

THE NEED FOR CULTURE: A STUDY OF
T. S. ELIOT'S SOCIAL CRITICISM

By

KATHLEEN SHOOK STEPHENSON

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Oklahoma State University

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Thesis Approved:

Edward S. Lawry

Thesis Adviser

Walter G. Scott

Neil R. Luthe

Norman N. Durhan

Dean of the Graduate College

PREFACE

This is a study of the social criticism of T. S. Eliot. The study attempts to raise sensitivity to the difficult problems of preserving community. In a world which has seen oppressive regimes and also attempts to provide maximal liberty, there is a need for intentionally defending the institutions which foster unity between persons. T. S. Eliot's insight concerning the requirements of a health culture emphasizes the happiness of individuals without ignoring the common good.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Need for Roots

Of all the needs of the soul, the most important is the need for a home in the world. Without a meaningful context, our existence here is a useless possession devoid of joy or passion. The need was explored by Simone Weil in her book, The Need for Roots. The need for roots was said to be a primary human need. Weil wrote:

A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape, certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future.¹

These roots provide a home in the world and make life worth living. Others have discussed the same need in a different language. For example, T. S. Eliot, who was sympathetic with Weil's work and wrote an introduction to her book, also wrote about a need to preserve cultural treasures. These treasures are the same that Eliot referred to in his essay, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture." He wrote:

But we can at least try to save something of those goods of which we are the common trustees: the legacy of Greece, Rome and

Israel, the legacy of Europe throughout the last 2,000 years. In a world which has seen such material devastation as ours, these spiritual possessions are also in imminent peril.²

These spiritual possessions are the treasures of the past which can only be preserved by man cultivating roots.

Therefore, when people work to listen to each other and cultivate roots that promote interpersonal bonding, they can be liberated from meaninglessness. The culture is what makes life worth living for all people. But without a fundamental context of belief that gives meaning to the mundane aspects of existence, culture is too disorganized to provide a happy human home. Intentional bonding and consideration of natural human ties is needed for culture. Although philosophers have made much of the fact that when man faces death he is ultimately alone, it is time for someone to give careful consideration to the situation in which we are essentially bound together, and thereby emphasize birth. Why has death been a more philosophically fruitful topic than birth? It may be partly because we know what happens after birth because that can be seen, and so we think we understand birth. Then too, philosophy has been a man's province and birth will always be a woman's province. So, perhaps a feminist philosopher is required to milk the notion that in birth we are never alone.

Thoughts concerning birth may be related to the much considered question, "Why should people care about one

another?" The birth experience is pregnant with meaning that may be helpful in considering that question. That is, although it seems an enigma that people should seek community, that people should care about each other, little has been made philosophically of the importance of the family and of the mystery of birth. Hence, the desire to nurture and be nurtured is as natural and respectable as the desire to liberate and be liberated. Since most people are blessed with a family and so a home, we have a model for how we relate to the world. For this reason, we can compare the incredible tension between the individual and his society to the similar conflict between a child and his family. Like the conflict between parent and child, this tension is heightened by the inevitable search for identity. "Am I my own person, or to what extent am I my parents' child?" Although no child is merely his parents' copy, no child is completely free of the accidents of his birth.

Moreover, just as each of us has a family history and family home, each of us has a set of beliefs that constitute a metaphysical home. This second kind of home in the world is a story, or mythos, that unifies and even directs our experience. Just as a child tests his parents, searching for limitations, an individual may scrutinize his or her world view, seeking logical limits. For many reasons, people in our time try to liberate themselves from their traditional family history. That

is, they try to act as if, regardless of their background, they can and should do anything, be anything, and believe anything they want to. As people isolate themselves in this way from their families and get caught up in the business of making something of themselves, it is very common that they become disillusioned. This should not be surprising because a person's family home is the basis and model for their world view. Therefore, one cannot be neglected without harming the other. So, since the ties or roots that ground an individual are what give life meaning, these ties should be cherished and protected.

Consequently, when traditions are disregarded, identity is lost and existence becomes a burden. The individual who breaks all ties with loved ones loses a sense of what he or she is working for, and even loses hope that anything is worth working for. As a result of such individualism, the search for liberation from traditional authority becomes a search for any convincing purpose that avoids despair. In other words, since the isolated self is not capable in itself of serving as a satisfactory motivation for which to live, the isolated self seeks some community. Man with no identity has no direction and no motivation to live. Similarly, a person with no loved ones has limited motivation and direction for work. So, one's identity is largely due to one's family background in the broadest sense, and one's actions are directed by those roots. In the same way, one's identity

is largely shaped by one's world view, which likewise directs one's actions.

So, of all the needs of the soul, the most important is the need for roots. Without the ability to form bonds or ties, no one is able to be human in the best sense. Persons are born with ties or roots. It is natural and good that people have commitments to each other. Commitments can bind people together, not only when they have the same relatives, but when they have the same heritage or style of living. And, the principles that unite people are their traditions. By way of introducing T. S. Eliot's ideas about tradition, Sean Lucy wrote:

In all the aspects of our lives we are our past, both personal and historical, and it is only by accepting, realizing, rectifying and nullifying that past that we can attain to a life of significant and worthwhile actions. Tradition is, for Eliot, an essential discipline for significant identity.³

T. S. Eliot's Affirmation of Culture

A shared history or tradition is necessary for true community, and community is necessary for being fully human. "Home," a "history," or "community," are specifications of what T. S. Eliot meant by talking of a "culture." Eliot fought to protect culture, culture being a way of life that makes life worth living. No culture can exist except in a community. So, in solitude, no man can find contentment. In such a state of isolation man is bereft of his relational role in the society and so loses

his sense of worth. Such problems, which are the result of a lack of culture, are discussed by T. S. Eliot in his essay "Notes Toward a Definition of Culture." In the essay, Eliot describes how tradition unifies people and therefore calls us to be stewards of our heritage. At the same time, Eliot was calling us to share a concern for the value of being related to other people in the community in a certain way. The essay does not provide any systematic program for protecting culture. In fact, the impossibility of such a program is explained. The essay does attempt to achieve a viewpoint from which we can better influence the future of our own culture.

Again, individuals can only be content if they think that their life is worthwhile. Such assurance is only possible if the individual is part of a meaningful culture. Man needs confidence in his own worth. So, man needs confidence in the worth of his culture. When the health of our culture is in danger, it is due to the degeneration of the world view which binds us together and gives us a place in the cosmos. As the culture becomes imperiled, the individual's health and happiness becomes endangered at the same time. For whatever reason, the Christian heritage that was the building block of our culture now seems to be crumbling. Maybe the increase of self-consciousness has led to the inability to be content with Christianity. Like children who have rebelled against the tyranny of parents whom they have

found to be fallible, our culture has seemingly lost faith in Christianity. So, the Christian tradition no longer serves as a primary motivator and director of human action. Unfortunately, it seems as if no other explanation of reality can fill this breach which results from the disappearance of Christianity. The community founded on the idea of Christendom is disintegrating, and with it goes the ties that bind men together. In the wake of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, Christianity remains in a torpor. Consequently, a renewed and vital story is needful in order to revive our society's faith in its own value.

Secularization and Atomization

One alleged reason for the decline of Christianity is the accusation that the church, when it has too much power or authority, becomes corrupt. Naturally, any institution that humans participate in is subject to corruption. But, this may not justify individuals throughout the course of history who have tried to reform tradition. Like Martin Luther, certain persons have valued their own private convictions rather than the tradition. Such a revolt against tradition springs from the notion that an inner voice or inner light is a better guide than the accepted customs of the community. That possibility, that an individual could detect and avoid the corruption of the institution, leads to

secularization and atomization. Secularization is the movement of power or control from the orthodox establishment of the church to the civil realm of everyday judgment. But, individuals like Luther could have experienced as much persecution from a civil or political establishment as from the ecclesiastical order. So, a particular type of government is required for the pursuit of the inner light. A democracy or a form of government that allows maximal liberty lends itself to personalized religion. The fragmentation and destruction of community is the atomization that takes place as each individual is directed according to his own will alone. The power of the church to act as a unity or a culture, is being replaced by a model of independently powerful individuals, each governed by his or her own conscience.

As we move through history, different factors contribute to the personalizing of faith. Political revolution, technological advances in communication, and mass education are a few of the things that have made private religion accessible to individuals in isolation. Furthermore, secularism challenges man to accomplish the impossible, to create his own standard of justice by which to govern himself. That is, since God's will is rejected as a standard, since it is not ascertainable except for the individual and by the individual, a new standard is needed. Even when man concocts some such standard, relevant only to himself, he cannot get along with his

fellows. His personal inner light, if it becomes the dominant motivating factor, tends to blind him to all others. That is why Eliot refers to an "Inner Light" as "The most untrustworthy and deceitful guide that ever offered itself to wandering humanity."⁴ The best alternative to being directed solely by the inner light is to be guided by orthodoxy within a tradition.

In short, emphasizing the autonomy of the individual's freedom and authority attacks the tradition which preserves culture. Therefore, this process of atomization is disadvantageous to persons who are benefited by being in a unified community. So, while tradition is merely a starting point in a search for meaning, for many people the culture itself already provides an adequate explanation for existence. Likewise, no one is fully human when completely outside the community. And, no one is able to share in social life unless he shares some foundational ideas or principles. So, of all the needs of the soul, the most important is the need for roots.

An awareness of the threat posed to our cultural traditions has increasingly preoccupied philosophers. For example, William Barrett understands the awareness of this to be a key existentialist theme, saying "The uneasiness of modern man arises from a rupture between himself and nature that leaves him homeless within the universe."⁵ This alienation between man and his world is the lack of roots in the terms of Weil. Likewise, it is the

situation of being without a culture that T. S. Eliot warned his readers about. In order to avoid a lack of culture, Eliot thought it necessary to maintain a balance between unity and diversity in culture. He thought that people should not ignore their differences; should not cling tenaciously to tradition. However, Eliot did think that people should join together and compromise while pursuing their diverse heritages. For our own culture, the most serious threat of our time is extreme individuality that is pursued for its own sake. The diversity has run rampant until community in any real sense seems like a pipe dream. If man is to have a home in the universe, then he must be concerned with community, just as a family must work to share a home.

