

The Cross and the Wheel: An Introductory Study of the Merging of Eastern Religions and Christianity in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* manifests three main religious influences: Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, systems of thought commonly perceived as incompatible among themselves. However, Eliot's most outstanding achievement is to present such belief systems as parts of a whole instead of divergent forces in the poem.

Key words: Eliot, *Four Quartets*, religion, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity

Resumen

Cuatro Cuartetos, de T.S. Eliot, manifiesta tres influencias religiosas principales: el cristianismo, el budismo y el hinduismo, sistemas de pensamiento que comúnmente se perciben como incompatibles entre sí. Sin embargo, el más grande logro de Eliot en el poema es presentar dichos sistemas religiosos como partes de un todo y no como fuerzas divergentes.

Palabras claves: Eliot, *Cuatro Cuartetos*, religión, Budismo, Hinduismo, Cristianismo

Religious Influences in *Four Quartets*

Christianity, as manifested by Saint John of the Cross' concept of the dark night of the soul, is clearly visible in the *Four Quartets*. However, this religious system is not the only non-poetical influence for Eliot. Both Hinduism and Buddhism exerted a powerful influence over early Christianity and the presence of ideas derived from such religious systems is also present in Eliot's writing, implicitly in some cases, explicitly in others. As a matter of fact, Eliot had a strong connection to the East, as his participation in gatherings involving Eastern philosophies shows.¹ Furthermore, the Christian dark night of the soul, as manifested in Saint John's writings, presents several characteristics that have to be taken into account, for they represent the link between Christianity and both Hinduism and Buddhism as religious systems. Among such traits one has to mention three elements: Detachment of all earthly matters and goods, detachment of the self, and awareness of the deceit of the world.

A strong, conscious rejection of material goods is found among the main teachings of early Christianity: It gave birth to asceticism and stands as one of the practices that the first Christian monks cultivated as a virtue. It was also incorporated into the priesthood as one of the vows and no Christian would argue that, in order to be closer to God, one has to get rid of greed. Along with this willful desire to avoid wealth comes disaffection with earthly matters, that is, any Christian who wants to follow a pious life has to avoid involvement with the secular world, for activities of that sort demand effort and one's concentration, which should be used to get closer to God, shifts to money. Consequently, the early monks and hermits decided to separate themselves from the world in order to reach their ideal.

Moreover, Jesus himself propagated the idea of rejection of material goods with his teachings, for he stated: "Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? Or, What shall we drink? Or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after these things do the Gentiles seek) for your heavenly Father knoweth that you have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mat. 6.32, 33). Thus, the concept of devotion involved rejection of everything that could be perceived as earthly: Food, clothes, property, and wealth. Later on, Paul reaffirmed this idea in his second letter to Timothy: "Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier" (2 Tim. 6.32). In other words, devotion includes the obligation of suffering, but this suffering is a product of detaching oneself from all that might be considered basic for existing in this world. After all, Christians were supposed to believe that their existence on this earth was transitory, for their lives would continue in Heaven.

The ideal Christian must not only avoid involvement with earthly matters and look upon goods disdainfully, but he must also abandon another significant

element: His own self. The only effective method for opening oneself totally to the godhead is letting go of one's own personality so that the very nature of the godhead can overflow the person. If the subject is no longer the subject, then he becomes an extension of the godhead: It is the godhead acting upon the life of an individual. This seems to be the idea at work when Paul says that his actions are no longer performed by his will, but by God's through Christ: "I am crucified with Christ: Nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2.20). Losing oneself in the godhead is the key for living a Christian life and thus the Christian is placed in a dichotomy: s/he has to live on earth doing the will of God, but knowing that the world and everything that it offers are illusory goals that make him/her miss the real target, the kingdom of God.

Saint John of the Cross presented all of these teachings in his writings. As a matter of fact, it is from these teachings that he formed the first element of the dark night of the soul: Austerity, which encompasses negation of earthly matters and the self, and losing one's individuality in order to be able to enter the ultimate reality: To be absorbed by God. However, achieving such a goal is not easy, for the Christian has to take the path of emptiness. As Saint John himself put it: "*Qué aprovecha y que vale delante de Dios lo que no es amor de Dios? El cual no es perfecto si no es fuerte y discreto en purgar el gozo de todas las cosas, poniéndole sólo en hacer la voluntad de Dios*" (Subida 3.30). In other words, this perfect love will make all other goals in life fall away until the only one that remains is God. After all, negation is the spine of Saint John's system of beliefs which, according to Federico Ruiz, makes no sense without it: "*La negación es la columna del sistema sanjuanista. Ocupa un lugar irremplazable y contribuye eficazmente a la armonía sanjuanista*" (414).

