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Towards a biblical mind

# Modern spirituality: learning from the poets

By A. J. Nickerson

## Summary

The last decade has seen striking growth in the popularity of alternative spiritual practices requiring neither doctrinal explanation nor institutional affiliation. This essay offers a brief account of such contemporary beliefs before asking what it is like to negotiate the tension between the assumptions of secularity and the impulses towards extra-ordinary forms of experience. Some of the richest accounts of modern spirituality come from the 1930s, and this paper examines some of the period's profoundest poetic explorations of belief before considering T. S. Eliot's analysis of the modern situation in the light of Christian revelation.

## Contemporary spirituality

Although formal religious affiliation continues to decline rapidly in the West,<sup>1</sup> the last decade has seen a widespread resurgence of interest in those practices that might enable us to connect with immaterial aspects of our own lives and of the world around us. This trend is particularly strong among the Millennial and Gen-Z cohorts, the group most likely to describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated.<sup>2</sup> As a 2020 VICE Media Group report concluded, 75 per cent of young people 'are turning towards alternative methods to get in touch with a higher power' – although only 11 per cent 'say their soul feels fulfilled'.<sup>3</sup>

But the very informality of these 'alternative methods', coupled with the reluctance or inability to specify the nature of the 'higher power' that is sought, means that contemporary spirituality encompasses a wide range of practices, many of which disturb older understandings of 'spirituality'.

Anecdotal evidence, for instance, suggests that many of these 'alternative methods' are, in fact, forms of occult practice. Another recent Pew survey found that 60 per cent of Americans believe in either psychics, reincarnation, astrology, or the presence of 'spiritual energies' within physical things.<sup>4</sup> According to Dominique Camus, a leading ethnologist, there are now 'between 150,000 and

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200,000 self-declared witches, wizards, or soothsayers practising in France'.<sup>5</sup> Publications targeting Millennial and Gen-Z readers, such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, and *Refinery29*, regularly publish articles on topics such as astrology, crystals, and witchcraft, while the vast 'Spirituality and Religion' department of the online marketplace Etsy includes offerings such as '15 Blackthorn Thorns for Protection', 'Full Chakra Healing Set', and 'White Sage Smudge Sticks'.<sup>6</sup>

- 1 'Younger people are less religious than older ones in many countries, especially in the U.S. and Europe', 13 June 2018, <[www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/13/younger-people-are-less-religious-than-older-ones-in-many-countries-especially-in-the-u-s-and-europe/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/13/younger-people-are-less-religious-than-older-ones-in-many-countries-especially-in-the-u-s-and-europe/)> [accessed 26 July 2021].
- 2 'In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues At Rapid Pace', 17 October 2019, <[www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/](http://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/)> [accessed 9 September 2020].
- 3 *Relationships: A Status Update*, <[https://company.vice.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/VMG\\_Relationships\\_White-Paper\\_02202020\\_V1\\_compressed-1.pdf](https://company.vice.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/VMG_Relationships_White-Paper_02202020_V1_compressed-1.pdf)> [accessed 9 September 2020].
- 4 "'New Age' beliefs common among both religious and nonreligious Americans', 1 October 2018, <[www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/)> [accessed 25 June 2021].
- 5 'Witches make a comeback with French', *The Times*, 17 July 2021, <[www.thetimes.co.uk/article/witches-make-a-comeback-with-french-nhncljg6](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/witches-make-a-comeback-with-french-nhncljg6)> [accessed 26 July 2021].
- 6 <[www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2016/11/131281/birth-chart-analysis-natal-astrology-reading](http://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2016/11/131281/birth-chart-analysis-natal-astrology-reading)>; <[www.vogue.co.uk/article/crystals-how-to-use-them](http://www.vogue.co.uk/article/crystals-how-to-use-them)>; <[www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/g33928897/gifts-for-witches/](http://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/g33928897/gifts-for-witches/)>



Other 'alternative methods' seek to get in touch with those elusive powers that lie in our psychic depths or in the strangeness of the non-human world. The last five years have seen a striking resurgence of interest in the use of psychedelics as a means of accessing mystical forms of experience. Books such as Michael Pollan's *How to Change Your Mind* (2018) have popularised the idea that psychedelics, in conjunction with psychotherapy, might be used as a means of untangling the mysteries of the mind,<sup>7</sup> while others suggest that the magic mushroom might be the means by which we can re-engage with the shared consciousness of the natural world.<sup>8</sup> Both examples illustrate the flexibility of these new 'spiritualities': the 'spiritual' might mean the domain of God, or the transcendent, or supernature, but it might equally be the domain of the mind, the immanent, and the natural.