Notes

¹ Simone Weil, The Need for Roots (New York, 1952), p. 43.

² T. S. Eliot, "Notes Toward the Definition of Culture, Christianity and Culture (New York, 1968), p. 202.

³ Sean Lucy, T. S. Eliot: and the Idea of Tradition (London, 1960), p. viii.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, After Strange Gods (New York, 1934), p. 64.

⁵ William Barrett, Time of Need: Forms of Imagination in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1972), p. 371.

CHAPTER II

THE DIALECTIC OF CULTURE AND RELIGION

Insofar as we think of culture as that which makes life worth living, it is similar to broad notions of religion. In this sense, culture is related to belief. Eliot wrote:

Yet there is an aspect in which we can see a religion as the whole way of life of a people from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture.¹

Culture, then, is a way of life that makes life worth living and religion shares this quality of imparting value. The relationship between culture and religion was discussed in "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture." Eliot wrote:

Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living. And it is what justifies other peoples and other generations in saying, when they contemplate the remains and the influence of an extinct civilisation, that it was worthwhile for that civilisation to have existed.²

The development of culture is accompanied by a development of religion. While observing this point, Eliot is unwilling to say either that religious development causes cultural development, or the reverse. Rather, he understands culture and religion to be inseparable. He wrote:

We may go further and ask whether what we call the culture, and what we call the religion, of a people are not different aspects of the same thing: the culture being, essentially, the incarnation (so to speak) of the religion of a people.³

In other words, Eliot saw a dialectical relation between culture and religion.

The relationship between culture and religion is the result of one peculiar aspect which differentiates religion from other elements in culture. That is, religion claims to encompass every element of life. Religion imbues every activity with a certain meaning; it revolutionizes all of life. Other elements in culture like fashion, government, leisure-time activities, art, education, or work are only part of the culture. Each is only one activity which characterizes the people, and so each activity can be taken up for a time and set aside at other times. But, it would be inadequate to understand religion as the kind of thing which can ever be set aside. Although some people speak as if religion only happens in certain places at certain times during a week, religion actually lays claim to the entire life. So, religion should be present in all the activities of a person. Thus, religion can be seen, in a broad sense, as being indistinguishable from the culture that is all the characteristic activities of a community. Whatever unifies the whole society is the religion, be it confidence in capitalism or any other common value. The unity of

the culture is fostered by passing down to the next generation the characteristic value. This cultural inheritance is the tradition that contains the religion of past generations.

Eliot's notion of tradition as explained in his book After Strange Gods, is an important part of culture. By "tradition" Eliot meant a way of life, not just a religious heritage. He wrote:

Tradition is not solely, or even primarily, the maintenance of certain dogmatic beliefs; these beliefs have come to take their living form in the course of the formation of a tradition. What I mean by tradition involves all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represents the blood kinship of 'the same people living in the same place.'⁴

So, like religion, tradition is not only a set of beliefs but also a way of acting. In fact, "tradition" may be an early term for what Eliot later called culture.

Again, it is important to underscore the difference between common sense usage of the words "culture" and "religion" and Eliot's definition of these terms. In other words, religion is not just what happens in and around churches and church people. Culture is not what happens in museums and theaters. Instead, Eliot is using these terms in a broad sense that illuminates the ties that bind all our experiences together. So, both religion and culture are manifest in our actions. What we believe is a part of our culture and of our religion.

However, beliefs are "incarnated" in actions just as culture is the incarnation of the religion. This explains why Eliot thought that "behaviour is also belief."

He wrote:

The reflection that what we believe is not merely what we formulate and subscribe to, but that behaviour is also belief, and that even the most conscious and developed of us live also at the level on which belief and behavior cannot be distinguished, is one that may, once we allow our imagination to play upon it, be very disconcerting.⁵

For this reason, the diversity of actions within a unified culture or religion, it is obvious that when Eliot speaks of people having the same religion, he does not mean that they all perform the same rituals. He wrote:

Yet, while these wide divergences of belief on the same level are lamentable, the Faith can, and must find room for many degrees of intellectual, imaginative and emotional receptivity to the same doctrines, just as it can embrace many variations of order and ritual.⁶

So, Eliot is using religion in a broad sense and we must not limit his reference to things that are commonly referred to as religion.

Definition of Orthodoxy

Religion can fulfill that greatest need of man--the need for a defining mythos or story in order to bring unity and identity to man. But not just any belief will suffice, according to Eliot. At this point, Eliot's use of the term "orthodoxy" can be helpful if we stress the

fact that he is not referring to a theological orthodoxy. Just as he used the terms "tradition" and "culture" in a broad sense, Eliot spoke of orthodoxy in a way that cannot be confined to meaning only official church doctrines. While tradition is related to one particular location and time, orthodoxy in some sense transcends such details. Orthodoxy is the revealed meaning or value of existence. It cannot be fabricated or tailored to suit just any desire of any group. Orthodoxy is eternal and more real than any particular culture or religion. Tradition is differentiated from orthodoxy because orthodoxy is the product of God's will, while tradition is the result of many things, some of which are accidental. As Eliot said:

And while tradition, being a matter of good habits, is necessarily real only in a social group, orthodoxy exists, whether realized in anyone's thought or not.⁷

So, one might describe orthodoxy as what is believed to be God's will or desire for the community. Even if a society has forsaken the beliefs associated with its religious heritage, even if no one in the community recognizes the claim of orthodoxy, the society still has an obligation to orthodoxy.

Orthodoxy also, of course, represents a consensus between the living and the dead: but a whole generation might conceivably pass without any orthodox thought, or as by Athanasius, orthodoxy may be upheld by one man against the world.⁸

Moreover, besides being man's understanding of God's

will, orthodoxy is the greatest foundation for culture. In fact, orthodoxy gives a context and value to all the everyday details of life. Orthodoxy is not merely custom. It is a set of principles that claim to be and actually are true directives for how to live.

Tradition by itself is not enough; it must be perpetually criticized and brought up to date under the supervision of what I call orthodoxy; and for the lack of this supervision, it is now the sentimental tenuity that we find it.⁹

Consequently, tradition without orthodoxy must disintegrate. When people hold tenaciously to bits of their heritage without realizing the real value of those things, then the fragments become antiquated and meaningless. Either people forget their history, or they misunderstand their history, unless they believe in the same principles which their ancestors held dear. Orthodoxy evolves in a community of people who share common beliefs. It is revised and reformed by those in the community who have the perception and insight to understand what is most real or true. Though everyone contributes to and partakes of their tradition, only a few are able to contribute to the formulation of orthodoxy. Most people in a healthy culture just accept orthodoxy as the reason for the way that they live. Eliot wrote:

. . . a tradition is rather a way of feeling and acting which characterizes a group throughout generations; and that it must largely be, or that many of the elements in it must be, unconscious; whereas the maintenance of orthodoxy is a matter which

calls for the exercise of all our conscious intelligence.¹⁰

Intelligence seems a strange requirement for those who maintain orthodoxy, since nowadays people often contrast faith with intelligence. In other words, it is at least partly the human capacity for intelligence that has led to a dismissal of a belief that there is any real orthodoxy. Faith, rather than intelligence, has traditionally been considered the safeguard of orthodoxy. Nevertheless, Eliot showed how, by clinging thoughtlessly to the old myths, people have endangered orthodoxy. A healthy culture requires both the tradition and its shepherd--orthodoxy. The daily activities are lost without orthodoxy. But orthodoxy uses the traditions, the daily pursuits, as a means of influencing the masses.

On the other hand, it is possible to have a style of living that is devoid of orthodoxy. This is the lifestyle of most Americans in our time. We might wish to establish some principles persuading all people to affirm them as unifiers of our culture. But, unless the principles were grounded in orthodoxy, they would not be adequate foundations for genuine unity. People cannot consciously decide to adopt a principle with the goal of unifying their experience. The principles must present themselves to individuals as the only belief that is reasonable. This only happens to most people if they are already immersed in a tradition that is consistently

undergirded by the principles. In other words, if the principles are going to unify, you must sincerely believe in them in a natural way.

It is interesting to try and understand why Eliot believed that "If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes."¹¹ Obviously, for Eliot, the culture that it knows as Christianity and so the destruction of Christianity would require future culture to be totally different. But, why doesn't Eliot anticipate a new culture as a possible improvement? Why does he want to preserve his culture rather than look toward a new culture? Perhaps Eliot's powers of imagination were not great enough to transcend his belief in Christianity. Surely he would admit that there have been rich cultures based on non-Christian societies. But, if one has a strong enough belief in Christianity, one becomes intolerant of conflicting beliefs. It is not possible to genuinely believe that Christianity has a valid claim on oneself, and at the same time, agree with Islam that no man could ever be divine. So, in a sense, a person of a healthy culture cannot fully appreciate the greatness of another conflicting culture. In fact, given the belief that there is one God--the Christian God--cultures based on different God concepts must be considered inferior. Eliot did not address this problem as clearly. He concerned himself with the immediate threat to Western culture. That is, we are not in danger of adopting a new unifying

principle; rather, we are in danger of rejecting every principle. Eliot wrote:

The world is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting the collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization, and save the world from suicide.¹²

This then is Eliot's task as he sees it: to be a steward of Christianity and culture.

Development of Individuals, Groups, or Classes and the Whole Society

In examining the relationship between the individual and the society, Eliot's essay "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture" is beneficial. Eliot believed that cultures are not formed because different individuals come together to pursue mutual interests more efficiently. That is, culture is not just a collage of different individuals who bring their private experience to a group. (The individual is born into a group from which he learns his style of living.) Eliot pointed out that culture moves from the whole to the individual through the groups to which that individual belongs. The culture as a whole shapes the individual more than the individual shapes the culture. The groups that the individual belongs to are shaped by the whole culture more than they are shaped by the individual. This is important to remember because

when one individual presumes to attempt totalitarian control over a group or whole society, things go awry. This individual is never outside of his own culture. He cannot be objective about how to improve his culture in order to perfect it. Even if he could, his ability to singlehandedly revolutionize culture would be inadequate. The things that make life worth living always exceed the values of one particular individual. For this reason, individuals or groups which try to enforce social justice through revolution or reform usually replace one set of problems with another. The culture is too big and too complex to be entirely understood by one person. The effects of change are too far-reaching to be predicted. For this reason, the culture cannot be transformed intentionally with perfect success. When the attempts to change the culture according to a systematic program are made, new problems replace old ones. If the culture cannot be renewed systematically by a fraction of the society, then other possible methods of improvement must be sought.

