a secular basis’ may mean two quite different things. Communism, and its perhaps only temporary opponent Fascism, demand an emotional reorganization as well as a material one; they demand a *diversion* of the thought and emotion which the Christian offers to God alone. They are faiths to which the Christian cannot possibly adhere. . . . The love which does not find its proper Object will issue in fanatical devotion to a theory, or to power, or in excessive affection to created beings, which is humanitarianism. Probably, therefore, the Christian will find a fundamental difference of attitude between himself and the non-Christian with whom he co-operates, a difference which he cannot afford to forget.”—Review of *Preface to a Christian Sociology*, 6 February 1936

“For if Mr. Reckitt infers that I believe that the acceptance of a natural end by the great majority can create a Christian society, he obviously thinks that I have fallen into the grossest heresy. I do not believe that Christianity germinates out of natural religion, but that it is given by revelation; and it is only from the Christian point of view that the ‘natural ends’ can be recognized as merely natural. . . . If you design your Christian Society only according to what your experience of human beings, and the history of the last nineteen hundred years, tells you is possible, then it must remain open to the charge of being sub-Christian. If you design it beyond experience and history, you are committed to utopian plans the impracticality of which will expose you to relapse into a Lutheran despair of this world. I do not deny the possibility of a much more Christian society than that which I have outlined: for all things are possible to God. . . . [But] It will be likely to repeat every error of the past: I did not attempt to sketch anything but a human society—that it to say, a society which, whatever spiritual heights it reaches, is liable always and at any moment to fall out of the hand of God.”—“A Sub-Pagan Society?” (14 December 1939)

T. S. Eliot’s preface to his revision of his Boutwood Lectures expresses concern that contemporary political theory “may only tend to conceal from us the real issues of contemporary civilisation” (C&C 3). In this he was hardly alone. He cites Christopher Dawson, John Middleton Murray, V.A. Demant, and Jacques Maritain as influences, and he includes as well in the notes H. A. Hodges, George Every, and J. H. Oldham. *The Idea of a Christian Society* can be considered part of a much larger discussion in the period as to Christianity and European civilization, as well as faith and the meaning of history in general. Eliot was involved, for example, in the 1937 Oxford Conference on Church, Community, and State, which drew from a wide variety of European and American Protestant leaders, as well as in Oldham’s The Moot, an intellectual think-tank of predominately Christian leaders which convened between 1938 and 1947 and which hoped that a significant Christian minority might shape a general public of various beliefs (or lack thereof). Both the conference and the discussion group modeled the kind of serious engagement that Christians of various persuasions hoped to make with a broad spectrum of political, economic, social, and cultural issues. That Eliot was increasingly involved in the thick of it all says much about his commitment to cultural criticism, which beginning in the mid-1920s would continue for the rest of his life.

## Chapter I

Eliot begins by stressing that what he means by “idea” has to do with a certain end: a Christian society, which by the nature of its telos differs from a neutral society or a pagan one in specific ways. Though Eliot supports the work of Christian sociology (e.g. R. H. Tawney, V. A. Demant and the Chandos Group) and though he also acknowledges the public nature of controversies over Church-State relations, his real concern is with a society that makes Christian devotion possible. A Christian society is not synonymous with a tolerant democracy, which really only has a negative goal for its existence. Modern liberal societies destroy traditional ones by dissolving their positive social basis, that is the piety, wisdom, education, and cultivation of the good by which they flourish (C&C 12). Modern liberalism’s secularizing method is one of repudiation. While it rejects some “practices and abuses which are legitimate objects of attack,” it also discards other elements which it simply treats as outmoded. But this pattern of casting away the past has no teleological goal.

Eliot is seeking to pinpoint something that is pre-political and pre-economic—“a way of life for a people” (C&C 14), that is a level more tacit than ideology. Ultimately, he insists that a flawed Christian society is better than a supposedly neutral liberal one. He sets this argument against what he imagines in 1938-39 as a future in which modern liberalism will exhaust itself and thus render itself a more easy prey for totalitarianism.

### **Comprehension Questions**

1. What makes a Christian society different from the present one (ala' England 1939)?
2. When does a society cease to be Christian?
3. How does Liberalism prepare the way for totalitarian governments?
4. Why should political philosophies represent their people's worldviews?
5. How does political speech lose its meaning?
6. Why does industrialism create a "well-fed" mob?
7. What problems do a tolerated, Christian minority face in a pagan society?

## Chapter II

What Eliot exactly means by a “Christian society” is not a mass conversion to Christianity nor is it a return to a pre-industrial, traditional form of Christendom. Rather, what he is after is a consensus culture grounded in a certain social imaginary. But what shape can this take, given the then-current erosion of Christian life in Britain? He teases apart three categories: the Christian State, the Christian Community, and the Community of Christians.

