

Catholic Modernists, English Nationalists

Timothy J. Sutton

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“Anglo-Catholic in Religion”: T. S. Eliot and Christianity

Barry Spurr

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Timothy J. Sutton's highly readable monograph explores the efforts of one strain of English literary modernists to conduct a nostalgic search for belief in myth, order, and authority amid a fragmented and skeptical modernity. That search, Sutton argues, would lead some writers to conversion to the Catholic Church—and those writers therefore constitute a Catholic sub-species of modernism. Looking back to the Victorian poet and Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins, proceeding through accounts of Ford Madox Ford and T. S. Eliot, before concluding with studies of the expressly Roman Catholic modern novelist Evelyn Waugh and the “postmodern” Catholic novelist Graham Greene, Sutton seeks to show the manner in which each author illustrates a distinctly modernist longing for spiritual, moral, and political order. That longing found fulfillment in the Catholic faith, but also carried with it a commitment to “nationalism.”

Sutton's book thus promises to tell a familiar narrative in a new way. Accusations of absolutism, elitism, and totalitarianism pepper scholarship on the modernists already. Sutton's book restricts itself to just those modernists who sought shelter in the Church, and acknowledges that their cases do not have necessary implications for modernism as a whole. And yet, in assuming that nationalism and Catholicism are simply two characteristics of one among many kinds of modernism, it risks treating both as mere ideological symptoms rather than as ideas sincerely believed and possibly meriting belief. Though he leaves the question unexplored, we are left asking whether all modernists sought order and authority, and the Catholic modernists simply happened to “use” the Church and the English nation as instrumental goods.

And, though he soon abandons the question, Sutton's opening paragraphs suggest that English modernism as a whole may be understood as just one symptom of a declining British Empire.

Sutton's chapters are admirable in their fluent re-descriptions of the various authors' works, moving seamlessly between paraphrase and analysis, and between written word and authorial life. In Hopkins, he finds a devout and troubled Anglican convert to Catholicism, whose conversion alienates him from family and country. Sutton justly highlights the panentheist and sacramental understanding of God's presence in creation which subtends Hopkins's poems, but suggests that this confident theological poetics would give way, as Hopkins's spiritual and literal exile from Anglican England grew more painful, summoning in him a hyperbolic love of empire.

This analysis drives toward two interesting but unpersuasive conclusions. Having considered Hopkins's intellectual debt to John Henry Newman, he proposes that Hopkins's Catholicism was more "nationalistic" in form than his mentor's. This ignores Newman's sustained efforts to make Catholicism appear compatible with patriotic Englishness despite the foundational anti-Catholicism of the English nation. Further, Sutton makes Hopkins appear almost grotesquely jingoistic, explaining away Hopkins' sympathy for Irish Home Rulers as a reluctant concession by one who favors the "mission of the empire" over "that of the church" (53). Hopkins's patriotism for the Empire is unquestionable, but Sutton paints it as if it were inherently in tension with his Catholic faith. But, for better or for worse, we have little reason to believe a Victorian Catholic could not be a stout imperialist; that would have been news to the Belgians.

Sutton's chapter on Ford is less ambitious and more persuasive. While Ford's actual religious beliefs seem to have been tepid, he saw the Catholic Church as a force of order and tradition in modernity, and so gave it his sentimental allegiance. Catholicism also saved one from a provincial outlook in art and literature; and so, for Ford, to be Catholic meant to be at once rooted in tradition and open to the culturally universal. Sutton thus convincingly shows that Catholicism did a kind of ideological "work" for Ford, providing a means of negotiating between cultural cosmopolitanism and a fidelity to tradition and, it turns out, empire.