Since culture comes to the individual through his relations to groups and the groups' relations to the whole society, perhaps any major change in a culture would have to be brought about at the level of the whole culture first. But the efforts of man cannot bring about such change. But, could culture be almost like an entity

which exceeds the totality of its units? Could a whole culture have a movement of its own? Culture is not just a bunch of individuals who are unified. It is not just the product of peoples' interaction. There is a sense in which the culture creates the people.

If we think of culture as identity, this becomes more clear. Culture is what characterizes a people, what unites them. As Americans, we are characterized by things like capitalism, enterprise, and worldly success. Part of our culture is the principles which motivates us. The beliefs in the principle form our common identity. If I had been born in China, I would have been formed in a different way, because different principles would have been revealed as being valuable. To ask who created the culture is like asking who created language. Culture is the principles that are venerated as making life worth living and the practices which manifest the principles. The principles are not thought up and instituted by man. They have a reality which is revealed through the culture. If change in culture is to occur, it might happen as a result of the movement of ultimate reality. It might occur as a result of man's failure to believe, or in other words, his failure to practice devotion to the principles. As long as man is acting, he will be expressing admiration for some principle. But, if some principles are easier to live for, then man might opt for the lower principle as a motivating one. It may be that it

is easier to be the great businessman rather than the philosopher king. If we think of the forms of truth or goodness as having the kind of reality that could claim men, then it would be possible to imagine that culture changes, not only according to the will of man, but also in relationship with the movement of something transcendent. One way of conceiving this would be to imagine that God establishes culture and that only God can save culture. If culture is the result of people experiencing God, then when the culture has become corrupt, another similar revelation may be required to renew that culture. Or perhaps cultures, like men, just are destined to bloom, ripen, and then wither away. Maybe T. S. Eliot should just accept the natural fate of his culture.

And yet, there are rumors of a saving possibility that can ransom man from death. Perhaps Eliot hopes for a similar possibility for his culture. For a man to accept his failure and then wait for grace to solve his problems would be too presumptuous. For the man to strive to transform his identity into a more worthy identity would be equally presumptuous. Similarly, culture, if it is not to wither, must not be either smug and self-assertive or totally unconfident. The changes in culture cannot occur on the level of the whole culture unless the individuals of the civilization are willing. On the other hand, even if all the individuals of a culture desire change, it is not guaranteed to happen.

The principles must be able to accommodate the change without being destroyed and the people be able to weather the change without having their identity destroyed. If the people cannot accept the message of God, then God may have to find a new people for that truth. But, even if the people are all longing for the Word, it may not appear. Culture must be like that, being generated when ideas and activities can accommodate one another.

Notes

¹T. S. Eliot, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," Christianity and Culture (New York, 1968), p. 103.

²Ibid., p. 100.

³Ibid., p. 101.

⁴T. S. Eliot, After Strange Gods (New York, 1934), p. 18.

⁵Eliot, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," p. 104.

⁶Ibid., p. 101.

⁷Eliot, After Strange Gods, pp. 31-32.

⁸Ibid., p. 32.

⁹Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 31.

¹¹Eliot, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," p. 200.

¹²T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays (1951), p. 387. As quoted by R. Kojcky in T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism (New York, 1972), p. 124.

CHAPTER III

CHANGING THE TRADITION

Tradition is largely passed down through families from one generation to another. It is a combination of action and belief. Tradition is extremely precious and needful for a healthy personal identity. For this reason, tradition should not be totally ignored. Attempts to destroy tradition invite anarchy and disillusionment. On the other hand, the world does change. Tradition comes to be modified in a gradual way over extended periods. Eliot was not suggesting that we should cling to the good old days as if there were no tomorrow. He said:

We are always in danger in clinging to an old tradition, or attempting to reestablish one, of confusing the vital and the unessential, the real and the sentimental. Our second danger is to associate tradition with the immovable; to think of it as something hostile to all change; to aim to return to some previous condition which we imagine as having been capable of preservation in perpetuity, instead of aiming to simulate the life which produced that condition in time.¹

So, if a person is interested in changing the tradition, the utmost contemplation and patience should be exercised.

As individuals we must try to improve our culture, while at the same time realizing that we are not capable of perfecting the culture. As Eliot wrote:

We cannot say: 'I shall make myself into a different person'; we can only say: 'I will give up this bad habit, and endeavor to contract this good one.' So of society we can only say: 'We shall try to improve it in this respect or the other, where excess or defect is evident; we must try at the same time to embrace so much in our view, that we may avoid, in putting the thing right, putting something else wrong.'²

Presumably, this means that we must do the best that we can in our own way, at our own level, and with a sense of humility. We must realize that our goals for the culture are not final, since the culture exceeds our interests and goals. But, at the same time, we cannot refuse to adopt goals and work toward them. We have the responsibility to improve aspects of our culture. The key is in having enough conviction in one's own goals for culture that you are driven to commit yourself to some task, while at the same time respecting the person who, because of different values, may thwart your work. There is a delicate balance between when to compromise and when to fight for your identity. This is why Eliot cannot provide a clear program to correct the problems of culture. He can only indicate some characteristics that are necessary to a healthy culture.

According to Eliot, the well-being of a culture depends on maintaining the proper balance of unity and

diversity. If we share certain unifying qualities which characterize our culture, then we must have an adequate degree of diversity in order to have a successful culture. Our American culture certainly has plenty of diversity. Our weakness is a lack of unity. The typical American is most interested in being successful in business. This diversifies people rather than unifying them. If our culture is to be healthy, we need common beliefs. Eliot said:

The need is for causes for which sacrifices can be made: One might cheerfully submit to even higher taxes were there reason to believe that the money thus squeezed would be anything but squandered.³

If people had a common belief about when money was being squandered and when it was justifiably spent, our society would have a different attitude towards sharing, sacrifices, and cooperating. But as it is, some people think that money should be spent on charity, others want to support education and protect big business, while still others think money should be spent on defense. There is no priority or value that is commonly agreed upon as being most important. The reason for this is a lack of unity in belief. In other words, there is no religion in the broadest sense. The remnants of Christianity that still carry on the practices and rituals associated with "religion" have practically no power in the "real" world, namely the business world.

So culture is not just a collection of individual units that add up to a mass. The individual is derived from the culture, rather than the culture being a summation of lots of individuals. The way that individuals fit into the culture is through their participation in a group. By living in close connection with other people and sharing a variety of experiences with them, people develop their culture through the medium of their group. Eliot believed that a classless society could result in the destruction of culture, because to do away with classes would be to break the ties that bind people. Classes might be thought of as the soil in which people can grow their roots. Eliot was opposed to the kind of individualism that would give too much power to the personality guided by the inner light. Culture maintains the bonds by which people shepherd each other. Classes provide continuity with the wisdom of the past as well as a sense of responsibility for other persons. Eliot said:

When morals cease to be a matter of tradition and orthodoxy--that is, of the habits of the community formulated, corrected, and elevated by the continuous thought and direction of the church--and when each man is to elaborate his own, then personality becomes a thing of alarming importance.⁴

Men should not rely on themselves alone for their understanding of life or their guiding values. Instead, they should be open to the influence of those with whom they have intimate ties and share a common lifestyle.

Condemnation of Liberalism

When revisions in the culture occur or are desired, the change should develop organically. Eliot recognized the reality that individuals may be called to bring about dynamic and far-reaching changes in culture. However, it would be wrong to praise an individual just because he or she is powerfully persuasive and devoted to a revolution. But, as we lose our moral orientation, it becomes more common for a man who has made sacrifices for his cause, no matter what the cause, to become a hero. Nevertheless, individuals are not free to ignore the eternal and universal realities of goodness and truth. The only time an individual is justified in acting purely as a critic of his culture is when he genuinely has had a "real vision" of justice. Because our culture as a whole has lost its vision of the good, we have become completely lost in a sea of tolerance. We generally expect well educated people to be liberals. In other words, they are expected to be in favor of individual liberty and thus must be extremely tolerant.

The term "liberal" has been used carelessly enough so that it no longer has any one clear reference. But, tolerance is clearly the hallmark of one type of liberal. A liberal is a champion of individual freedom. This is why Eliot said that it is the great struggle of our time:

. . . to concentrate, not to dissipate; to
renew our association with traditional

wisdom; to reestablish a vital connection between the individual and the race; the struggle, in a word, against Liberalism. . . .⁵

Liberalism is seen as an enemy because it advocates liberty at the expense of virtue. So, the autonomy of the individual is preserved even if the individual fails to exhibit the essential goodness and progress that the liberal expects. The purest political liberalism leads to legal sanctions of individual autonomy. Similarly, religious liberalism leads to independence from ecclesiastical authority and institutes personal religion. Eliot is referring to both kinds of liberalism. Both political liberalism and the movement in modern Protestantism that advocates being guided by the inner light are criticized by Eliot. So, Eliot considered liberalism harmful to culture.

This accusation that liberalism is harmful points up an interesting ambiguity in the liberal ideology. John Stuart Mill, an advocate of maximal liberty, wrote:

. . . the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually, or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. . . . Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.⁶

In order to be perfectly clear, the liberal should specify precisely what constitutes the type of harm that may be prevented, especially since harming others is exactly

what raises the ire of liberals, making them less tolerant than the stereotypical conservatives. But, Eliot claimed that liberalism itself was harmful. So, what exactly is meant by "harm?" Some liberal hearts bleed about the starving masses, others take an interest in the politically oppressed, while still others are concerned about the derision and harrassment received by people with unusual sexual practices. But, one common characteristic of these liberals might be that they advocate rapid social reformation as a solution to injustice. It would be inaccurate to say that no liberals have a dogmatic sense of justice. Liberals favor freedom from oppressive ideologies. Freedom of religion means freedom from religion, and finally, freedom from any idea of moral accountability other than legal consequences. The idea is becoming more and more common that nothing is really right or wrong as long as you don't get caught. Even if you do get caught, you are only being criticized or condemned by a majority in a particular location and time with their own eccentricities and hang-ups. So, moral responsibility comes to be thought of as an old wives' tale, which is only good for social stability if it is good for anything at all.