In short, our own decade has seen a widespread revival of interest in those practices and experiences that cannot be adequately understood using the naturalistic assumptions of secular modernity. But this interest – and this is the important point – resists any kind of philosophical or theological description. As Tara Isabella Burton puts it in her recent survey of contemporary spirituality, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, these 'alternative methods' are highly individualised, taking a 'pick-and-mix' approach to an array of cultural and religious traditions.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, although these new methods seem to resist a reductively materialist understanding of the world, they nevertheless tend to secularise the traditions they borrow from, transforming practices that were once explicitly directed towards supernatural encounter into therapeutic or self-care rituals.<sup>10</sup>

To put it in more philosophical terms, this is a distinctively contemporary instance of what Charles Taylor calls the 'immanent Counter-Enlightenment': 'the revolt from within unbelief' against the secular consensus that 'ordinary' life is all that can be affirmed or pursued – a 'revolt' enacted not 'in the name of something beyond, but really more just from a sense of being confined, diminished, by the acknowledgement of this

primacy [of ordinary life]'.<sup>11</sup> We might think of contemporary spirituality as an inchoate search for the extra-ordinary – whatever that might be.

### Learning from the past

This interest in 'alternative methods' for getting in touch with a 'higher power' is nothing new. Many contemporary spiritualities are part of a broader revival of interest in 1970s popular culture, while the psychedelic renaissance of the last few years explicitly draws on forgotten or suppressed research from the 1960s, as well as the informal knowledge of those who continued to experiment with psychedelics in later decades.

But if we want to know what it is *like* to be a modern person in search of the extra-ordinary, we need to turn to the work of those writers who have attempted to describe this experience from the inside. Much of this work comes from the 1930s, a period which saw wide-ranging public discussion about emerging forms of alternative spiritual practice.

The question of 'belief' was a matter of urgent debate, both among the educated public and among the intellectual elite. 'There is no avoiding that dilemma', T. S. Eliot wrote in 1929, 'you must be either a naturalist or a supernaturalist.'<sup>12</sup> In 1931, the BBC commissioned Eliot to give a series of four public broadcasts on the subject of this 'modern dilemma' or what Eliot would later call the 'choice' between Christianity and secular philosophy.<sup>13</sup> These talks were so well received that they were reprinted in full in the now defunct BBC magazine, *The Listener*. Such was the enthusiasm for public debates of this sort, that shortly afterwards the BBC commissioned G. K. Chesterton to give a similar series of radio talks which continued until his death in 1936. C. S. Lewis took up the mantle in 1941 with the wartime broadcasts that were eventually published as *Mere Christianity* (1952).

But these problems were also of interest to a smaller, more consciously secular intellectual elite. In the 1930s, many of those writers who had seemed to represent the vanguard of modernist thought began to turn their attention to theologians whose understanding of the world sat very uneasily with their own secular vision of reality. Marianne Moore was reading and recommending the theologian Karl Barth to her fellow poet, Elizabeth Bishop. Ezra Pound, the great modernist writer, struck up a correspondence with Étienne Gilson, the neo-Thomist scholar. Wyndham Lewis, sometime writer, painter, and co-founder of the Vorticist movement, was busy writing to Martin D'Arcy, the Roman Catholic philosopher. W. H. Auden was reading Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Søren Kierkegaard. And David Jones, the artist and poet, was reading Jacques Maritain.<sup>14</sup> Many of these writers – most of whom were poets – had no formal religious affiliation; those who did were (with the exception of Moore) unorthodox, to say the least. And yet, throughout the 1930s, they were reading those theologians

7 This is largely due to greater awareness of the psychedelic trials currently being conducted at Johns Hopkins and Imperial College, London.

8 VICE claims that '2020 Was the Year of the Magic Mushroom', 31 December 2020 <[www.vice.com/en/article/jgq5vx/2020-was-the-year-of-the-magic-mushroom](http://www.vice.com/en/article/jgq5vx/2020-was-the-year-of-the-magic-mushroom)> [accessed 27 May 2021]. The idea that mycelial networks might enable a kind of panpsychic unity is an idea popularised, but not wholly affirmed, by Merlin Sheldrake in *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures* (London: The Bodley Head, 2020).