Eliot, a Catholic who later converted to Anglicanism, also perceives negation as one of the fundamental principles of the dark night of the soul. In *Four Quartets*, the dark night of the soul manifests itself more visibly in the third section of each quartet and becomes paramount in "The Dry Salvages". However, this Christian concept overlaps with the teachings of two Eastern systems of faith: Buddhism and Hinduism.

Buddhism and Hinduism in the Dark Night of the Soul

The basic principles of the Christian dark night of the soul have been borrowed from Buddhism and Hinduism. Eliot not only mentions these religions in *Four Quartets*, but also articulates a poetic discourse in which they converge by exposing the points of intersection between Christian beliefs and the ones found in Hinduism and Buddhism. In other words, the similarities between the controlling ideas of the Christian dark night and the principles of the religions mentioned above will help to enrich one's understanding of the *Four Quartets*.

Both Buddhism and Hinduism are directed by a series of principles that might seem strange to a Christian. These main beliefs, however, are also found in Christianity, and they permeate the basic thought of Christians. Suffering

and impermanence, the wheel of birth, the *maya* and craving, and the still point are the principles that overlap in the three systems of faith to a certain extent. In a way, those principles constitute the section in which the three religions converge and, hence, they are significant for understanding Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

1. Suffering and Impermanence

Hinduism and Buddhism agree that the only permanent element of existence is suffering; everything else is transitory. In the words of P. S. Sri, "The fundamental perceptions of Vedanta as well of Buddhism are those of impermanence (*anithya*) of ephemerality of all phenomena and of the universality of suffering (*dukkha*). These insights are, of course, universal" (17). This impermanence is applied both to subject and object, which results in a complete dissolution of reality, which, in turn, leaves the person in a state of suffering: "Impermanence, when fully grasped, is applicable to the perceiver as well as to the objects perceived; the seer and the seen are both ephemeral, so that individuality or ego is best an illusion. Suffering, when fully understood, is found to be inseparable from existence in the world of phenomena" (17). This perception is rooted in the everyday experience of the world of phenomena, where all the elements include suffering: Death and birth, growth and decay, hope and despair, for instance.

In Christianity, the word suffering echoes throughout both the Old and the New Testament. For instance, the book of *Job* depicts suffering in all its pre-eminence, and it is also presented as a component of the life of the wise in *Ecclesiastes: The Preacher*, as the writer of the *Ecclesiastes* calls himself, comments on the dull existence of the wise. He states that "vanity of vanities, all is vanity" and "And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this is also vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief: And he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (Ecc 1.2, 17, 18). The Preacher is certainly aware that, after a long pursuit, the goal seems dull and empty, and that the effort seems futile. Moreover, he agrees with the idea that everything is impermanent.

2. The Wheel of Birth

Humanity is bound to the world of time and circumstance. This never-ending change that occurs in the world leaves the individual in a position of suffering, for as long as the person is within the wheel of change, s/he will experience the constant recurrence of suffering in his or her existence. According to Buddha:

The Wheel of Existence is without known beginning...
 The Wheel of Existence is empty with a twelvefold emptiness...
 Respecting the Wheel of Existence is to be understood that
 the two factors ignorance and desire are its roots.

Ignorance, desire and attachment form the round of the corruptions...
 And it is through these three that this Wheel of Existence is
 Said to have three rounds...it is incessant...it revolves. (qtd. in Sri 35)

When a person binds himself or herself to this world of change, s/he is trapped by fate. In other words, if one embraces the wheel, one has to spin on it forever, revolving and passing from a state of happiness that is illusory to another of sorrow, continuously. This symbolism is strongly associated with reincarnation in Eastern religions, for the eternal recurrence of existence has no beginning or end and, thus, the person is forced to endure this unceasing process of birth and death.