Here again we encounter the breach created in the world by the loss of Christianity. Those who cling to the tradition as a foundation of worthy existence are on one side of a chasm, while those who seek to be rid of

the burden of accountability are on the other side. Because of this grave separation, both those who would preserve the tradition and those who wish to be rid of it are unable to compromise. Unless one or the other relinquishes his identity, there can be no community, no polis, no culture. Without a common belief in principles to unify them, men are left like anti-humans, like mere animals without the ability to communicate. In his book After Strange Gods, Eliot wrote:

I am not arguing or reasoning, or engaging in controversy with those whose views are radically opposed to such as mine. In our time, controversy seems to me, on really fundamental matters, to be futile. It can only usefully be practiced where there is common understanding. It requires common assumptions; and perhaps the assumptions that are only felt are more important than those that can be formulated. The acrimony which accompanies much debate is a symptom of differences so large that there is nothing to argue about. We experience such profound differences with some of our contemporaries, that the nearest parallel is the difference between the mentality of one epoch and another. In a society like ours, worm-eaten with Liberalism, the only thing possible for a person with strong convictions is to state a point of view and leave it at that.⁷

Therefore, Eliot advocated a traditional approach, pursued moderately with only the most cautious and intentional changes in tradition. This is his alternative to Liberalism.

Notes

¹T. S. Eliot, After Strange Gods (New York, 1934), p. 19.

²T. S. Eliot, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," Christianity and Culture (New York, 1968), p. 92.

³T. S. Eliot, p. 121.

⁴T. S. Eliot, After Strange Gods, p. 58.

⁵Ibid., p. 53.

⁶J. S. Mill, On Liberty (New York, 1859), Chapter I.

⁷T. S. Eliot, After Strange Gods, pp. 11-12.

CHAPTER IV

COMPARISON OF CLASSES AND ELITES

The Doctrine of Elites and Its Goal of Justice

Traditionally, society encompassed groups or classes which provided the intimacy for interpersonal bonds. In our time, there is a trend to become a classless society which is largely taken for granted as an improvement. T. S. Eliot gave special consideration to the problems of a classless society in comparison to a society based on the doctrine of classes. He observed a growing tendency to assume that society should be broken down into elites. He called this system the "doctrine of elites." The doctrine of elites assigns persons their social position based upon their merits. According to this system, some people who have a special aptitude or talent for politics would have the task of governing. Those who deserve to teach in universities, because of their abilities, would be encouraged to do that. This system should result in promoting the best people into the positions for which they are best suited. As Eliot wrote:

Superficially, it appears to aim at no more than what we must all desire--that all posi-

positions in society should be occupied by those who are best fitted to exercise the function of the positions.¹

Eliot was sensitive to the frustrating problem of finding people in "situations in life for which neither their character nor their intellect qualified them."² The fact that people often do attain positions because of their family or friends in high places of power seems unfair. This type of injustice is the chief problem the doctrine of elites aims to resolve.

Another unhappy situation in our society addressed by the doctrine of elites is that some people who have been born into less fortunate circumstances do not have a fair chance to get an education that would allow their abilities to be developed. To prevent this inequality, we have developed programs which attempt to give all persons an equal chance to cultivate their talents. The doctrine of elites requires such programs. But Eliot opposes the doctrine. He wrote:

The situation of a society without classes, and dominated exclusively by elites is, I submit, one about which we have no reliable evidence. By such a society, I suppose we must mean one in which every individual starts without advantage or handicap; and in which, by some mechanism set up by the best designers of such machinery, everybody will find his way, or be directed, to that station of life which he is best fitted to fill, and every position will be occupied by the man or woman best fitted for it.³

One of the main attractions of the doctrine of elites is that it promises to deliver justice.

Often when people clamor for "social justice" they favor a society based on elites rather than classes. Those of us who have been among those demanding justice for the poor, justice for the third world nations, justice for women and so on, are called into accountability by Eliot's examination of the term "social justice." He wrote: "The term 'social justice' is in danger of losing its rational content--which would be replaced by a powerfully emotional charge."⁴ Eliot recommends that the term not be used "unless the user is prepared to define clearly what social justice means to him and why he thinks it just."⁵ One might attempt defining social justice as an equality in social systems. This is implied by social justice movements which attempt to bring about a more equitable distribution of food, wealth, or political power. On the other hand, justice may be defined as a proper system of rewards and punishments. In other words, some believe that certain factions in society deserve to be wealthy, even though others are starving, since the wealthy people earned their riches. One notion of social justice describes justice as equality, while the second suggests that justice is retribution. Neither one of these two understandings of justice works out in practice. Even if we could choose between the conflicting definitions of justice, we could not clearly imagine implementing either one.

If justice means equality, it cannot be provided, because people are born with such different and unequal talents and potentials. Even if we could magically or scientifically provide persons with commensurate environments and equal opportunities, the different genetic make-up would cause disproportion. Some persons would still be females and others males. Some would be beautiful; others deformed. Total equality might result from producing clones, if the producers were themselves equal. But, such a situation could not be described as a society. Such a classless world of equals would certainly not have a culture. It is impossible to speak of justice in relation to such a spectacle. This type of illustration makes it clear that it would be impossible to have both perfect equality and justice, much less equality and culture.

But, if this type of justice which emphasizes equality cannot be purely realized in this world, maybe it should still be held up as an ideal to strive for. Perhaps we are bettering our society by making people more equal. Without resorting to genetic engineering, what type of equality can be achieved? When people talk about equality or equal rights, what are they calling for? Usually the equality desired is either in terms of wealth, political power, or personal respect. It seems that political power is a combination of wealth and personal respect. In our society, those who are elected

are usually the ones who spend the most money on their campaigns. People who belong to a minority group which has less personal respect than the majority are politically disadvantaged. Women, homosexuals, and racial minorities are less likely to be elected than white males. If, as a society, we could educate people that racial and sexual differences do not decrease the worth of individuals, we could overcome the asymmetry that results from lack of personal respect for persons who belong to the minorities. If that could be achieved, minority groups would have a more equal chance of political power.

But what about the unequal distribution of wealth? Are we to hope for some type of equal distribution of riches? If justice means equality, then surely we in the United States do not want this type of equality. There is a problem with using wealth as a measure of people's assets. When we start trying to make people equal, it seems as if money is the most simple commodity to equalize. We cannot make all people equal in intellect and talent, but we could make everyone middle-class in terms of income. The way we talk about "lower class" and "middle class" in America is confusing, because we are really talking about elites and not classes. Now the working definition of "upper class" is the group of people who have a certain level of wealth. Taken alongside the American idea that the wealthy deserve to be

rich, since they or their parents earned the money, we have a financial elite rather than a class. As money has become the measure of all things, people have left families and histories behind and are stationed socially in a financial hierarchy. This is a result of casting off traditional class systems in favor of the doctrine of elites which provides more potential for social mobility. But, by adopting wealth as a standard of success we have failed to provide more social justice, if by justice we mean equality.

If, on the other hand, we think of justice as retribution, the doctrine of elites may promote a type of social justice. A person from a poor family is free to break out of the ghetto and make a fortune, moving from a group that is scorned and even resented, to the social group of prestige. America has been lauded as the land of opportunity, where anyone could possibly make a fortune if only they work hard enough, are rather cunning, and have good luck. Needless to say, we should be hesitant to accept this kind of justice without first considering what it means to earn and own wealth. America, the land of abundance, was secured by brute force. Do we, who stole and murdered for our resources, have a right to this wealth? There are problems with conceptualizing how land can be owned at all. But, if we as a nation have a right to this abundance, we must have gained that right by wiping out the native Americans through aggressive

actions. If we accept this Darwinistic idea of ownership, then we are hardly justified in having prohibitions against stealing today. But, it may be said that the unseemly methods used by our forefathers are not our responsibility. After all, we did not secure our wealth by conquest. We were simply born in the land of abundance, so our wealth is inherited.

The notion of justice, of deserving wealth, becomes more and more indefensible. Surely we cannot say that it is just for one child to be born to parents who are millionaires, while another is born to a welfare family. If both families had started out equally and earned their wealth--but we have already rejected the possibility of an equal start. It does not make sense to talk about people getting what they deserve financially in a world where some are born rich while millions are born literally starving.

Man is not capable of providing social justice when he uses wealth as a standard. Man does not have the wisdom to understand what an individual deserves or how to treat different individuals equally. One set of programs may solve some problems, but a new set of problems is created. With the goal of providing equal opportunity and freedom of vocational choice, we in America have instituted all sorts of programs to allow the elite to become the ones who get the benefits of the society. The programs that were instituted to help the needy often

reaffirm the self-identity and low self-esteem of the poor. Furthermore, we have instituted special reward systems that further separate the successful and the unsuccessful. This is based on the notion that we can have a just system in which everyone gets what they deserve. This structure is supposed to encourage and reward merit. But, at best, the doctrine of elites can be described as the natural way of things. It recommends the survival of the fittest by any means necessary. If some people are naturally stronger, healthier, smarter, or wealthier, according to the luck of their birth, then maybe this business about justice should be forgotten and the reality of fate should be recognized. In order to avoid advocating a type of social Darwinism, advocates of the doctrine of elites have imagined that the system ensures more justice. This is an example of man striving to justify his existence by working for a thing that can be upheld as worthy, namely justice. But justice is always bigger than one person's conception of it. Social justice fails to be systematically implemented. In trying to provide equal opportunity, we must first equalize the capacities and potential of the recipients of opportunity. Otherwise, the "opportunities" are not equally accessible to all.