As to the first, he is mostly concerned with the kind of education such a state would sponsor and thus avoids trying to advocate for a certain political structure. As to the second, he considers the parish the traditional unit, though one now severely weakened due to both urbanization and suburbanization. This is because various social and economic pressures compartmentalize and privatize Christian behavior and living. Eliot assumes that most persons practice religion as “a matter of behaviour and habit” that includes all aspects of business and recreation, and as a result “religious emotions must be a kind of extension and sanctification of the domestic and social emotions” (C&C 24). But the modern world mitigates against this in multiple ways. Thus, the need for Eliot’s third category, which is that of select intellectually committed Christians who seek to influence the culture.

He admits that mass media is working against those elites that would seek to shape a culture. Here, he returns to the question of education, as well. “[O]nly a proper system of education can unify the active and the contemplative life, action and speculation, politics and the arts” (C&C 33). Yet, here too he admits that there can be no simple coherent curriculum in the modern, secular state.

### **Comprehension Questions**

1. How does Eliot define a "Christian State"?
2. Why are Christians in government not enough to address his concerns?
3. What is the purpose of "Christian education"? What undergirds it?
4. What distinguishes a "Christian Community" from a "Community of Christians"? (Also see pg. 69-70.)
5. Why is the parish no longer effective?
6. Why does there remain a need for a religious-social whole to shape behavior?
7. Why are neo-agrarianism and an uncritical acceptance of modernism false answers to the current problem?
8. How does the modern world mitigate against Christianity?
9. How do modern economic systems work against the arts?
10. Why is there a need for a uniform ideal in education?

### Chapter III

This brief chapter is a defense of the need for a national Church that unites most of the convictions of the people. Eliot admits that the English people in general exist in a netherworld apart from any consistent faith, and yet he argues that disestablishing the Anglican Church might be worse. He also concedes the dangers of a nationalistic Church, a class-based one, or of general dominance of the State over the Church. He ends this section acknowledging the tension that will always remain between Church and State for the Christian.

### **Comprehension Questions**

1. Why is there a need for a majority, established Church?
2. What should the Church of a Christian Society be?
3. What are the temptations of the Established or National Church?
4. What is the National Church's relationship to the Universal Church?

### Chapter IV

In many ways this chapter acts as a coda. Eliot considers it a mistake to identify any political form with Christianity, for to do so “confounds the permanent with the transitory, the absolute with the contingent” (C&C 45). He neither wants to condemn fascism or communism nor promote Christian morality simply along the lines of expediency. A Christian society will not offer “a kind of apocalyptic vision of a golden age of virtue,” for the Kingdom of God is not to be realized upon earth even as it is already present. Instead, it will be imperfect, even sordid and ordinary, yet one that also makes the presence of contemplative orders possible (C&C 46-47).

Eliot argues that what modern Britain needs is a reconsidered economic and ecological life that learns from indigenous cultures “the operation of a social-religious-artistic complex” and from the Church Fathers a renewed vision of the world and God (C&C 49). Without such a vision, then Britain has little to ground its ethical life, as Chamberlain’s capitulation before Hitler had recently shown.

### Comprehension Questions

1. Why is it a mistake to identify any one form of government with Christianity?
2. Why is the Kingdom of God always being realized, never fully realized?
3. Why is there a need for religious orders?
4. Why does a wrong attitude towards nature imply a wrong attitude towards God?

### Notes

The extended notes show the larger conversation of which Eliot was a part, in particular key figures from the Moot discussions—Oldham, Hodges, Middleton Murray, and Dawson, as well as George Every and Dement. Topics include:

- Christian sociology,
- German national religion (and why it is not Christian),
- Pacificism (and can it be Christian),
- Disestablishment or the dangers of Christian nationalism,
- Moral Re-Armament (A Christian movement promoting traditional morality).

Two important notes are on the uniformity of culture (Dawson) on pages 59-61 and Oldham's letter on pages 67-68, which brings the background question of Christian civilization to the forefront.

### Appendix ("Church, Community and State," Feb. 1937 broadcast talk)

Eliot argues that the Church should interfere with the World because the Church must evangelize everyone. He points out that constitutional democracy is not of necessity the only form of government that can be advantageous to Christians; besides, there is no permanent settlement of the Church with the State. There is a distinction to be made between the reformer who treats evil as something external that can be changed and the Christian who recognizes that the conversion of the self is necessary, too. Eliot thinks that socially at least the Church has a greater responsibility to point out the wrong than to offer a uniform set of social solutions.

In the last analysis, the deep question that the Church must ask is, "To what purpose were we born? What is the end of Man?" (C&C 77).

### Comprehension Questions

1. Why should there be some tension between Church and State?
2. Why should the Church interfere with the World?
3. Why is there a need for humility in the Church?
4. Why should the Church never be identified with one political party?