How is it possible to relate the wheel of existence that is so familiar for Eastern religions to Christianity, a system of faith that explicitly states that "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9.27) and, in doing so, closes the door to reincarnation? Yet the symbolism of the wheel of existence is not absolutely alien to Christianity, for it is present in the first chapter of *Ecclesiastes*: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: And there is no new thing under the sun" (9). Moreover, W.R. Inge argues that the early Christian era was permeated with the realization that the chief aim of mankind should be "to escape from the 'weary wheel' of earthly existence and to find rest in the bosom of the eternal" (qtd. in Sri 36). In addition, the symbolism of the Wheel is also found in the New Testament: The phrase in the third chapter and verse six of *James* "setteth on fire the course of nature" is a free translation of the Greek word meaning wheel, for the same word that is translated as "course" is translated as "wheel" in the Spanish version: "*E inflama la rueda de la creación.*"

Eliot suggests the idea of the Wheel of Birth in "East Coker" by repeating: "In my beginning is my end" (EC I. 1, 14). The first section of this poem follows a discourse that is similar to the words of the Preacher in the *Ecclesiastes* and that establish a cycle of existence.

3. The *Maya* and Craving

According to Buddhism and Hinduism, the root of the never-ending suffering that human beings experience in the world of constant flux is craving. The Japanese, for example, observe at the end of the year a Buddhist custom in which they are supposed to get rid of twelve desires in order to be happy the following year. In Hinduism, the words of Krishna reveal the same idea: "All is clouded by desire; as the fire by smoke, as a mirror by dust, as an unborn baby by its covering. / Wisdom is clouded by desire, the ever-present enemy of the wise, / desire in its innumerable forms, which like a fire cannot find satisfaction" (qtd. in Sri 60). The Buddha talks about thirst for sensual pleasures, for existence and becoming, or even for the termination of life. Such a thirst for life, for the transient objects that the world offers, was also strongly discouraged by Christ

and his disciples in the Gospels. Craving, and its result, suffering, is another connecting point between the two Eastern religions and Christianity. When one is enslaved by the flux of desires, without being able to realize that they produce endless affliction, one is then blindly trapped in the revolutions of the wheel of existence; it is the ignorance mentioned by the Buddha.

However, not to look for a way out of this bondage implies that the individual is lost in the mist of the *maya*. *Maya* is the world of appearances, the illusion that the world is real, which hence justifies the craving. P. S. Sri explains it this way:

Our perception of an independent material world of objects, persons, and processes is grounded in a pervasive error. We take the unreal for the real and the real for unreal. This is borne out by the famous analogy of the snake and the rope. We often *mis*-take a coil of rope for a snake in the dark; but, on closer examination, we discover it to be only a coil of rope. Our everyday world of appearances may be likened to a snake, and it seems very real to us; we are in the darkness of ignorance caught in the web of illusion. When we are illumined, we experience the truth; the snake-appearance vanishes into the underlying reality of the rope. This does not mean that the world of appearances is non-existent; the world, according to Sankara, 'is and is not.' (69)

Ignorance becomes the veil that conceals the very nature of truth; it is, as in a trick by a magician, the key for creating what people believe to be there. The illusory creation, as long as people believe it, exists, even though what we perceive, according to our senses, is quite different from what is real.

Human beings, thus, are confronted by a paradox: The world in which they live is and is not. In a state of ignorance, our perception is veiled, and we believe that we are experiencing the real world, whereas we are actually living in an illusion. Consequently, if a person takes the illusory world for real, and then s/he wants something from this deceitful world, s/he is binding himself or herself to suffering, or in the words of the preacher in *Ecclesiastes*, s/he is trying to catch the wind. Another analogy that explains this is that of the thirsty traveler who, in the desert, runs to what seems to be a not-too-distant oasis, which ends up being just a mirage that always remains at the same distance, no matter how much the person runs towards it.

In Christian terms, craving is what Saint John of the Cross defines as the *apetitos* that must be purged in the dark night of the soul, whereas *maya* is the deception of the world. For Saint John, all appetites go against God, for they prevent the person from being able to get closer to Him and chain the individual to a perennial state of suffering. Appetites represent a waste of energy that should be devoted to God. On the other hand, *Maya* is the beginning of the explanation that the saint provides as his justification for the dark night of the soul: It is worthless to gain the world of illusion, for it means to lose one's soul in the darkness of the apparent. Hence, it is the duty of the Christian to penetrate the illusion, to seek what is real.