If the doctrine of elites is to promote justice, it must first provide equal opportunity. This being impossible, and even undesirable, caution should be exercised

in criticizing the practices which grant advantages of birth. Social justice may not be feasible, if by "justice" one means equality. Eliot wrote:

From meaning 'justice in relation between groups or classes' it (social justice) may slip into meaning a particular assumption as to what these relations should be; and a course of action might be supported because it represented the aim of 'social justice,' which, from the point of view of 'justice,' was not just.⁶

Problems With the Doctrine of Elites

A major disadvantage of the doctrine of elites is that it fails to recognize the worth of persons of lower class. The dignity of the poor is trampled because, since the society tells them that they have an equal opportunity, they come to believe that their plight is no one's fault but their own. If they are supposed to have a chance to succeed and they do not, then it seems that they must consider themselves either stupid or lazy. The poor must have low self-esteem under the doctrine of elites. People who are successful are likely to look down on those who have not succeeded. In short, like the Pharisees, whose sin was that they thought themselves more righteous through their own achievements, the wealthy may come to think of themselves as superior beings. Since they are rich and are told that everyone has a chance, the wealthy people believe they deserve to be wealthy. Since the myth of equal opportunity is false

myth, the doctrine of elites becomes detrimental. Several years ago during an oil boom in Oklahoma, many expensive cars had bumper stickers which said, "If you don't have an oil well, get one." If everyone had an opportunity to have an oil well, that would be fine. But, because our system fails to provide the kind of justice it was designed for, it is the height of vanity to act as if one's oil well is a mark of achievement or merit, rather than sheer luck. The doctrine of elites is a futile attempt by man to create a value to justify or make worthy his existence.

Many people think of a perfect world as a world in which all people have equal opportunity. In fact, it is not at all clear that such a world is desirable, although many people take it for granted that such a world should be our highest goal. Eliot was concerned about the attempt to strive for a society which had no class divisions. He advocated instead a society with some form of a class structure. In reference to a society with classes, Eliot wrote:

It has now become a commonplace of contemporary thinking, that a society thus articulated is not the highest type to which we may aspire, but that it is indeed in the nature of things for a progressive society eventually to overcome these divisions and that it is also within the power of our conscious direction, and therefore a duty incumbent upon us, to bring about a classless society.⁷

Since no one knows exactly what ramifications the doctrine of elites would bring about, and no one can

imagine in what sense people could be equal without being identical to one another, we should exercise caution before buying into the doctrine of elites. We might guess that equal opportunity can never be achieved without destroying the incentive to improve. If we try to limit the opportunities of the rich or intelligent, at the same time trying to increase the opportunities of the poor and the ignorant, we introduce new problems. We may provide a better level of equality, but we have to interfere with liberty to do so. Because people have all sorts of different talents, and because different people value different skills, equality is not attainable. We cannot make everyone's skills equal and we cannot require that everyone value the same skills equally. But this is exactly what people have resorted to in the United States. We attempt to slow down the gifted students and force the slow students to keep up. We try to make everyone appreciate the English Department as much as the Athletic Department, but we cannot force the patient to value the priest as much as the doctor. We cannot force the football player to be as good at philosophy as he is at sports. For this reason, we cannot provide equal opportunity or equal respect. If there is no equal opportunity, then the doctrine of elites does not provide justice. But if we eliminate equal opportunity or a facet of the doctrine of elites, it can only be defended as a recognition of the process of evolution in which the

strongest survive. But if we claim that the doctrine of elites is simply the same thing as the doctrine of evolution, we have even more problems justifying our interference of the evolutionary process by trying to implement some kind of equality.

The Doctrine of Classes

Considering these problems associated with the doctrine of elites, Eliot was opposed to the idea that people should attain their position in society on the basis of merit alone. Instead, he favored a kind of social heredity. This is not strictly a biological heredity but a system in which a person inherits his likely position in society because of family status. There is inequality in such a system. Eliot recognized the inequality but opposed programs that would institute a type of equality for its own sake. For the sake of the common good, diversity of roles in the society is needed. Because different people have different functions in the society, and because some functions come to be valued more than others, classes arise. A class is built around a function but it is not exhausted by the function. A certain lifestyle accompanies each particular class.

If a man is a farmer he will probably live in the country, have access to certain kinds of food, have certain leisure time activities, and have certain

responsibilities. It is likely that his neighbors and friends will also be farmers and will share his style of life, to a great extent. A person who is an actor, on the other hand, will have different working hours, will probably need to live in an urban area, and will have different options to pursue than the farmer. The different jobs involve entire ways of life that go beyond the specific work being done. The lifestyle will influence not only the farmer or the actor, but their children as well. The different families will attend different schools, have different types of vacations, and will meet different types of people. This kind of cultural inheritance provides for the perpetuation of culture in its complexity.

In our society, it seems unfair to expect people to accept their station in life when that station is openly considered to be inferior. This is a result of our unrealistic expectation for equal opportunity and the stigmatization of the lower classes that result. Eliot is not suggesting that some people be content in inferior levels which lack culture. He wants to see a class system in which each status has its advantages and pleasures. It should be no shame or disappointment to find oneself in the so-called lower class. The desire to move out of one class would be lessened if, as a culture, we had more appreciation for those in lower classes. The lower levels of culture should be fun and recognized as

worthwhile. The personal respect for individuals would be heightened if each class realized its dependence on other classes in the culture. The higher classes are those with more complex, sophisticated, self-conscious levels of culture. The lower classes have the same amount of culture, but is less complex. There should be advantages to each class. Eliot suggested that the upper classes have more burdens and responsibilities than the lower classes. Upper class people should realize that their social position is not due to any special talent or achievement of their own. In this way, the inherent dignity of each man is guarded, since the lower class persons also realize that their position is a matter of fate, rather than an evaluation of their merits.

In this way, the doctrine of classes does provide a basis for more sympathy between people of different classes. The peasant can understand that there are a lot of disadvantages to being King, and the King can appreciate the simpler life of the peasant. Both can share feelings of resentment about being locked into a certain class. It can even be imagined that the King and the peasant could have a relationship of mutual admiration, but an American president and a ghetto-dweller could not have such a relationship because one would despise the president's "lucky breaks" while the other would tend to have contempt for the laziness and inferior intellect of the ghetto-dweller. One is to be prided for being an elite,

while the other must be shamed for failing to excel. Under the class system, the responsibility is on the system, not the individual. Like the poor little rich girl who wanted to make mud pies, or the prince who thought the life of a pauper might be exciting and adventurous, the upper class individuals can respect the lower class person if the lower class has a rich culture. But, if the children are in the same class at the public school, the child who had the advantage of being born into a successful family will probably excel in school. Because of the doctrine of elites, the child comes to believe that his merits are due to his own personal superiority. He and his parents feel responsible for his success. His disadvantaged classmate and family are also made to feel personally responsible for failure to achieve in school. This is dehumanizing. Under a class system, people understand and admit the unequal opportunities and the impossibility of comparing the merits of people of different classes. Thus, the dignity and worth of each class is protected.

The diversity of the whole culture is also safeguarded by the doctrine of classes. People learn their appropriate lifestyles through a tradition. Elites only have certain abilities in common, but members of a class share a way of life. The way of life is what Eliot means by culture. He wrote:

The primary channel of transmission of culture is the family: No man escapes from

the kind, or wholly surpasses the degree of culture which he acquired from his early environment.⁸

If the whole society is to have a healthy culture, the family must perpetuate the diversity of levels of culture. The rural Arkansas family that eats grits and black-eyed peas, is protecting a segment of culture just as the family in New England that eats clam chowder or mutton. Without the variety of cultural aspects, the culture as a whole would deteriorate.

The family is the building block of a class. Eliot was dissatisfied with the tendency of a present day people who think of a family as only a couple of parents and their children. This way of thinking might confuse someone who hears Eliot praise the family. He is not holding up for admiration "the personal affection between the members of the family," which can easily be sentimentalized. Rather, he wants the family to be a model of devotion and loyalty to a way of life. He wrote:

But when I speak of the family, I have in mind a bond which embraces a longer period of time than this; a piety towards the dead, however obscure, and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote. Unless this reverence for past and future is cultivated in the home, it can never be more than a verbal convention in the community.⁹

The need for interpersonal ties is primary to the health of a culture. People must be bound together in different commonalities if there is to be a tradition. These

traditions provide the meaning and coherence needed for satisfactory living.

However, to assume that people can be content with an inherited identity rather than an identity which they have created for themselves, seems shocking to contemporary America. If people are not happy in their class, then the benefits of the structure are lost. The structure may avoid chaos, indecision, and agonizing choices, but if the people are not happy with their given role, nothing is gained. On the other hand, it is likely that most people would be happier if they did not feel pressured to make vocational choices. It would be easier if people grew up without so many choices, knowing what to expect, and not having to think so much. People often wish that someone else would decide for them so that the responsibility would be out of their hands. Eliot was willing to make exceptions for a number of people to switch classes. But he thought that most people should adopt the role in society which was assigned to them by birth. Again, we face the problem of equality. Eliot did not suggest that all classes be valued equally. He did favor a hierarchy of classes. But this hierarchy need not be a cause of unhappiness for people in the lower classes. As Eliot said:

We have to keep in mind that in a healthy society the maintenance of a particular level of culture is to the benefit, not merely of the class which maintains it, but to the society as a whole.¹⁰

Since the continuation of tradition depends on groups within the culture, classes are needed to unify the people of lower classes to the people of higher classes. Since the thing that distinguishes one class from another is its different identity, all classes cannot be equal if equal means having the same opportunities. Since people naturally value some opportunities more than others, we are committed to having unequal classes, if we have any classes at all. This does not mean that the higher class should have a license to ignore the needs and desires of persons of lower classes. Eliot felt that we:

. . . should also remind the 'higher' class, insofar as any such exists, that the survival of the culture in which it is particularly interested, is dependent upon the health of the culture of the people.¹¹

Having classes works to the benefit of all. It encourages people to be interdependent and so it enables unity as opposed to the doctrine of elites which individualizes people as they are in constant competition.