However, Ford alone fits neatly Sutton's narrative of a "need" for order and authority *leading to* Catholic conversion, and this raises a serious methodological question. Namely, to what extent can the current conventional language of literary criticism adequately account for religious belief? The origin of much contemporary critical method in the ideology critique of Marx or Nietzsche encourages the scholar of religion and literature to seek to explain religious belief in terms of something extrinsic to it—which

means, of course, to explain it *away*. For a Marxist, such an approach makes sense, because all cultural phenomena are ultimately explicable in terms of material causes; for the Nietzschean, similarly, cultural forms become ultimately intelligible in terms of the will to power, and so the good critic will pierce through cultural and literary forms to the structures of power beneath them.

But, what if the scholar lacks these meta-critical commitments, or, rather, believes there is something intrinsically valuable in understanding how art can illuminate religious belief? Can one approach literature *with* critical perspicuity but *without* presuming that all beliefs are attributable to an unacknowledged agenda beyond themselves? This is more than a hypothetical question; Sutton's study demonstrates a great interest in its authors precisely because they were believing Catholics, and evaluates, in part, in terms of how purely they adhere to that belief. Furthermore, the concluding pages indicate that this interest and criterion alike derive from the salient extra-literary question, to what extent these authors provide a model of how a believing Catholic can navigate through a pluralistic and secularizing modern West?

Sutton's monograph deploys the language of ideology critique, but it seems to hinder his efforts to analyze his subjects on precisely those points that guide his interest. Hopkins is criticized for compromising his sincere faith for love of a worldly empire, and so, presumably, Sutton could envision a better Hopkins who would not compromise. Ford accepts Catholicism for purposes of authority and tradition; Sutton exposes this ulterior motive, but then does not explain why authority and tradition are themselves goods to be desired.

In his account of Eliot, Sutton brilliantly argues for the continuity and sincerity of the poet's quest for belief from *The Waste Land* onward, intervening in a debate he identifies with F. R. Leavis and Cleanth Brooks; namely, are Eliot's pre-conversion writings, especially *The Waste Land*, in tension with or an anticipation of the Christian writings (101)? Sutton vindicates Brooks through a close reading of several oft-overlooked passages of Eliot's best known poem, indicating that any division of Eliot's works into an earlier, secular period and a later, religious one can be maintained only if one ignores the actual contents of the poems (92). Eliot's search for religious belief was sustained and sincere, but, even so, Sutton criticizes the poet's faith for being cut with a "nationalistic character." It never actually becomes clear what Sutton means by "nationalism," for he seems to use it in regard to any conceivable commitment to place, culture, or government. And so, given Eliot's view of the modern nation-state as a passing historical fashion, acceptable in its way though hardly fundamental, it is unclear what

this accusation implies.

This is not to accuse Sutton of inadequate scholarship. I wish rather to suggest, again, that the language of contemporary scholarship, which is committed to explaining in Nietzschean fashion not *what* an author believes but *why*, for what ulterior reason, the author believes it, may provide inadequate resources to account for the presumably ultimate beliefs of religious faith. Hopkins and Eliot get caricatured in Sutton's account in ways that Ford's half-sincere belief does not. I would venture even to say that the discourse of ideology critique seems to lead Sutton's monograph to judgments at variance with the sympathies and religious commitments he intimates in its conclusion. Namely, it prompts him to make Graham Greene the "postmodern" hero who transcends simply by surrendering the complex and problematic beliefs of other Catholic modernists.

On Sutton's account, Greene begins as still another Catholic modernist, whose religious doubts lead to a "postmodern Catholicism." His early novels assume the doctrinal, ordering truths of Catholicism against which a chaotic modernity can be judged. In this, he follows Eliot, Hopkins, Ford, and his contemporary, Evelyn Waugh. But Greene's doubts prompt his surrender of Catholicism as the "master narrative" in terms of which human experience must be interrogated. Rather, faith itself comes under interrogation, reduced from episteme to object (175).