4. The Still Point

The only hope for the person is to free himself from *maya*, which is what chains him to the wheel of existence. This is no easy task, however, for everything is *maya*: It is timeless, for time only occurs within it; unthinkable, for all thought is subject to it and hence, conditioned by it; indescribable, for all concepts and even language result from it. Thus, in order to escape *maya*, the person has to go beyond it. According to Eastern religions, underlying this world of division and appearances there is an indivisible, unchanging reality (called *Brahman* in Hinduism). Once the person experiences *Brahman*, *maya* vanishes like a mirage. The person, in experiencing it, ceases to be an individual—for *Brahman* has no divisions. Consequently, the ego is but illusion, for it results from the ignorance resulting from *maya*. When this enlightenment comes, *maya* is destroyed (everything that is perceived as separate) in the light of purity and wholeness that is *Brahman* and the state of *Nirvana* is achieved. *Nirvana* is nothing but freedom from the wheel of existence. In other words, it is going back to *Brahman*.

Eliot's symbolism of the "still point" is derived from the idea of the wheel of birth that revolves constantly. In the turning world of the wheel, that is movement, division, suffering, and noise, there is a quiet, unmoving, indivisible point in the center. No one who is caught up in the movement of the wheel is ever capable of getting to the still point, for the never-ceasing revolutions prevent him from distinguishing the unmoving center. That is, *maya* hides the still point, the *Brahman*, which explains why a person who lives in the illusion cannot see the reality.

In Eastern religions, *Nirvana* is only achieved after the individual has gained the wisdom that is needed in order to transcend *maya*. Most of the time, the illusion is so strong that it becomes impossible to break during a lifetime; hence, reincarnation becomes the answer for the question of how an individual gains such wisdom: Once the person has lived several times, the repetitive experience can make the person become aware of the deception of the world and, thus, s/he starts discovering an existence depending upon an illusion. After several lives of suffering, the individual (who might not remember a previous life, but such a memory is irrelevant anyway) wonders why s/he is bound to sorrow and sees the world as a place of woe. This discovery of the wheel of birth enables him or her to renounce aspirations, reject the craving, which prepares the stage for the ultimate enlightenment to come: The state of *nirvana* and the awareness of *Brahman*.

Whether an individual is able to experience *Brahman* or not is a rather pertinent question. Even though some currents of thought claim that this experience is actually out of reach for all individuals, the eighth-century philosopher Sankara,² maintains that it can be concretely experienced by a person but, when that happens, the person loses his individuality. Furthermore, in order to experience *Brahman*, the individual must first reject his or her own ego, which is the key for discovering the still point: Only through self-denial can the craving be stopped and only through the suppression of the ego can the individual's selfish

motivations be replaced by a broadened consciousness that links the person to all living creatures and that allows him/her to break from the wheel.

Eliot is attracted to the assertion that individuals are able to experience *Brahman* for two main reasons. First, the Christian writers that Eliot drew upon, such as Dante, Saint Augustine, and concretely Saint John of the Cross, declare unequivocally that a person can be united with the godhead, which will set him/her free from the world and its traps. Second, Eliot, being a professed Anglo-Catholic, is unwilling to declare that human beings are unable to access God and be one with Him, thus contradicting the most basic teachings of the Church. However, in assimilating the idea of *Brahman*, Eliot must have struggled with a concept that is part of the Eastern conception of the still point and that has no room in Christianity, *karma*. This word can be understood as “act,” “deed,” or “work,” and can be defined as an action that inevitably produces an impression in the actor and determines the action that is to come. According to Sri, “since we usually act out of self-interest in order to attain some end or fruit, such egocentric acts bind us to other acts, either immediately or at some future moment; this implies a series of births, deaths, and rebirths for us, the actors. Our own *karma* thus creates our bondage to the world” (Sri 108). Due to the fact that reincarnation has no validity in Christianity, the concept of *karma* has to be adapted to fit into the Christian paradigm. The method for doing so is Saint John’s concept of passions: All the earthly interests that chain the person to an existence without the possibility of experiencing the plenitude of the godhead later on become sins. If it is true that in Christian terms those passions do not cause a person to live several lives, they do prevent the individual from discovering the deception of the world and, thus, have an equivalent function of that of the Eastern *karma*.