If each class in the culture is necessary and valuable, why not advocate a nonhierarchical structure of society in which each different style of culture is seen as equally valuable? Although the majority of society does value some functions more than others, and hence some classes more than others, the doctrine of classes rests on the notion that each class is valuable in some sense and each member of each class is inherently valuable. The doctrine of elites measures an individual

according to his merits and classifies him this way. But, the doctrine of classes is just a judgment in itself. A person is not classified because he has been judged to be worthy of a particular station. Under the doctrine of classes it is unnecessary to evaluate classes according to their individual worth. It is not even possible to meaningfully discuss any one class in isolation. Each class has a function in the part of the whole culture. So, each class is necessary to the health of the culture. Eliot thought that higher levels of culture should enrich the lower levels. He wrote: "Thus, the movement of culture would proceed in a kind of cycle, each nourishing the others."¹² Again, it should be emphasized that Eliot thought of culture as an organic, growing structure. If classes are a part of that structure, and some are more complex, they are in some sense higher and more valuable than the less sophisticated classes. Eliot did not claim that the upper class was the one organ of society whose importance should be emphasized. He wrote:

Rather it is a plea on behalf of a form of society in which an aristocracy should have a peculiar and essential function, as peculiar and essential as the function of any other part of the society. What is important is a structure of society in which there will be, from 'top' to 'bottom,' a continuous gradation of cultural levels: it is important to remember that we should not consider the upper levels as possessing more culture than the lower, but as representing a more conscious culture and a greater specialization of culture.¹³

It is important to notice that "top" and "bottom" are in quotations. In order for the classes to be strictly equal, they would have to have the same function. In any organic structure which has parts which function differently, some parts will be more complex than others. The higher classes are more complex, and, in a sense, "higher" than other components. But each class has its peculiar and essential function. So, the worth of each part is emphasized.

However, one major criticism of the doctrine of classes is that it adds impetus to discrimination on the basis of mere prejudice. In every culture, different groups have varying status. The warriors may rank highest in one culture, while the priests are more highly valued in another system. Other groups are much lower in terms of social status. These groups are sometimes looked down on because of what they do. But not only vocational groups like shoe-blacks or garbage collectors, are low ranking. Other racial and sexual groups are stigmatized in the same way. This is the major problem with the doctrine of classes. Although no one really wants to belong to a world of identical persons, it seems unbearable that some people only conceive the child while others have to labor through birth. Even more vexing is the social system that demands that the ones who bear the child, bear the majority of dirty work of rearing the child. This is a matter of tradition and a matter of

class. It is outrageous that a vast majority of people of color are found in the lower classes. Even if the lower classes were not those who failed to be elite, but those who are born into a certain style of life, it seems inappropriate that differences in lifestyle be determined by differences of sex or race. Why is this any worse than inequality due to the advantages of birth? It is worse because this difference is something that we as a society could prevent, at least to some extent.

This question can be addressed, not in terms of justice or rights, but rather in terms of the health of the culture. Eliot's view is that some cultures incorporate more diversity without sacrificing their unit. Now, if each class could be more integrated in terms of sexual and racial attributes of its members, it could incorporate more diversity without sacrificing its unity. But the connectional power must be sufficiently accommodating so that it will not be sacrificed as different persons diversify the group. If the only thing that unifies a class is a hatred of another group, then no members of the hated group could be incorporated into the class without sacrificing the solidarity of the class. The Ku Klux Klan, for example, does not have a unifying principle capable of accommodating a racial diversity of its members. But, the members of Uncle Tom's Cabin could integrate members of other races into their circle without sacrificing their cohesion. This is because their

blackness is not the principle that unifies them. They are unified by their particular style of Christian faith. When a class has a worthy unifying principle, it can accommodate a great diversity of people, thereby enriching itself.

It is not necessarily the case that the doctrine of classes will lead to systematic discrimination on the basis of race or sex. Racial and sexual prejudices are not necessarily eliminated by the doctrine of elites either, since the elite in power can continually suppress minorities by setting a criterion for success in a certain way. The doctrine of classes could theoretically exist with a mixture of different races and sexes at each level. Unfortunately, the problem of discrimination against minorities, although not unique to the doctrine of classes, is a stumbling block for those who advocate the class system.

The Benefit of Unity

In a paper entitled, "On the Place and Function of the Clerisy," Eliot compared the doctrine of classes and the doctrine of elites in several ways. A way of contrasting the two systems was: "One of the chief merits of class is that it is an influence for stability; one of the chief merits of the clerical elite is that it is an influence for change."¹⁴ The doctrine of elites is attractive to those who seek reformation. Historically,

certain classes had privileges granted by birth and inaccessible to others because of blood. Such an establishment secures certain traditions and safeguards culture so that change, when it occurs, happens slowly. The doctrine of elites would create a situation where transformation would be rapid and continuous since those who were the most meritorious would be superceded often. A new person would come along to break the record and beat the champion. Such a set-up would result in increasing distance between people. People would be changing associations as they perfected their skills and moved up the ranks of elites. There would not be the time in interpersonal history to form ties with their co-workers. But at least the social mobility would allow the possibility of the improvement or progress of individuals.

If anyone could be sure which changes brought about progress or which direction progress should take, the system of elites would be more inviting. As it is, the continual turnover of elites would likely be a futile repetition of one set of problems following another. Besides, Eliot thought an elite "will tend to establish itself as a class."¹⁵ When people in the elite are unwilling to accept their replacement and surrender the benefits of their position, they will seek ways to maintain the benefits of the position. In this way, the elite acts as a class, although it no longer functions appropriately. Eliot wrote:

But an elite which thus transforms itself, tends to lose its function as elite, for the qualities by which the original members won their position, will not all be transmitted equally to their descendants.¹⁶

In practice, the doctrine of elites is likely to be more detrimental than helpful, since it espouses the myth of equal opportunity but fails to deliver positions on the basis of merit alone.

Another harmful by-product of the doctrine of elites is the intense competition encouraged by the system. Such a society would result in increasing distance between persons, since every person interested in the same position would be pitted against each other. It would be alienating because one would always be competing and would be required to rise above family and friends in order to succeed. Eliot wrote:

A man is born a member of a class, but becomes a member of an elite by virtue of individual superiority developed by training; he does not thereby cease to be a member of the class into which he was born, nevertheless, he is partially separated from the other members of his class who are not members of the same elite.¹⁷

Eliot spoke of three senses of "culture": culture associated with the individual, with the group or class, and with the whole society. The doctrine of elites does away with culture on the level of the group or class. A person does not associate with members of his elite enough to have intimacy with them. Because of this, the individual has no home within his culture. He has no way

of fitting in. The doctrine of elites "posits an atomic view of society."¹⁸ This is why the doctrine of elites wrecks havoc with culture, since the whole culture cannot be given to the individual except through classes. As Eliot said, "The unit of class is family," and "The unit of the elite is the individual."¹⁹ But the individual in isolation can have no real worth and is hopelessly lost in meaninglessness. Individuals need belief in something other than their own success or pleasure, and so they need ties to other people. The doctrine of elites does not provide a framework for personal ties to develop.

The elites, in consequence, will consist solely of individuals whose only common bond will be their professional interest: with no social cohesion, with no social continuity. They will be united only by part, and that the most conscious part of their personalities; they will meet like committees.²⁰

Although elites may be the most effective way to accomplish a certain task, a culture cannot be built totally around elites without any classes.

In his book, T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism, Kojecky wrote:

Broadly, he argued that culture, that is, a people's imaginative, intellectual and spiritual life, was a living, growing thing which required it to be tended rather than generated.²¹

If a person is dissatisfied with his social position, he cannot successfully formulate a program to implement a corrective without creating new problems. If classes are an integral part of culture, we cannot do away with

classes without injuring our culture. In claiming that culture and equalitarianism do conflict, Eliot presents us with the choice of having "advantages of birth," or the problems of being without a culture.

In consideration of American culture it is difficult to determine which doctrine reigns currently. We do have a hierarchy of classes based partially on function. There is a little class mobility. But, for the most part, people end up in roles similar to those of their parents. Classes are ranked according to amounts of riches rather than the value of the work performed. In general, people admire the wealthy baseball player more than the nurse. Our heroes are the idle rich and not the people of hard work or sacrifice. Certainly we go by the doctrine of elites. We have all sorts of programs to encourage people to break out of the lower classes. This practice may be the saving grace of a few, but it also reinforces the idea that the people who remain in the lower classes deserve to be oppressed and should be unhappy in their situation. The people who are not able to achieve membership in the elites today, need not necessarily be in the lowest class under Eliot's view. There is nothing in Eliot's conception that requires that classes be divided on the basis of prejudice. He even said, "Nor should we cling to traditions as a way of asserting our superiority over less favored peoples."²²

But when Eliot strongly condemns the liberals, our immediate reaction is to brand him as a conservative. Like the term "liberal," conservative has become a bad word in certain circles. We tend to think of a conservative as a person who ignores the problem of minorities, among other things. But Eliot would not willingly be grouped with just any conservatives. He wrote, "Most defenders of tradition are mere conservatives, unable to distinguish between the permanent and the temporary, the essential and the accidental."²³ Since class divisions result primarily from accidents of birth, they are, in a sense, arbitrary. But, class distinctions do not have to be based on racial, ethnic, or sexual criteria. If hierarchy is natural rather than artificially enforced, then the hierarchy itself can enrich the culture. Weil wrote:

Hierarchism is a vital need of the human soul. It is composed of a certain veneration, a certain devotion toward superiors, considered not as individuals, nor in relation to the powers they exercise, but as symbols. What they symbolize is that realm situated high above all men and whose expression in this world is made up of the obligation owed to each man by his fellow men. A veritable hierarchy presupposes a consciousness on the part of the superiors of this symbolic function and a realization that it forms the only legitimate object of devotion among their subordinates. The effect of true hierarchism is to bring each one to fit himself morally into the place he occupied.²⁴

Eliot was in no way suggesting that we, as legislators, create laws to prevent people from moving from one

class to another. He was, however, suggesting that we as parents and friends, not indoctrinate each child to believe that he can be whatever he wants to be. With the amount of encouragement toward social mobility that we have in America, it is not surprising that parents want their children to succeed or advance up the social ladder. There is pressure to do that, resulting in children with great anxiety about being successful in order to please the ones they love. If remaining in one class, after having been born there, were the norm, this pressure would not haunt people. If someone came along who wanted very badly to do something different, Eliot would not be opposed to his doing that. However, Eliot was opposed to our teaching children that their identity and success in life rested in their ability to rise above their parents' social level.

It is common for people in our time to be defensive about their right to lead their own lives and expect others to mind their own business. The idea that liberty should have no limits except those that prevent harm to others, relies on a belief that harming others is wrong. But a further implication is that liberty is more precious than virtue, or that harming another person is the only possibility of failing to be virtuous. Given a broad enough definition of "harm," this might be an acceptable approach to ethics. But, what Socrates considered helping others would be considered harm by many.