9 Burton, *Strange Rites*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020), p.24.

10 Burton, op. cit. p.24.

11 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2007), p.372.

12 T. S. Eliot, 'Second Thoughts About Humanism', *Selected Essays* (1932), p.485.

13 T. S. Eliot, 'The Modern Dilemma: Christianity and Communism', *The Listener*, 16 March 1932, pp.382–83; T. S. Eliot, 'Introduction', in John Baillie and Hugh Martin eds. *Revelation* (1937) pp.38–39.

14 See 'A Conversation between Philosophers and Artists', in Anthony Domestico, *Poetry and Theology in the Modernist Period* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), pp.1–17.

and philosophers who proposed the existence of a reality that stretched far beyond the confines of our 'ordinary' modern lives. It did not matter whether these thinkers were in the Reformed tradition (as in the case of Barth and Niebuhr) or in the Catholic (as with Maritain, Gilson, and D'Arcy), so long as they were grappling with fundamental philosophical and theological questions. By contrast, these modernist writers were largely uninterested in the more liberal theologies of the mid-twentieth century that refrained from making clear and specific statements about the nature of reality.<sup>15</sup>

### Learning from the poets: W. H. Auden

Take Auden, for instance. He described himself as a 'would-be Christian', an Anglo-Catholic by birth and, later, a member of the Episcopalian Church.<sup>16</sup> His 'would-be' Christianity was strikingly worldly, requiring no belief in the miraculous, the immortal soul, or the resurrection of Christ, but emphasising the social obligation to love one's neighbour. Nevertheless, Auden's poetry frequently registers a desire – sometimes even a need – to make contact with that supernatural reality which he had so carefully excluded from his own heterodox faith. 'Are you in Heaven, Father?', cries one of Auden's characters. From the sky comes the devastating reply: 'Address not known'. And yet the man continues to cry: 'Are you pleased with me, Father?' ('Victor', 1937).<sup>17</sup>

Auden's belief in the necessity of something greater and qualitatively 'other' to the self comes through most strongly in his poem 'The Fall of Rome', written in 1947 but with an eye to the political turmoil of the 1930s. His theme is civilisational collapse, both ancient and modern. The struggle between Cato and Caesar for control of the Roman Empire in the first century BC becomes a metaphor for the failure of Western democracies in the run-up to the Second World War. Put



simply, the question Auden is asking in this poem is 'Why do societies fall apart?'

Each of the characters in this poem has given up on the idea that there is something greater than themselves which demands their allegiance and which ought to shape their individual choices. The tax-defaulters have abandoned the idea of a common purse. The temple prostitutes should be enabling public worship, but have swapped organised religion for 'private rites of magic' and fallen asleep. The literati, who ought to be cultivating a common culture, are entertaining 'imaginary friends'. The 'Marines', who ought to be defending the State, are mutinying. Caesar, who ought to be out embodying the State, is at home in bed. And the 'unimportant clerk' who ought to be upholding the ideal of a functioning bureaucracy is instead engaged in an act of petty vandalism. Everyone has forgotten that they have an obligation to participate in a reality that is bigger than the individual, whether that is organised religion, the common purse, or the civil service. Cato is the lone voice in the wilderness, extolling the 'Ancient Disciplines' of restraint, service, and loyalty to the Republic. But no one listens.

In the last stanza, Auden turns his attention 'Altogether elsewhere', to a place where 'vast | Herds of reindeer move across | Miles and miles of golden moss, | Silently and very fast'. Auden is emphatic that this place has absolutely nothing to do with Rome or its inhabitants. Indeed, instead of grubby Rome there is the ethereal Arctic tundra, and instead of the dysfunctional Romans (or the squabbling factions of the 1930s) there are reindeer, united in purpose and moving swiftly towards a common goal.

What does this final vision mean? On the one hand, it is a rebuke to our human uncooperativeness. But it is also a reminder that there is a reality that is other than – perhaps even greater than – the ordinariness of our lives. And this other reality exists whether or not we believe in it and whether or not Rome falls or modern society fails.

The last stanza thus directs our attention away from the history of our own failures and towards that which is truly extra-ordinary. And at this critical moment in the poem, the extra-ordinary takes on a new meaning. This alternative reality is no longer simply a convenient fiction underpinning a functioning society, but rather an emblem for a realm of enchantment. Rome fell not only because individuals stopped believing in the idea of a shared civilisation but because they lost sight of the 'vast' and 'golden' world of the magical, the mysterious, or the numinous – a quality that is very close to holiness.<sup>18</sup>

Auden, like many of today's spiritual-but-not-religious, sees the poverty of both the individual and modern society, and reaches for that which might re-enchant the world and move us towards cooperation – but without committing us to any specific practices or beliefs.

15 Domestico, *Poetry and Theology in the Modernist Period* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), p.4.

16 W. H. Auden, *Prose, Volume II, 1939–1948* (Princeton University Press, 2002), p.250.

17 W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p.169. All further quotations from this volume.

18 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1928), p.222.

## Learning from the poets: Wallace Stevens

Wallace Stevens was a committed humanist and a staunch critic of old-time religion. And yet, like Nietzsche, he was troubled by the thought that even the death of God would not be enough to dispel his 'shadows' – those habits of thought and action derived from the Christian metaphysic which would linger long after the proclamation of a secular age.

This is the idea behind Stevens' great poem of 1936, 'Evening without Angels'. The poem begins with a question: 'Why seraphim like lutanists arranged | Above the trees?'. The title tells us that this is – or ought to be – an evening 'without' angels. We are immediately confronted with a series of puzzles: What are the seraphim doing there? Who or what has 'arranged' them above the trees? And why are they like 'lutanists'?<sup>19</sup>

Like Auden, Stevens is not using his poem to advance his own beliefs but is rather taking the opportunity of the poem to think through the question of 'belief' itself. As Anthony Domestico notes, it was partly through their interaction with contemporary theologians such as Barth, Tillich, and Maritain that these poets learned to make 'theological speculation' the purpose of their poetry.<sup>20</sup>

The poet can hear a mysterious music and is looking for an explanation. Perhaps, Stevens suggests, this is angelic music. But he is not entirely convinced: these seraphim are only 'like' lutanists. Is there another explanation?

We know from the rest of the poem that Stevens is thinking, in part, about poetry. There is a long tradition in English verse of thinking about the work of the poet using the metaphor of the Aeolian harp. The Aeolian harp originated in ancient Greece and was named after Aeolus, Keeper of the Winds. The harp is hung on the outermost branches of a tree and when the wind blows through its strings it produces strange, unearthly harmonies. It is an instrument without an instrumentalist. And this is Stevens' point: it is tempting to attribute mysterious phenomena (like this arboreal music) to the intervention of a supernatural being, but this would be a mistake. 'Air is air', as Stevens puts it: the mystery of the world is not proof of its divine origin. Things only tell us about their own existence – they do not, and should not, lead us towards visions of angels or intuitions of transcendence.

Indeed, Stevens goes on to suggest, our habit of conjuring angels out of thin air says more about our own insecurities than about the world in which we live: 'Its sounds are not angelic syllables | But our unfashioned spirits realized | more sharply in more furious selves.' These 'angels' are not supernatural beings but projections of the human psyche; they do not refer us to a reality beyond ourselves but only

to the reality within. They are, in other words, the way in which we imagine who we are or what we might become. For Stevens, as for Auden, that which seems altogether 'other' is the falsehood by which we organise our lives.

But, unlike Auden, Stevens is unwilling to tolerate these borrowings from the old Christian order. Instead, he advises us to seek out a 'bare earth', stripped of the structure and meanings given by Christianity. 'Bare night is best. Bare earth is best. Bare, bare'. And yet bareness is not easy to live with. Stevens knows this: 'Bare earth is best [...] *Except* for our own houses huddled low | Beneath the arches and the spangled air' [my italics]. Modern people might, in general terms, assent to Stevens' bleak materialism, but when it comes to our own lives we prefer to dwell where there is a reassuring semblance of cosmic order, hinted at in the cathedral 'arches' and in the starry sky.

Such is our human frailty. We want to be told of something that transcends us and which enriches and ennobles our lives, but we are committed, as secular moderns, to the notion that there is nothing there but 'ourselves'. The complexity of this experience, and its implications for the modern artist, are described by Stevens in 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' (1937). 'But play you must', the people cry in confusion, 'A tune beyond us, yet ourselves'. The impossible task of the poet or musician is to

sing both tunes at once – to describe the world in terms that are acceptable to the secular worldview while awakening our desire for that which is 'beyond us'. This is a contradiction that neither artist nor audience is fully able to understand, but which might be best expressed – if still inadequately – through poetry. As Charles Williams, the great friend of Lewis and Tolkien put it, true poetry is 'the approach of the fallen understanding to that unfallen meaning' that originates in the extraordinary otherness of God himself.<sup>21</sup>

## Yearning for the fulfilment of belief

T. S. Eliot thought that this instinct for something 'beyond us', however minimally defined or reluctantly acknowledged, was the defining characteristic of modern culture. As editor of the *Criterion* for over fifteen years, almost all the most important works of philosophy, theology, history, art criticism, and poetry passed over his desk. But Eliot was a poet as well as a cultural commentator, and he was not only concerned with describing the modern dilemma but with understanding what it was like to live *within* it. Some of his greatest poems – 'Marina', *Asb-Wednesday*, *Four Quartets* – are extended meditations on these conflicting impulses towards belief and unbelief, towards the bareness of modernity and the spangled visions of the Christian metaphysic.<sup>22</sup>

19 Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.116. All further quotations from this volume.

20 Domestico, *op.cit.*, p.8.

21 Charles Williams, *The Place of the Lion* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1947), p.162.

22 See also: John Valentine, 'T. S. Eliot and the Crisis of Meaning', *Cambridge Papers*, 22.2 (June 2013), <[www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge-papers/ts-eliot-crisis-meaning](http://www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge-papers/ts-eliot-crisis-meaning)> [accessed 30 June 2021].

Having undertaken to understand the philosophical and experiential aspects of modern spirituality, Eliot concluded:

What a discursive reading of the literature of secularism, over a number of years, leads me to believe [...] is that the religious sentiment – which can only be completely satisfied with the complete message of revelation – is simply suffering from a condition of repression painful for those in whom it is repressed, who yearn for the fulfilment of belief, although too ashamed of that yearning to allow it to come to consciousness.<sup>23</sup>

Eliot's diagnosis seems to be correct, at least with regards to Auden, Stevens, and those other unbelieving writers such as Bishop, Pound, and Lewis who, rather oddly, chose to immerse themselves in theological writings that emphasised the transcendence of God. But what is most striking about his conclusion is his proposed remedy. He does not simply affirm this repressed instinct for some (loosely defined) form of extra-ordinary experience, and he does not simply suggest that acceptance of the Christian faith will satisfy these longings. Indeed, as he noted in 1933, thinking of his own conversion, to come to believe anything is to join 'that bitter fraternity which lives on a higher level of doubt; no longer the doubting which is just play with ideas [...] but that which is a daily battle'.<sup>24</sup> Rather, he proposes that those who 'yearn' for that which is 'beyond us' will only be truly satisfied when they fully encounter the definite and demanding revelation of transcendence and nearness that is encountered in Christ.

Eliot urges a return to the 'complete message of revelation', a radically different experience of that which is 'beyond us' that does not depend on human intuition but rather on God's self-disclosure within the world. Eliot was so committed to the urgency of recovering this doctrine that he wrote and lectured on this subject throughout the 1930s and, in 1937, commissioned and introduced an anthology of essays on the subject by some of the decade's most important theological thinkers: *Revelation*, edited by John Baillie and Hugh Martin.

### To the law and to the testimony

Eliot's proposed remedy – that we should return to the full message of revelation – has scriptural precedent. It is not only in the last two centuries that society has seen waves of spiritual-but-not-religious feeling. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet describes a society that has much in common with our own:

And when they say to you, 'Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter,' should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on

behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. They will pass through it hard-pressed and hungry; and it shall happen, when they are hungry, that they will be enraged and curse their king and their God, and look upward. Then they will look to the earth, and see trouble and darkness, gloom of anguish; and they will be driven into darkness.' (Isaiah 8:19–22, NKJV)

This is a society in confusion. The people both 'look upward' to God and 'look to the earth': like Auden's man who cries to the sky or Stevens' audience who demand a double tune, these people are unsure whether they live in a truly 'bare earth' or one in which we might encounter something that is truly 'beyond us'. But, like the poets of the 1930s and the spiritual-but-not-religious of today, these people remain

invested in the idea of the magical and the mysterious. Like the Millennial and Gen-Z readers of *Refinery29* and those who buy and sell on Etsy, these people engage in mediumship, witchcraft, and the occult arts: practices that might afford experiences of the supernatural and satisfy our desire for something other than the 'ordinary' life, but without demanding either our belief or our obedience.

Isaiah's response to these people is not simply to commend their interest in the 'beyond' and to seek to expand this into a fuller account of reality. Rather, his response is *To the law and to the testimony!* To the

revelation that we have in Christ.

There is, in fact, something deeply misconceived about any attempt to break through into this realm of extra-ordinary experience by alternative means when God himself (as Isaiah goes on to describe) has broken into the world in the person of the incarnate Christ. Scripture clearly prohibits any attempt to access these forms of experience without submitting to the Christian revelation. Paul includes *pharmakeia* among the acts of the sinful nature in Galatians 5:19. This is traditionally taken as a prohibition against witchcraft, but the term also includes drug-use (psychedelics in particular) and other forms of magical practice – any activity, in short, that is directed towards accessing that which is 'beyond us' while circumventing the One who holds visible and invisible realities together (Colossians 1:15–20).<sup>25</sup> Such activities are understood as an assault on the unique necessity, sacrifice, and glory of Christ's incarnation and, as such, will only drive the participant into ever greater darkness. We might take this as a warning against any philosophical position or spiritual practice that affirms the reality and desirability of such experiences while refusing to acknowledge the fullness of Christian revelation.

Rather, our impulse to seek out the invisible things spoken

<sup>23</sup> From 'Introduction', in *Revelation*, ed. by John Baillie and Hugh Martin (New York: Macmillan, 1937).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2008), p.181.

<sup>25</sup> See Ellis Potter, *The Cloud of Knowing* (Destinée, 2018).

of in Colossians 1:16 must be constrained by, and in obedience to, the written revelation of Scripture and the personal testimony of the incarnate Christ. After all, it is the invisible God who rules over the invisible parts of reality, and it is only in union with him, through the reconciliatory work of Christ, that such an encounter will do any good to our souls.

This is a thought that recurs in Eliot's late poetry. In *Four Quartets* (1940–42), he notes that the modern fascination with the mysterious is nothing new. The occult arts (fiddling 'with pentagrams | Or barbituric acids') and psychic analysis (dissecting the 'recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors') are the 'usual pastimes and drugs, and features of the press: | And always will be' (*Dry Salvages* V, ll.1–12).<sup>26</sup> 'Men's curiosity', he continues, 'searches past and future | And clings to that dimension' (*Dry Salvages* V, ll.16–17). Our desire for the extra-ordinary cannot be satiated, however much we repress the 'religious sentiment'. But Eliot goes on to describe how it is only in the Christian doctrine of Incarnation that we might discover the proper object of our curiosity and desire. Christ's Incarnation unites 'spheres of existence', integrating the supernatural with the natural, the invisible with the visible, the extra-ordinary with the ordinary – or, to use Eliot's terms, the known world of the 'past' with the unknown world of the 'future' (*Dry Salvages* V, l.34). The modern spiritual quest, according to Eliot, finds its only possible fulfilment in the specificity of Christ's revelation within the world.

## Conclusion

Our culture prizes the magical and the mysterious not only as the means by which we might access a fuller reality, but for its own sake, as a means of escaping the ordinariness of our lives. Indeed, for Stevens, it was this unspecified intuition of the mysteriousness of the world that was the source of much modern art: 'from this the poem springs', he writes, 'that we live in a place | That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves' ('Notes towards a Supreme Fiction'). There is an

echo here of Ecclesiastes and the Teacher's claim that these intuitions of the mysterious are central to both the richness of human experience and the meaningfulness of our work, artistic or otherwise:

I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. (Ecclesiastes 3:10–11, NKJV)

Christian revelation does not extinguish the real mysteriousness of reality but brings us into proper relationship with it. It is through the person of Christ, through union with him, and through obedient exercise of those practices he has given us for our spiritual good, that we might find ourselves at what Eliot termed the 'point of intersection' – that reality in which the ordinary and the extra-ordinary are united (*Dry Salvages* V, ll.31, 18).

Eliot concluded that the Incarnation was the proper 'occupation' for anyone captivated by the mysteriousness of the world, whether poet, saint, or the ordinary, dissatisfied modern individual (*Dry Salvages* V, l.19). As he put it in another essay, 'theology' – the disciplined pursuit of that which is 'beyond us', predicated on Christian revelation – is 'the most exciting and adventurous subject left for the jaded mind'.<sup>27</sup> It still is.



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26 T. S. Eliot, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), p.199. All further references from this volume.

27 Quoted in Anthony Domestico, *Poetry and Theology in The Modernist Period* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), p.16.

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