The other disjunctive issue that Eliot probably faced is related to accessing the still point. In Buddhism, the still point is attained by conscious, exhaustive individual work. Eliot seems to be attracted to this idea of struggling in order to get to the center of the wheel; however, this idea contradicts the Christian theology of Grace. God cannot be accessed by human will alone, that is, all human efforts to get closer to God are valueless, for it is impossible for the flawed creature to enter the presence of the pure, perfect Creator. Hinduism, nevertheless, opposes the Buddhist concept of the still point and makes it more accessible to the Christian since it argues that God reveals himself to the person as well, which can be reconciled with the concept of Grace. Eliot seems to be torn in two directions, and in some instances appeals to individual effort to get to the still point, whereas sometimes the poet mentions that passivity is the key. One distinctive point that Eliot stresses is the possibility of having a glimpse of the still point, but beholding it in its plenitude is something that is reserved for people having a particularly high spiritual stature: If most individuals are able to have hints of the reality of the *Brahman*, only saints can absolutely experience the ultimate reality, or God. As Sri states it: “Eliot does uphold the possibility of attaining the reality of the still point, the silent centre around which all the world turns. He even goes so far as to say that most of us are vouchsafed about the nature of the ultimate reality although we are often incapable of the total apprehension possible to a saint”(71).

Saint John's apprehension is, precisely, the dark night of the soul. There, his depiction of how the individual, in cooperation with divine grace, is enabled and becomes united with God serves as the inspiration for Eliot's the *Four Quartets*.

The third section of *The Dry Salvages* contrasts with the third sections of the previous and the following poems; whereas the references to Christianity are very explicit in the third section of both *East Coker* and *Little Gidding*, *The Dry Salvages* often refers to Hinduism. It is also possible to perceive this contrast within the poem, for the second and fourth sections of *The Dry Salvages* are more direct in their dealing with Christianity. The *Bhagavad-Gita*, one of the sacred books of Hinduism, is the Eastern source that Eliot uses. However, the idea of detachment presents a thematic connection between the third section of *The Dry Salvages* and Saint John of the Cross.

The whole third section of *The Dry Salvages* deals with the episode in which Krishna, disguised as the charioteer of Arjuna, tells him to march to battle without thinking about the results. The poem starts with a speaker pondering the significance of this event. Montezanti believes that the way in which the poem starts shows Saint John's influence since Eliot employs the saint's writing style: "Por otra parte, así como el remedo de las paradojas de San Juan de la Cruz se enmarca en una presentación que parece dudar del mismo acto elocutivo, también ahora el poeta toma una cierta distancia de su fuente, al decir 'sometimes I wonder if that is what Krishna meant'" (Montezanti 104). The question refers to the reasons Krishna gives Arjuna to fight since Arjuna, upon seeing all the people that he loved marching against him, decides not to use his weapons to harm them. Among other reasons, Krishna explains to him that the warrior's destiny is to fight, that fighting for a good reason does not add any bad *karma*, and that he should not worry about the consequences of his actions, for he is a warrior and that is his *dharma*. All the explanations that Krishna gives deal with the idea of avoiding reincarnation. In Hinduism, reincarnation is a negative process that takes place because the person attaches himself/herself to the wheel of existence, the material world. Although Eliot never accepted the idea of reincarnation, he is using the concept to portray how the Christian dark night of the soul works.

The Dry Salvages opens with images of the tube once again, but this time the poet's main concern is detachment from the idea of the future:

I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant—
 Among other things—or one way of putting the same thing:
 That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender
 spray
 Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret,
 Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never
 been opened.
 And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back.
 You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure,
 That time is no healer: The patient is no longer here.
 When the train starts, and the passengers are settled

To fruit, periodicals and business letters
 (And those who saw them off have left the platform)
 Their faces relax from grief into relief,
 To the sleepy rhythm of a hundred hours.
 Fare forward, travellers! not escaping from the past
 Into different lives, or into any future;
 You are not the same people who left that station
 Or who will arrive at any terminus,
 While the narrowing rails slide together behind you (*DS III. 1-20*)

Lines eight to ten present the first allusion to the dark night of the soul. The paradox of the two ways (going down in order to go up) is also found in the teachings of Saint John of the Cross. In addition, the poem provides the poet's new insight about the dark night. Even though the reference takes the reader back to the image of medical care in the third section of *East Coker*, line ten presents the conclusion of the episode in the hospital: The patient dies. Since dying in the paternal care is the objective in the previous poem, one can understand that the poet has finally seen the future of the soul pass through the dark night.