It is clear then, that talk of harm and guidance, or talk of rights and duties, is always dependent on a particular understanding of the purpose of life. If one believes that the highest goal is justice, harm might mean something different than it will to one who thinks the highest good is pleasure. Although some would accuse Eliot of sacrificing liberty for virtue, it is not clear that he would be wrong to make such a sacrifice. But Eliot's hope is not to implement a political program. It is rather to suggest to persons how they might best use their freedom. Often, justice is defined as objectivity or disinterestedness. To be just, one is expected to be impartial. Eliot's justice requires connectionalism. It calls for a special kind of caring for each other, which demands compromise. According to this view, idiosyncrasy should not be valued at the expense of the community.

Notes

¹T. S. Eliot, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture, Christianity and Culture (New York, 1968), p. 109.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 117.

⁴T. S. Eliot, p. 89.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., p. 108.

⁸Ibid., p. 115.

⁹Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 107.

¹¹Ibid., p. 108.

¹²Ibid., p. 110.

¹³Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁴T. S. Eliot, "On the Place and Function of the Clerisy" (see the Appendix of R. Kojecky's T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism (New York, 1972), p. 241.

¹⁵T. S. Eliot, "Notes Toward the Definition of Culture," p. 117.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷T. S. Eliot, "On the Place and Function of the Clerisy," p. 248.

¹⁸T. S. Eliot, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," p. 109.

¹⁹T. S. Eliot, "On the Place and Function of the Clerisy," p. 240.

²⁰T. S. Eliot, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," p. 120.

²¹R. Kojecky, T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism (New York, 1972), p. 198.

²²T. S. Eliot, After Strange Gods (New York, 1934), p. 20.

²³Ibid., pp. 67-68.

²⁴S. Weil, The Need for Roots (New York, 1952), p. 19.

CHAPTER V

THE CLERICS

In many ways, the social criticism of T. S. Eliot is similar to Plato's design explained in The Republic.

Eliot himself made reference to this. He wrote:

In our ideal Platonic Republic, the country would be governed by those who can best write and speak its language. Those, in other words, who can best think in that language.¹

The ones who guide, according to Eliot's view, should be those who have experienced "a vision of the good." This traditional approach to social organizations seems shockingly un-American. Eliot wrote primarily about Western European culture during his own time. But, his reflections can be productively applied to other cultures as well. In many ways, America has the same problems as the culture about which Eliot wrote. They are ancient problems that occur in every society. People must decide how to deal with the problems of the individual who conflicts with the society. When an individual conflicts with the society, it is because he holds a different view of the meaning of life, or a different set of values than the ruling class. Whether to emphasize virtue or personal autonomy, whether to recognize the liberty of the

individual or the requirement of social stability, are questions for those who participate in the dialogue of "The Republic." Eliot's priorities are comparable to those of Plato. Eliot understood the vision of the good to be the vision of Christianity. His recommendations may outrage a modern political thinker, but his view is inspired and his appraisal is holistic.

Eliot's recommendation called for a society with both class and elite, "with some overlapping and constant interaction between them."² He was anxious that the society allow the gifted minds to exert a major influence. He wrote:

When I say 'dominated,' rather than 'governed' by elites, I mean that such a society must not be content to be governed by the right people; it must see that the ablest artists and architects rise to the top, influence taste, and execute the important public commissions; it must do the same by the other arts and by science; and above all, perhaps, it must be such that the ablest minds will find expression in speculative thought. The system must not only do all this for society in a particular situation-- it must go on doing it, generation after generation.³

One elite that Eliot defended is the clerisy. The clerisy must be an elite and not a class, according to Eliot.

He said:

It may be roughly defined as, at the top, those individuals who originate the dominant ideas, and alter the sensibility of their time; if we recognize sensibility as well as 'ideas,' we must include some painters and musicians, as well as writers.⁴

These clerics leaven the culture but they are not the only transmitters of culture.

The maintenance of culture is a function of the whole people, each part having its own appropriate share of responsibility; it is a function of classes rather than of elites.⁵

There must be those who listen and are influenced by the clerics. There must be those whose sensibilities are altered. The clerics also depend on their class, for stability and roots. However, Eliot said:

The cleric himself should be partly, though not altogether, emancipated from the class into which he was born; an outcast. He should, to some extent, be able to look upon and mix with, all classes as an outsider; just as he should, to some extent, get out of his own century.⁶

But the cleric is not to be without personal ties:

He should also have a supra-national community of interest with clerics of other nations; so as to work against nationalism and racialism (provincialism) as he does against class.⁷

As the clerics leave behind the bonds of their classes, they are liberated for a new community that is more universal and united by purer principles. It sounds as if Eliot almost suggested a kind of world culture shared by clerics. According to his critic, Kojecky, Eliot's guardians "are required to have seen a vision of the Good."⁸ Each class is unified by the religious principles of the whole society. But Eliot thinks the clerics of each society could be unified through higher, more essential principles. According to Eliot, the elite was

a way of sustaining orthodoxy in the culture. Without unification of all the ideologies that motivate the activities of a people, there is no culture. The clerics cannot ensure culture, but they can help to achieve the conditions necessary for culture. Eliot felt the isolation of different elites in his time to be partly responsible for the lack of unity. He said:

Let us hope that the next generation of men of letters will be able to cooperate towards the creation of a society, or if you prefer, a community: and I do not mean by a common political programme, either, but by their devotion to their art because its life is a part of the life of society.⁹

The clerics do not have special talents or merits without the accompanying extra responsibilities. The clerics are in some sense guardians of culture. The people in classes are also responsible for the culture. But, the clerics are conscious of their responsibility, to a higher degree. Like the guardians in Plato's Republic, the clerics are in a better position to judge than the common people are. In fact, one of the reasons it is to the benefit of all the classes that there are clerics, is that most people are unable to think adequately about their values. Eliot wrote:

The number of people in possession of any criteria for discriminating between good and evil is very small; the number of half-alive, hungry for any form of spiritual experience, or what offers itself as spiritual experience, high or low, good or bad, is considerable. My own generation has not served them well. Never has the printing press been so busy, and never has such varieties

of buncombe and false doctrine come from it. Woe unto the foolish prophets, that followed their own spirit, and have seen nothing.¹⁰

In one sense, the clerics that form the elite must function as a class, providing nurturing and care to each other. However, each individual cleric, as he breaks away from his hereditary class, must in some sense remain a rugged individual. The elite of clerics must not establish itself as a class since its offspring may not necessarily be gifted as a cleric. The transmission of culture requires that there be an elite, but also that there be classes. The clerics should be united in an integral whole, based on the common principle that is the cornerstone of culture. Clerics must always have a genuine interest in the culture as a whole.

A certain social structure that can facilitate healthy culture is a combination of classes and the elite. The masses should be at home in a class which has dignity and provides the opportunity for happiness. The clerics should function as an elite, naturally gravitating towards one another, but never completely losing their original home in some class. This arrangement allows the culture to organically improve itself, revealing and responding to orthodoxy, an eternal reality that sustains all people and fulfills the ontological need for meaning.

Notes

¹T. S. Eliot, Criterion (April, 1929), p. 378. As quoted by R. Kojecky, T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism (New York, 1972), p. 116.

²T. S. Eliot, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," Christianity and Culture (New York, 1968), p. 117.

³Ibid., p. 118.

⁴T. S. Eliot, "On the Place and Function of the Clerisy" (see the Appendix of R. Kojecky's T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism (New York, 1972), p. 243.

⁵Ibid., p. 244.

⁶Ibid., pp. 243-244.

⁷Ibid., p. 244.

⁸R. Kojecky, T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism (New York, 1972), p. 116.

⁹For a fuller discussion of this point, see R. Kojecky, p. 118.

¹⁰T. S. Eliot, After Strange Gods (New York, 1934), pp. 66-67.

CHAPTER VI

CRITICISM

Allen Austin, in his commentary on Eliot's social criticism, described the difference between having a system of elites, with lots of different elites, and having an elite. He said: "Eliot criticizes Karl Mannheim for equating elites and classes and for being concerned only with the elites rather than an elite (the integration of all elites)."¹ Having an elite of clerics who interact with each other is a way of allowing those with talent to enrich the culture and, at the same time, retain the homogeneous culture. The idea of the polis, or a holistic, unified style of life, is being promoted through an elite. Austin wrote:

The isolation of elites (political, philosophical, artistic, and scientific) should be overcome by a general circulation of ideas and by mutual influences, so that the scientist would be conversant with art, and the artist with science; thus, elites would constitute the elite.²

Eliot's suggestion that most people are not capable of ruling themselves well is not a popular one in our time. Resistance to that idea has been the source of some misunderstanding of Eliot. For example, Austin wrote: "Eliot seems to believe that his religious

objective--'virtue' in community and 'beatitude' for some--justifies authoritarianism."³ Eliot is certainly more congenial towards authoritarianism than some. But he is not suggesting a kind of legal program to institute classes and an elite of clerics. If by "authoritarianism" Austin means "legal sanctions," he is on the wrong track. Eliot is in favor of a heavy-handed way of showing care for other people by encouraging them not to play fast and free with their own liberty. And, the purpose of this is not to force Eliot's religious belief on others. Yet, on the other hand, since Eliot does believe in Christianity, he is in favor of returning to a system which respects and serves Christianity.

Austin exhibited another misunderstanding of Eliot when he said:

Eliot's concept of culture, of a society in which there is conflict between the parts but no change, fits well with his philosophy of resignation, which he opposes to the Romantic philosophy of aspiration.⁴

First of all, Eliot is not advocating a society in which there is no change. He specifically discussed the need for the updating and natural growth of orthodoxy and thus the culture itself. Secondly, Eliot is only in favor of resignation to a certain extent. He is certainly not in favor of the clerics or anyone else, for that matter, being resigned to a situation that lacks culture. The fact that he bothered to write about such things may

serve as some indication that he was not resigned to the state of culture in his time.

