Approaching Literature Religiously: Between Theology and Lived Religion in T. S. Eliot

**Learning Objectives:**

- To understand the differences between ‘theological’ and ‘lived religion’ approaches to literature and religion.
- To apply ‘theological’ and ‘lived religion’ approaches to interpret modernist poetry.
- To relate ‘theological’ and ‘lived religion’ approaches to poetic form and to evaluate how poetic/creative texts work differently to religious paratexts.

**Readings:**


**Part 1: To understand the differences between ‘theological’ and ‘lived religion’ approaches to literature and religion.**


Look at these images. Why do you think the cathedral authorities introduced these amusements? How might religious people react? How do you think the entertainments serve (or undermine) the religious community of the cathedral or the aims of the Church of England more broadly? Who are these cathedrals targeting with these amusements? How are these target audiences likely to engage with the entertainments and the cathedral more broadly either at the time of the visit or in years to come? The Rev. Gavin Ashenden (quoted in the article in the first column), a former Anglican clergyman, has called the displays a ‘mockery.’ He continued, ‘We experience a saturation of stimulation and distraction in everyday life,’ he wrote in a blog post. ‘It is almost as if the pace and pleasure of life set out to make reflection and prayer impossible. The one place one might be free of this could be, ought to be, a cathedral.’ Do you agree?

Share the following definition: ‘How religion happens in everyday life has come to be
called “lived religion.” To study religion this way is to expand our lens beyond the official texts and doctrines so as to see how ideas about the sacred emerge in unofficial places. It is to include the practices of ordinary people, not just religious leaders. It is to expect to find religion both in “religious” places and in all those other everyday places. It is to focus on what people are doing, as well as what they are saying’. Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), p. 5.

would the scholarship of lived religion position Ashenden’s comments? How does lived religion relate to the theological ideas you have heard about in Domestico? How useful is the study of lived religion to discussions of modernist poetry? To what extent can, modernism be said to concern ‘ordinary people’ and the ‘everyday’? Is *Four Quartets* best understood as part of the ‘official texts and doctrines’ of Christianity or does it (or did it once) represent something more ‘unofficial’? How do those different positionings inform your understanding of the poem?

### Part 2: To apply ‘theological’ and ‘lived religion’ approaches to interpret modernist poetry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn to the article by Anthony Domestico, ‘The Twice-Broken World: Karl Barth, T. S. Eliot, and the Poetics of Christian. Revelation’, <em>Religion and Literature</em> 44, no. 3 (Autumn 2012), 1–26 and ask the students to share their notes and observations from their reading. The discussion questions in the second column can help organise this activity. Teachers might pre-circulate all or some of the questions so students can make notes under these headings.</th>
<th>What are the theological ideas from Karl Barth that Domestico recovers? How are they different from our discussion of lived religion / innovations in the cathedral? How are these theological ideas related to the cultural moment? What strikes you about the way in which Barth writes? How does this approach to writing / his writing style seem similar or different to poetic writing? How and in what ways do Barth’s ideas relate to T. S. Eliot’s poetry? Can Eliot be said to implement Barth’s ideas in poetry or is he doing something different with Barth’s ideas? How and in what ways?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turn to Callison, <em>Modernism and Religion</em>, pp. 105-114, 169-92 and ask the students to share their notes and observations from their reading. The discussion questions can organise this activity. Teachers might pre-circulate the questions so students can make notes under these headings.</td>
<td>How do twentieth-century retreats compare to the entertainments we discussed at the outset? Why did people go on retreat? How are the issues brought forth by retreat different to the ideas brought forth by Domestico and Barth? What new research tools/ foci are needed to think about what people do as opposed to what they write? How does the engagement with embodiment in various ways help discuss different aspects of Eliot’s poetry?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Part 3: To relate ‘theological’ and ‘lived religion’ approaches to poetic form and to evaluate how poetic/creative texts work differently to religious paratexts.

Read ‘Little Gidding’, in *Four Quartets*, pp. 49-59. Focus especially on Sections III and V. The discussion questions can organise this activity. Teachers might pre-circulate some or all of the questions so students can make notes under these headings. The teacher might want to acknowledge that these passages contain allusions to the medieval mystical theology of Julian of Norwich and the author of *The Cloud of the Unknowing.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What theological/ dogmatic/ technical vocabulary is at work in these passages? How do those words/ phrases compare to other sections of the poem (are they common? Do they stand out in some way?) Based on this passage, is Eliot best understood as an ‘ordinary person’ or a ‘religious leader’? Is <em>Four Quartets</em> addressing ordinary people or religious leaders? Why is that significant and how does it contribute to the meaning of the poem? How are we to understand the allusions? What major shifts in tone/ emotion do you detect? How can these shifts be understood by our theological or lived religion frameworks? How and in what ways is religion important to the context of <em>Four Quartets</em> as a WWII poem (and one written with expected defeat in mind)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teacher shifts away from close reading of the passages and asks plenary questions modelled on those in the second column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What different elements of these passages do theological and lived religion frameworks alert you to? Are both frameworks equally relevant (or irrelevant) or does one approach have more to say about poetry than the other? To what extent is writing poetry like Eliot’s an attempt to find religion in ordinary, everyday experience? To what extent is it an attempt to emphasis or draw out the theological aspects of life and experience that might otherwise be neglected? How do your answers to these questions inform your view of poetry and what it does more generally? Is poetry a religious structure like a cathedral or is it closer to one of the entertainments we saw at the outset?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Development and/ or Further Reading

To develop the ideas here, students could read:


This section of the book focuses on H.D.’s unexpected encounter with her own religious heritage while reading an otherwise secular book and the catalyst this provided for reimagining her past and present. Continuing with lived religion, students might consult:


This looks at the importance of developing a transatlantic and trans-temporal religious community amidst wartime London through creative reading and writing practices. Theological concerns of medieval nominalist theologians are picked up in:


An alternative engagement with theology is represented by:


Here modernist literature is itself presented as a form of secular theology. Finally, students might consult:


This volume presents poetic form as itself theological in design.