It is possible to assert that the dark night in *The Dry Salvages* has given the poet a powerful insight: Acceptance. Passengers of trains, who grieve about leaving their loved ones behind, have to accept departure as a fact and they slowly surrender to the idea of separation, the logical consequence (*DS III. 11-15*). In doing so, the poet recommends detachment as the way to survive separation: "Fare forward, travellers! not escaping from the past / Into different lives, or into any future" (*DS III. 16-17*). Such a recommendation resembles Krishna's words about transcending the material in the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

Arjuna said: What are the characteristics of those who have transcended the three Gunas, and what is their conduct? How does one transcend these three Gunas, O Lord Krishna?

The Supreme Lord said: One who neither hates the presence of enlightenment, activity, and delusion nor desires for them when they are absent; and

The one who remains like a witness; who is not moved by the Gunas, thinking that the Gunas only are operating; who stands firm and does not waver; and

The one who depends on the Lord and is indifferent to pain and pleasure; to whom a clod, a stone, and gold are alike; to whom the dear and the unfriendly are alike; who is of firm mind; who is calm in censure and in praise; and

The one who is indifferent to honor and disgrace; who is the same to friend and foe; who has renounced the sense of doership; is said to have transcended the Gunas.

The one who offers service to Me with love and unswerving devotion transcends Gunas, and becomes fit for realizing Brahman.

Because, I am the abode of the immortal and eternal Brahman, of everlasting Dharma, and of the absolute bliss. (14. 21-27)

Detachment in the *Bhagavad-Gita* has the objective of transcending time and becoming united to the divinity. The person who attaches himself or herself to the temporal is cursed with the wheel of birth, reincarnation, which is commonly perceived as a journey of the soul. Traveling is significant in the third section of *The Dry Salvages*; there are several images of voyages. Since the images of voyage include the movement through the sea, the idea of traveling is also expanded:

And on the deck of the drumming liner
 Watching the furrow that widens behind you,
 You shall not think 'the past is finished'
 Or 'the future is before us.'
 At nightfall, in the rigging and the aerial,
 Is a voice descanting (though not to the ear,
 The murmuring shell of time, and not in any language) (III. 18-24)

The poem illustrates the principle of spiritual awareness, the trip in darkness, with the subtle voice that murmurs in the ear of the person. Its words become particularly significant when considering that the voice strips the soul from its final possessions, the last two rags that it uses to cover itself and separate it from the godhead. The first one is the realization that, by undergoing the dark night, one's life cannot remain the same: "Fare forward, you who think that you are voyaging; / You are not those who saw the harbour / Receding, or those who will disembark. / Here between the hither and the farther shore / While time is withdrawn, consider the future / And the past with an equal mind" (*DS* III. 19-24). The last possession that the person treasures is undoubtedly attachment to life. Therefore, the voice speaks about the fear of death, but it does so not with the intent of soothing the soul with sweet thoughts about the avoidance of death. Paradoxically, the words instruct one to embrace it:

At the moment which is not of action or inaction
 You can receive this: 'On whatever sphere of being
 The mind of a man may be intent
 At the time of death' - that is the one action
 (And the time of death is every moment)
 Which shall fructify in the lives of others:
 And do not think of the fruit of action.
 Fare forward.

O voyagers, O seamen,
 You who came to port, and you whose bodies
 Will suffer the trial and judgment of the sea,
 Or whatever event, this is your real destination.
 So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna

On the field of battle.

Not fare well,
But fare forward, voyagers. (*DS III. 25-40*)

The greatest sacrifice that the person has to make in order to merge himself or herself with God is precisely to abandon his or her will to be alive. In “the moment which is not of action or inaction,” the dark night of the soul, the person comes to the realization that his life must mean nothing to him/her, for clinging to life reveals a self-centered mentality. Eliot claims that the only concern of the person has to be death, for it is the only constant in people’s lives. The true Christian, therefore, should not grow fearful of death, for it is the threshold of the union with God, as Saint John states:

Es de saber que la muerte natural de las almas que llegan a este estado, aunque la condición de su muerte, en cuanto al natural, es semejante a las demás, pero en la causa y en el modo de la muerte hay mucha diferencia, porque si las otras mueren a muerte causada por enfermedad o por longura de días, éstas, aunque en enfermedad mueran o en cumplimiento de edad, no les arranca el alma sino algún ímpetu o encuentro de amor mucho más subido que los pasados y más poderoso y valeroso, pues pudo romper la tela y llevarse la joya del alma.

