# Rule of Silence: Religion and the Modernist City

## Learning Objectives
- To understand the connection between silence and religion in the age of modernism.
- To sketch the ways in which literary culture responded to or reflected retreat culture.
- To evaluate how the form of the modernist long poem facilitates a meditative approach to its subject matter.

## Readings

## Part 1: To understand the connection between silence and religion in the age of modernism.
- Show students footage by British Pathé, *London Traffic (1920-30)*; *London Early Morning People Going To Work (1933)*.
- What is strange watching this footage? What do we miss? Why is that significant?

## Part 2: To sketch the ways in which literary culture responded to or reflected retreat culture
- Discuss student response to Callison, *Modernism and Religion*, pp. 169-92. The discussion is shaped by the questions in the second column. The teacher may wish to circulate these questions in advance.

### Questions

- Why is the metaphor of a mill appropriate here considering our discussion of the modern city? How is retreat to be understood in relation to the noise? What does retreat offer that cities do not?
- The teacher draws attention to the fact that with retreat the focus is on lived religion and/or religious practice not theology/reasoning. Using the questions in the second column, the teacher highlights the methodological implications of this difference.

### Questions

- How is silence / retreat different from interpretation of scripture / an example of moral reasoning / or a theological argument? What does the initial contrast we have drawn suggest about the content or the significance of this silence? What are the challenges of talking about silence as opposed to ideas? What are some of the advantages of connecting literature with emotionally rich/embodied practices? What is the challenge of talking about silence in relation to poetry?
- Discuss student response to Callison, *Modernism and Religion*, pp. 169-92. The discussion is shaped by the questions in the second column. The teacher may wish to circulate these questions in advance.

### Questions

- How was silence as a principle within retreat developed? What was necessary in terms of space and facilities to maintain this silence? What was the intellectual background for silence? How was silence experienced in differently on different in different kinds of retreat? Which form of silence is most relevant to modernist literature as far as you understand? What is silence able to achieve?
that other forms of talk / practice aren’t? Is silence only a negative (the absence of noise) or does it take on some positive content?


To what extent might we characterise retreat as a form of antimodernism? How does retreat address some of the principles that shape Eliot’s Christian sociology? To what extent does the retreat movement offer a different example to the role of religion in society to that offered by Eliot?

**Part 3: To evaluate how the form of the modernist long poem facilitates a meditative approach to its subject matter.**

Read Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’, in *Four Quartets*, pp. 49-59. Note that the religious community at Little Gidding featured prominently in histories of retreat in England published by *The Vision*. Students go through the poem and identify moments where the poem invokes sounds, the absences of sounds, silence, the failure of speech.

Silence etc is often discussed in the context of the failure / limits of language. How does retreat engage silence differently? What sense of silence is most important to *Four Quartets* the purgative silence of the Catholic Worker or the full silence of the APR more relevant to the poem? How do these different types of silence bring out different tone / resonance in the poem?

Share F. R. Leavis’s observation: ‘The criticism regards his [the poet’s, as expressed in the poem] fear of life and contempt (which includes self-contempt) for humanity. This combination of fear and contempt commits him to a frustrating and untenable conception of the spiritual. By “untenable” I mean one that cannot without his implicitly contradicting it be served by poet.’ F. R. Leavis, *The Living Principle: ‘English’ as a Discipline of Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), p. 205

Is Eliot’s embrace or invocation of silence a retreat from his job as a poet? Does it show contempt for the community as Leavis suggests? Or is there a different kind of value found in this silence? Why might this form of silence be particularly relevant / necessary in the context of modernity?

Note to the students that *Four Quartets* is a poem in which difference voices rub against each other and free verse is juxtaposed with lyric measures.

How is reading a sequence like this with its juxtaposition of forms and styles different from a piece written in a single style? How does the work of reading *Four Quartets* (the tracking back from one voice to another, the looking back from the later poems in the sequence to the earlier ones to understand the structure and development) reflect the kind of work done on retreat with its rhythms of retreat and return?

Teacher uses the questions in the opposite column to draw together the threads of the discussion.

‘Little Gidding’ is often connected with Christian dogma / theology. How does it read differently as a poem of retreat? To what extent does this difference arise from elements of the poem and to what extent does this difference arise from an expanded sense of religion (as meaning more than dogma;
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<th>Development and Further Reading:</th>
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<td>Retreat as a specific religious practice opens out into a discussion of modernism and spirituality more broadly. Two helpful studies for tracing this connection are:</td>
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