Yet, Austin is basically correct in asserting that Eliot believes in resignation rather than the "philosophy of aspiration."⁵ Eliot did not believe in continuous progress as a result of human aspiration. His position on this is very appropriate to his belief in Christianity. The fact that he was somewhat resigned exhibits the complacency of one who recognizes the need of a salvation beyond human capacity. The striving of man cannot produce the saving possibility that man desires. In reference to Eliot, Austin wrote:

The two fundamental principles of his religion are that man is essentially evil, disciplined only by institutions, and that this world, whatever its particular economic and political arrangements, is unimportant in relation to eternity.⁶

Only if we stress "in relation to eternity" can we agree that for Eliot, political arrangements are unimportant.

Eliot's whole social criticism described the importance of having certain structural characteristics of a society so that culture is possible. Yet, again, Austin is partially correct. Eliot, with the patience of Job, knew that he could not single-handedly bring about the changes required for culture to flourish. In that sense, he was resigned. As Austin said:

Eliot follows the advice he gives in After Strange Gods: he simply asserts the point of view that a stratified and authoritarian

society provides the only grounds for the advancement of culture.⁷

The healthy and natural advancement of culture is to the advantage of everyone in the society. So, in order to protect the transmission of culture, the best social structure is preferable to the maximum amount of individual power. An atomized society is the result of individual autonomy, but the individuals cannot be happy or good without culture.

Another helpful perspective on Eliot's social criticism can be found in Harrison's book, The Reactionaries. Harrison classifies Eliot as part of the "anti-democratic intelligentsia."⁸ He believes Eliot's interest in fascism to have stemmed from the influence of the Frenchman, Charles Maurras. Harrison said that Eliot:

. . . seemed to derive many of his opinions from the Frenchman. Maurras thought that the principle of liberty results in chaos; religious liberty means that everything is challenged; political and social liberty leads to the enfeeblement of the individual and to anarchy, for it destroys the ties of family and tradition and upsets the state. True liberty needs authority, which is the product of fixed rules, habit and discipline. In society, a system with fixed rules of this kind entails hierarchy and stratification--a Platonic pattern, with each individual gaining happiness from the proper exercise of his own function.⁹

Harrison himself was not interested in labeling Eliot as a fascist, although he was aware of such accusations.¹⁰ Rather, Harrison wanted to understand why Eliot and many of his contemporaries were attracted to fascism.

So Harrison looked to Eliot's poetry and plays and found illustrations of his social criticism therein. He wrote:

The people in Eliot's poetry are representative of the different social levels, and their relationships reveal broken social bonds in a society which is rapidly being undermined.¹¹

So, Eliot's interest in social stability is an interest in interpersonal relationships and traditional societal roles which solidify those relationships. "Eliot believes that, with the breakup of what is called the 'organic society,' 'organic' relationships between people have disappeared."¹² But, Eliot's interest in culture is not merely an interest in a social concern for persons. Rather, he is interested also in the achievements of culture, in the literature and art that manifests the culture. These achievements are the benefits of culture that are a part of the common good.

Therefore, Harrison is somewhat critical of Eliot because, while Eliot admired the achievements of the English people, he did not recognize increased liberation from tradition as a cause of those achievements. Harrison wrote: "But, he does not see that economic expansion, together with the rise of democracy and individualism, were what made these achievements possible."¹³ Harrison's criticism seems to be that Eliot is excessively optimistic about tradition and too naive about social structure. He wrote:

He speaks of social reform with contempt, and tries to define a society which will dispense with social reform, one that will be adequate, without any change, for all time. Such writing is bound to lack the appeal of immediate applicability. . . . He does not seem fully to understand the complex structure of modern society, or to recognize that there can be no going back.¹⁴

So, this criticism is like criticisms of Socrates' regime as specified in The Republic. Namely, it is not practicable and is utopian. Still, Harrison is sympathetic to Eliot's position because he understands the goals underlying Eliot's social criticism. Harrison wrote:

His position, with society in the state it is in today, is not untenable; if a man believes that great literature must continue to be written, whatever the cost to society, he will not feel that the position needs any other defense.¹⁵

Defense of Eliot's Position

Emphasizing the autonomy of individuals, whatever the cost to culture, destroys the traditional social structure to the disadvantage of all persons. Although the class system seems to encourage inequality and so injustice, that system is needed. Therefore, aristocracy is preferable to individualism because the goal of community--of the common good--justifies infringement upon individual liberty. So, we should reconsider the tendency to individualize political and religious authority.

A Modern interpretation of the teachings of Jesus demonstrates one reason that Western religion is becoming

less institutionalized. Consider the great commandment to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This places the responsibility for moral decision on the individual. Only you can determine how you would have others treat you. No priest or scripture can tell you that. In comparison to the Hebraic Law this simple directive can be adopted by the most common person. But obvious problems may result when people with perverted or sick desires put the commandment into action. It is certainly not clear exactly to what extent this commandment should replace the shared community. But, the result is a secularization or a movement of power away from the ecclesiastical order and into the hands of the individual. The individual is encouraged to declare his independence of the Christian community and even condemn it. This is closely linked with the change in belief from the idea of God saving or condemning nations, to the new idea of personal judgment. That kind of individualism is hazardous to the community.

However, certain individuals that Eliot called "clerics," are called to enrich the culture by transcending the class structure. Socrates is a good example of the type of person Eliot would recommend as a cleric. It is possible upon reading the "Apology" to receive the impression that Socrates was the most radical champion of individualism. It seems that he valued his own inclinations more than the tradition. He ignored the state's

recognition of certain gods because of his private experience with an inner voice. The personal perception of the voice took precedence over the community's tradition. It is true that the gods were known to speak to individuals, thus revealing things unknown to the community. But Socrates seemed to be deviating from the shared heritage in a way that was understood as heresy. Socrates would chastise and ostracize public leaders, even at the risk of causing chaos and anarchy. As the young rejected the leaders, revolution was a likely outcome. Socrates stirred up dissonance. He refused to lose confidence in his "personal mission" even when the society had decided that he must be mistaken about that mission. He was audacious and self-righteous and he would not be intimidated. He refused to compromise.

But it would be a mistake to think that Socrates was more concerned with his own virtue than that of the polis, or with his own wisdom as opposed to a shared wisdom. (It would be a mistake to think that he was rejected by the entire polis. After all, it was only a faction, a majority of voters at a particular time, which condemned him.) His mission was not to be concerned with the majority's view of virtue, but with the "culture" as a whole. The community should be modeled in the image of a virtuous man. Like an individual, it should be governed by the intellect and not the passions. So, Socrates refused to parade his family as beggars of

mercy during his trial. Like an individual, the community should strive to be virtuous rather than mighty. Socrates said a man should take care of himself first in order to become most good and most wise, before he took care of any of his interests, and the state should conform to this model of the individual. One interest of both man and a society is protection, or self-preservation. Socrates emphasized the idea that death is preferable to deceit. A threat to social stability is better than allowing the state to continue in iniquity. So, perhaps in the long run, Socrates was looking out for the community and not himself, since the "virtuous state" is his aim. Like a good cleric, Socrates' primary interest is the community rather than the individual.

Not everyone has the wisdom needed to be a cleric. So, not everyone should be so individualistic. Yet, the society needs clerics who guard the community. Therefore, these questions about whether or not Socrates was justified in upsetting the polis, the polis being the same thing as the culture, could be raised against Jesus, or Martin Luther, or any others whose lives have made dramatic impacts by criticizing tradition. Yet, while we might agree that some of these persons were justified in heeding their conscience even when it conflicted with the norms of their culture, other individual revolutionaries were not justified--Hitler being a good example.

Granted, there may be those who are called to special prophetic missions. But when we, in modern times, laud everyone who marches to the beat of a different drummer, the result is an intolerable relativism.

So, for the most part, people are not capable of changing tradition for the betterment of the culture. Moreover, most people need and desire stability and guidance. Certain individuals, however, have the insight to see ways to cultivate their society and enable the best things to flourish. In order to have a fertile culture, the masses with all their individual business must not get in the way of the clerics.

Although the class system has been accused of encouraging inequality, and hence injustice, it is the best system. This is due in part to the fact that equality cannot be conceived apart from sameness. Differences are a natural and good part of creation, and should not be foresaken to produce an artificial notion of justice. Yet, differences do not have to isolate people from each other, either. For example, classes, while diversifying, allow for the intimacy and direction to unite people in a group.

In conclusion, emphasizing the autonomy of individuals at the expense of community destroys the traditional social structure which preserves culture, and this process of secularization is disadvantageous to all persons. So, individuals need guidance to uncover their meaning

and identity. Furthermore, people need meaning because that is required for communication, and communication, because it is required for humanity. Some people need more security and others more liberty. People like Socrates are more self-conscious about their role in culture and so can serve as prophets or shepherds of the polis. So, everyone needs a metaphysical home in the world in order to be fully human. Eliot called these religious roots "culture." Culture is what makes life worth living. Culture depends on tradition in a broad sense. But no tradition can or should remain vital without changing and being revised. On the other hand, change must be limited to ensure the stability necessary for culture.

Notes

¹A. Austin, T. S. Eliot: The Literary and Social Criticism (Bloomington, Indiana, 1971), p. 83.

²Ibid., p. 83.

³Ibid., p. 81.

⁴Ibid., p. 88.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. 71.

⁷Ibid., p. 89.

⁸J. R. Harrison, The Reactionaries (London, 1966), p. 15.

⁹Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 17.

¹¹Ibid., p. 145.

¹²Ibid., p. 146.

¹³Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 157.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 160.

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VITA 2

Kathleen Shook Stephenson
Candidate for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Thesis: THE NEED FOR CULTURE: A STUDY OF T. S. ELIOT'S
SOCIAL CRITICISM

Major Field: Philosophy

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Sep-
tember 18, 1959, the daughter of Mrs. Sue Owen
and Dr. Marcus Boyd Shook.

Education: Graduated from Mulhall-Orlando High
School, Orlando, Oklahoma, in May, 1977; received
Bachelor of Arts degree from Oklahoma State Uni-
versity, Stillwater, Oklahoma, in 1981, with a
major in Philosophy; completed requirements for
the Master of Arts degree at Oklahoma State Uni-
versity in May, 1984.

Professional Experience: Employed by Oklahoma State
University as a graduate teaching assistant from
August, 1981, to May, 1984.