Así, la muerte de semejantes almas es muy suave y muy dulce, más que les fue la vida espiritual toda su vida; pues que mueren con más subidos ímpetus y encuentros sabrosos de amor, siendo ellas como el cisne, que canta más suavemente cuando se muere. (qtd. in Ruiz 670)

Saint John’s idea of death is deeply rooted in the example of acceptance set by Jesus. He himself had to accept death in the crucial moment of his betrayal in the garden. Although Peter tried to defend him with his sword at the time of his arrest, Jesus said: “Put up thy sword into the sheath: The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” (John 18. 11). This attitude towards death can be explained in the spiritual awareness that develops during the dark night of the soul. Saint Paul develops this idea when talking about the passion of Christ: “And being found in the fashion of man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him” (Phil 2. 8, 9). In the dark night, the person comes to understand that death makes it possible for the individual who seeks God to become one with Him. Death does not terminate the life of love of the Christian but merges him/her with the object of his/her affection, God: “So when this corruptible shall be put on incorruption, and this mortal shall be put to immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” (1 Co. 15. 55). The fruit of death is consequently union with God for the person who has undergone the dark night. However, the human mind cannot embrace death easily because it is constantly preoccupied with the material, and the

two bonding ropes of the material are regret and worry. These bonds entangle the soul by restraining the mind and fixing it to the temporal. A mind that is saturated by the thoughts of actions cannot concentrate on God, an idea that is suggested in *The Dry Salvages*: “And do not think of the fruit of action. / Fare forward” (DS III. 38, 39). Therefore, it is possible to see how the Christian idea of embracing death, the last teaching of Saint John of the Cross, is also present in the poem.

There is another religious teaching that is also significant in *The Dry Salvages*, but this teaching comes from the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Since regret ties a person to the wheel of birth, one has to forget about the consequences of one’s actions in order to be able to be free. This teaching has its roots in the idea that, when one has regrets, the mind is divided between reality and illusion and becomes ultimately distracted from the truth. Thus, a self-conscious person has to elevate himself above such a state, as the *Bhagavad-Gita* indicates:

The Vedas deal with the three states or Gunas of mind. Become free from dualities, be ever balanced and unconcerned with the thoughts of acquisition and preservation. Rise above the three Gunas, and be Self-conscious, O Arjuna.

To a Self-realized person the Vedas are as useful as a reservoir of water when there is flood water available everywhere.

You have Adhikaara over your respective duty only, but no control or claim over the results. The fruits of work should not be your motive. You should never be inactive.

Do your duty to the best of your ability, O Arjuna, with your mind attached to the Lord, abandoning (worry and) attachment to the results, and remaining calm in both success and failure. The equanimity of mind is called Karma-yoga. (2. 45-48)

The word *guna* can be understood as the quality, state, or the property of mind, matter, and nature. According to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the three *gunas*, *Sattva* or goodness, *Rajas* or activity, and *Tamas*, or inertia, bind the immortal soul to the body (14. 5). One dominates over the other two by suppressing them. When *Rajas* dominates, the happiness that springs from both knowledge and laziness is suppressed, but the person is bound to the wheel by actions:

Of these, *Sattva*, being calm, is illuminating and ethical. It fetters the embodied being, the *Jeevaatma* or *Purusha*, by attachment to happiness and knowledge, O Arjuna.

O Arjuna, know that *Rajas* is characterized by intense (selfish) activity and is born of desire and attachment. It binds the *Jeeva* by attachment to the fruits of work.

Know, O Arjuna, that *Tamas*, the deluder of *Jeeva*, is born of inertia. It binds by ignorance, laziness, and (excessive) sleep.

O Arjuna, Sattva attaches one to happiness, Rajas to action, and Tamas to ignorance by covering the knowledge.

