New Churches: Religious Change in the Age of Modernism

Learning Objectives:
• To describe the challenge of defining religion in the age of modernism.
• To sketch how modernist literary culture responded to these challenges.
• To evaluate how these challenges shaped formal choices made in twentieth-century religious poetry.

Class Readings
Callison, Jamie, Modernism and Religion: Between Mysticism and Orthodoxy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), pp. 1-17, 34-60. Open Access title via EUP.

Part 1: To describe the challenge of defining religion in the age of modernism.

The class opens with a series of images of religious items. These images stimulate answers to the questions in the opposite column. The captions are as follows: 1. Muslim worshippers pray around the Kaaba at the Grand Mosque in Saudi Arabia’s holy city of Mecca on 5 July 2022. AFP/Getty Images. 2. Giovanni Bellini, St Jerome in the Desert, 1505, oil on canvas, 49 cm × 39 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Public Domain. 3. Akshardham, Delhi. Creative Commons. 4. Rogier van der Weyden, The Last Judgement (detail), c. 1445–1450. 220cm x 548cm, Oil on oak, Hospices de Beaune. Public Domain.


How can Four Quartets be considered a ‘Christian poem’ but Ash-Wednesday not be considered ““religious” verse”? Do you think Eliot would have accepted ‘Christian’ but resisted ‘religious’ or is something else at stake here? What is Eliot’s resistance to ‘religious’ or ‘Christian’ verse? Why might that create problems in terms of audience and their expectations of this poetry? What does
don’t consider it any more “religious” verse than anything else I have written: I mean that it attempts to state a particular phase of the progress of one person. If that progress is in the direction of “religion”, I can’t help that; it is I suppose the only direction in which progress is possible’. T. S. Eliot to Rev M. C. D’Arcy SJ, 24 May 1930, in The Letters of T. S. Eliot, 9 vols (London: Faber & Faber, 1989–), 5: 1930–31, ed. by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden, p. 201 (p. 201).

Share the following comment from Eliot: ‘For the great majority of people who love poetry, “religious poetry” is a variety of minor poetry: the religious poet is not a poet who is treating the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit, but a poet who is dealing with a confined part of this subject matter; who is leaving out what men consider their major passions, and thereby confessing his ignorance of them. See T. S. Eliot, ‘Religion and Literature’ (1935), in Selected Essays, new edn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950), pp. 343-354 (p. 345).

Why does Eliot consider religion a ‘confined part’ of the subject matter? How is it connected to the sense that the age of modernism is a secular age? What is it to address ‘the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit’? How would religion/religious poetry need to be redefined to make room for this expansive definition?

Part 2: To sketch how modernist literary cultural responded to these challenges.

Discuss student responses to Callison, Modernism and Religion, pp. 1-17. The discussion will be structured by the questions in the other column, and the teacher may wish to circulate these questions to the students in advance of the class.

How was religion redefined in the age of modernism? In what sense could this redescription be interpreted as a reduction or limitation of what religion once was? How might this new limited role be challenged by institutional religion itself? What was the new religion focused on? What did it avoid or circumvent? Why did this shift become necessary? What opportunities did the shift bring and what were its challenges?

Discuss student responses to Callison, Modernism and Religion, pp. 34-60. The discussion will be structured by the questions in the other column, and the teacher may wish to circulate these questions to the students in advance of the class.

What are sacraments? How does Jones’s religion, in particular his interest in Roman Catholic sacramentalism, shape his aesthetics? How does his aesthetics shape his understanding of sacramentalism (Why is it significant? How does it happen? Where does it happen?)? Are there tensions between Jones’s aesthetics and his religion? Are their distinctions and boundaries that theology might insist upon that Jones’s aesthetics refuses to respect? Does his insistence on the religious dimension restrict or limit his work in some way?

Part 3: To evaluate how these challenges shaped formal choices made in twentieth-century religious poetry.
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<th>Read <em>In Parenthesis</em>. Students read the chapter and identify the religious/spiritual vocabulary used in the passage. Key sections include pp. 68-69 (the vision in no-man’s land) and the distribution of the rations p. 73 (distributing the rations).</th>
<th>Here we have religious imagery in a war poem. Is that usual? Why or why not? What are the tones and/or emotions associated with the religious terminology in <em>In Parenthesis</em> (lament, ritualistic, celebratory etc)? Is it significant that <em>In Parenthesis</em> is a retrospective poem i.e., that the imagery identified helped Jones look back / provided a new dimension of reflection? (Jones didn’t convert to Catholicism until after his return from WW1).</th>
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<td>Note that <em>In Parenthesis</em> has been criticized for this kind of language. ‘<em>In Parenthesis</em> [...] can't keep its allusions from suggesting that the war, if ghastly, is firmly “in the tradition”’. He continues ‘despite Jones's well-intentioned urging, we refuse to see these victims as continuing the tradition' of soldier heroes. Paul Fussell, <em>Great War and Modern Memory</em> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 152. [For Fussell, the allusions here are allusions to King Arthur etc., but the religious allusions help sacralize the soldiers].</td>
<td>What are the problems with suggesting that a war like WW1 is firmly in the tradition? Is it fair to say that the religious imagery throughout this section sacralises warfare? Or is there another way in which this imagery is working? Is the debate about sacralising (or not) connected to how we define religion/religious poetry? Does it make a difference if we thinking about Jones approaching ‘a confined part of this subject’ through his imagery or whether he is approaching ‘the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit’? Is his sense of religion restricted to Christianity? Do you see evidence of Jones aesthetic sense / his artistic temperament in his description of the war scene?</td>
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<td>Read Queen of the Woods. Student attempt to link the Queen of the Woods episode with aspects of the earlier chapter.</td>
<td>What is different about the vision pp. 68-69 as opposed to the Queen of the Woods section? Why do you think that Jones avoids outright Christian imagery in this final section? To what extent does this reflect the pressures of the secular? To what extent does this decision reflect concerns similar to those outlined in Eliot’s essay? To what extent is the Queen of the Woods episode an attempt to write a religious ritual? To what extent is it a form of aesthetic experiment? How useful is that distinction between aesthetics and religion for Jones based on what you have read today?</td>
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<td>Teacher moves away from specific passages and draws threads of various discussions together using the questions in the second column.</td>
<td>Does it make sense to describe <em>In Parenthesis</em> as a religious poem? If so, in what sense? How do we redefine religion/religious poetry in a way that responds to Eliot’s critique of the category? How relevant or significant is this religious dimension to secular readers (i.e., those that aren’t Roman Catholic)? How does this religious element of the poem endeavour to reflect or explore a</td>
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dimension of human experience not captured in secular terms? How is framing the issue in this way different from Thomas Dilworth’s sense that reading Jones requires the ‘suspension of religious disbelief.’ The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 5. How is modernism changed or developed by the inclusion of a religious dimension?

**Development and Further Reading:**
The class leads into a consideration of new religions and how these reflected the definitional challenges and changes that shaped institutional religion in the age of modernism. The following secondary literature offers an outline of the issues involved: