
Education and Culture in T. S. Eliot

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When we discuss Eliot's views on education, we have to scrutinize his idea that "the purpose of education is to transmit culture." It would be meaningful for us to examine European culture to assess its value as a worthwhile model for transmitting culture to the following generation. Eliot further states that European culture should be reunified by Christianity because people in Europe split up into sects.

If culture, as Eliot insists, is interwoven with religion, would it be hasty to say that education should transmit culture? The following passage by George Steiner would lead us to reflect on European culture before discussing the purpose of education. Steiner writes :

It is to the ambiguous afterlife of religious feeling in Western culture that we must look, to the malignant energies released by the decay of natural religious forms. We know from the plans of those who built them and from the testimony of inmates, that the death camps constituted a complete, coherent world. They had their own measure of time, which is pain. The unbearable was parceled out with pedantic nicety. The obscenities and abjections practiced in them were accompanied by prescribed rituals of derision and false promise.

Deliberate readers would realize that they should consider those religious feelings which contained the seed of the evilness before discussing culture. Steiner, whose parents were killed in the Nazi concentration camp posits that any argument about culture without any deep reflection of the holocaust would be meaningless.²⁾

The holocaust was not the result of merely individual pathology or of the neuroses of one nation-state. Indeed, competent observers expected the cancer to spread first, and most virulently, in France. We are not—and this is often misunderstood—considering something truly analogous to other cases of massacre, to the murder of the Gypsies or, earlier, of the Armenians. There are parallels in technique and in the idiom of hatred. But not ontologically, not at the level of philosophic intent. That intent takes us to the heart of certain instabilities in the fabric of Western culture, in the relations between instinctual and religious life.³⁾

Steiner seems to argue that the evil capability contained in religious feelings hovering all over Europe at that time caused the holocaust in which many innocent people were killed at the death camps. One might say that to discuss culture means to make a serious consideration about religion at large. It can be said that Steiner and Eliot share the same view that culture and religion are like both sides of a same coin. This can be proved by the following passage :

... I find Eliot's insistence on the religious character of genuine civilization, and his "conception of culture and religion as being, when each term is taken in the right context, different aspects of the same thing," largely persuasive. It seems to me incontrovertible that the holocaust must be set in the framework of the psychology of religion, and that an understanding

of this framework is vital to an argument on culture.⁴⁾

The passage indicates that if we want to discuss culture at large, we have to examine the religious climate in our society. Steiner seems to argue that Eliot did not examine closely the spiritual climate at that time.

Deliberate readers would recognize that there have been anti-Semitic feelings in Europe since the medieval days. One might argue that Eliot should have dealt with the anti-Semitic feelings if he really wanted to discuss culture. The following passage illustrates that the seed of the evilness in European society existed :

... the Jew is perfectly assimilable by modern nations, but he is to be defined as one whom these nations do not wish to assimilate. What weighed upon him originally was that he was the assassin of Christ. Have we ever stopped to consider the intolerable situation of men condemned to live in a society that adores the God they have killed? Originally, the Jew was therefore a murderer or the son of a murderer—which in the eyes of a community with a pre-logical concept of responsibility amounts inevitably to the same thing—it was as such that he was taboo. It is evident that we cannot find the explanation for modern anti-Semitism here; but if the anti-Semite has chosen the Jew as the object of his hate, it is because of his religious horror that the latter has always inspired. ... Thus it is no exaggeration to say that it is the Christians who have created the Jew in putting an abrupt stop to his assimilation and in providing him, in spite of himself, with a function in which he has since prospered.⁵⁾

The passage above of Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* warns us that people might have some religious prejudice in the corner of their minds in any period. From Steiner's viewpoints, one might ask why Eliot did not

reflect on what Christian society did to the Jews since the medieval days in Europe.

When a writer discusses such ideas that lack quintessential definitions as religious feelings and horrors, he might as well not refer directly to them. While Steiner criticizes Eliot for not referring to the holocaust and religious feelings which came out of the evilness, Steiner should have known that writers and intellectuals expressed their inner feelings without referring directly to them. The following passage would indicate Eliot's inner feelings about the holocaust :

... the deliberate destruction of another culture as a whole is an irreparable wrong, almost as evil as to treat human beings like animals.⁶⁾

The passage might serve as proof that Eliot had deep thoughts about the holocaust.

As for his views on education, he offers several opinions in order that we may not repeat the same tragedies such as genocide or discrimination. The most important aspect, according to Eliot, is how to cultivate a good man within a curriculum of education. Eliot seems to say that if a man displays his goodness in the community, it is not enough, because his good deeds lack a religious basis. He suggests that religion should have the right place in education. Eliot seems to imply that the cultivation of those who can put their goodness into practice in public affairs is absolutely necessary in human society; to educate men who know the moral differences of right and wrong would have been an immediate issue for Eliot at that time. Eliot wrote :

How are we to try to educate good men, seeing that the idea of the good citizen implies the good man? Are we to be content with a rough-and-ready description of the good citizen, leaving everybody to define goodness according to his own taste and fancy? As you may have feared, this question raises for me the final question, that of the relation of education to religion.⁷⁾

Eliot suggests that to cultivate a good man, some place for religion in which he or she can learn how to behave morally, distinguishing right from wrong is necessary. In this sense, education has a connection with religion, which is a different aspect of culture.

The question of whether it is worthwhile transmitting culture to the next generation would be out of the question, because Eliot in his critical works has given a due reflection about European culture at large. If the reader examines Eliot's passage minutely, he or she would realize that Eliot presents us the right way to produce a culturally healthy society.

Notes

- 1 George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 53.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, translated by George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), pp. 67-68.
- 6 T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company), pp. 139-140.
- 7 T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic and other writings* (Lincoln and London:

University of Nebraska Press), p. 107.

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