Sattva dominates by suppressing Rajas and Tamas; Rajas dominates by suppressing Sattva and Tamas; and Tamas dominates by suppressing Sattva and Rajas, O Arjuna.

When the lamp of knowledge shines through all the (nine) gates of the body, then it should be known that Sattva is predominant.

Greed, activity, restlessness, passion, and undertaking of (selfish) works arise when Rajas is predominant, O Arjuna.

Ignorance, inactivity, carelessness, and delusion arise when Tamas is predominant, O Arjuna.

One who dies during the dominance of Sattva goes to heaven, the pure world of the knowers of the Supreme.

When one dies during the dominance of Rajas, one is reborn as attached to action (or the utilitarian type); and dying in Tamas, one is reborn as ignorant (or lower creatures). (*BG* 14. 6-15)

Adhikaara, on the other hand, means ability and privilege, prerogative, jurisdiction, discretion, right, preference, choice, rightful claim, authority, and control. According to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, one cannot control the consequences of one's actions and, hence, one should not worry about them, for those worries are a manifestation of the dominance of *Rajas*. Therefore, one should transcend attachment to actions and ignorance in order to achieve happiness, or *Brahman*, which is done by means of *Karma-yoga*, the exercise of detaching oneself from worrying about the results of one's actions. In *The Dry Salvages*, this last idea is also present. The closing lines of the third section of the poem become a request to the seamen to forget about the future, embracing Krishna's teaching:

O voyagers, O seamen,
 You who came to port, and you whose bodies
 Will suffer the trial and judgment of the sea,
 Or whatever event, this is your real destination.
 So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna
 On the field of battle.

Not fare well,
 But fare forward, voyagers. (*DS* III. 40-47)

A significant word in the poem is "destination." Although readers normally see it as the point where the seamen have to arrive, it is also possible to read it as "destiny." If one reads it so, then Krishna's teaching becomes evident, for the ultimate destiny of the person would be to keep advancing, to proceed disregarding the consequences of that continuous moving forward.

Complete abandonment of the self, hence, is what Eliot sees as the most significant aspect of the dark night of the soul in *The Dry Salvages*. This abandonment implies being willing to die, perhaps the greatest sacrifice for a

human being. However, that a seaman embarks knowing that he is going to die is a difficult task indeed. One wonders how the person undertakes such a step. The answer is revealed in the fourth section of the poem, the movement out of the dark night. For Eliot, therefore, prayer is the way out of this void. Nevertheless, it has to be the prayer of an influential being, and Eliot, an Anglo-Catholic, believes that such a person cannot be anyone other than the Virgin Mary. When one's own prayer proves to be ineffective, the intercession of the Virgin Mary is the only hope for those wandering in the profound darkness of the soul.

Conclusion

Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism are the three systems of belief that are generally regarded as distant from each other, yet they find several points of convergence in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. One last question that has stirred the speculation of critics still remains unanswered: Was Eliot himself a mystic? Critics who say he was point out that his ability to pen the intricacies of the Christian faith and elaborate on them requires more than poetic genius. His accomplishment becomes more notorious when one considers that he was capable of transcending such religious paradigm to uncover the points in which Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism walk hand in hand.

Eliot, however, seems not to qualify himself as a mystic and implies that poetic experience, or all artistic endeavor, for that matter, produces a redeeming force, a spaceless and timeless dimension where the impossible becomes possible. Eliot's position is that art, a realm of infinite probabilities, enables the artist to go beyond his or her own limitations and have access, if only briefly, to the ultimate reality, where all faiths flow like rivers from the same source. It is this dimension that he explores in the fifth section of each quartet and the object of a more detailed study.

Notes

- 1 T.S. Eliot participated in the meetings of a group called "The Buddhist Society" while he was studying at Oxford in 1915. There, he met people who studied Buddhism and Hinduism, such as Henry Furst, and their influence can be seen in Eliot's poetry. It was due to the mutual interest both Furst and Eliot had regarding the influential figure of the Japanese scholar Okakura Kakuzo, Curator of the Department of Chinese and Japanese Arts at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, that they became acquainted. Kakuzo had taken Eliot to meet Matisse in 1910, as Eliot mentioned in a letter. (Eliot 93)
- 2 This philosopher revived the Hindu way of life by reinforcing the nondualistic reality or *Brahman*.

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