For Sutton, this questioning of "master narratives" is a virtue, as it was for Jean-François Lyotard, from whom he loosely borrows the notion. Greene exemplifies a sincere, if wavering, Catholic faith, free of unsettling political implications beyond a general commitment to social justice. He thus provides a model for how a Catholic can live and speak in a pluralistic, skeptical society without either disturbing the political order or entirely surrendering faith (179).

The ambitions of this critical project only become clear in Sutton's conclusion, where he recommends Greene more frankly as the type of the Catholic who continues to believe without evangelizing, and who accepts the reduction of Catholicism from universal ordering principle to an object within a larger pluralistic order, without surrendering to "moral relativism" (195). This argument is problematic and even incoherent. Sutton's Introduction does not set forth the question of the possibility of Catholic belief in modernity as the problem to be answered in the volume. Rather, it proposes, in the conventional framework of ideology critique, to show that Catholic modernists became Catholic because they desired "order and authority." And so, he seems to conclude that to be a Catholic modernist is to be inadequately Catholic (because beholden to an ulterior agenda). And yet, with the exception of Ford, by Sutton's own account, the other

authors discussed are evidently more convinced and faithful Catholics than was Greene, their convinced "nationalist" commitments notwithstanding. And so, it would seem that Sutton's two ambitions, the explicit task of explaining Catholicism in modernism, and the less fully articulated one of finding a model for how to be Catholic in modernity, get their wires crossed. This failure in his larger critical scheme does not undermine Sutton's local successes in his accounts of each writer, and so this remains a valuable book, especially for those anxious to get a richer sense of the intersection of Catholicism and modern literature.

Barry Spurr's *"Anglo-Catholic in Religion": T. S. Eliot and Christianity* promises less than does Sutton, and seeks to accomplish less even than his title suggests. Spurr argues that, while accounts of Eliot's Christianity are central to a proper understanding of the author, little attention has been paid to the historical particularities of the Anglo-Catholicism Eliot actually professed. Rather than tackling the full range of theistic expressions in Eliot's work, Spurr attends patiently to the specificities of the Anglo-Catholic movement as they inform Eliot's work—aspects that scholars have tended to ignore or misunderstand by assuming a vague uniformity of belief between one branch of Christianity and another, or between the Christianity of Eliot's day and ours. With aplomb, Spurr makes the comparatively subtle differences between the Anglo-Catholicism in its early-twentieth-century heyday and contemporary Protestantism, Anglicanism, and Catholicism visible. He also shows those differences to be significant to our understanding of Eliot's life and work.

Spurr provides a chronological narrative in four chapters of Eliot's intellectual journey into the heart of Anglo-Catholicism, followed by two chapters organized thematically: one that illuminates Eliot's social criticism by distinguishing it from those fellow Christians who nonetheless influenced it; and another that examines those few moments in his work where Eliot shows forth, not merely as a Christian poet, or a poet who is Anglo-Catholic, but, as an expressly Anglo-Catholic poet.

The narrative begins with a clear account of turn-of-the-century American Unitarianism, the ancestral "faith" of the Eliot family. Unitarianism's simplified creed, which reduced theological belief to moral conduct, and its celebration of man's basic goodness and powers of individual reason, would influence Eliot in two ways. First, its inheritance inclined Eliot toward religious skepticism, and would prove one of many obstacles to his effort to discover a truth beyond philosophical materialism (21). But, second, well before his conversion, the attenuated theology and anthropology of Unitarianism would be a form of belief against which Eliot would react (17).

Eliot's frequent criticism of atheists such as Bertrand Russell as part of a species of low-church Protestantism is thus helpfully explained as a reaction against the family religion.

Spurr's account of the continuity of Eliot's religious journey agrees with that of Sutton (see above). While he questions biographer Lyndall Gordon's narrative, which portrays Eliot as an esoteric Christian mystic in search of belief from his Harvard days onward (29), Spurr shows that the skeptical young Eliot cherished the spiritual nourishment of sacred architecture to such an extent that the references to the London Churches of St. Magnus Martyr and St. Mary Woolnoth in *The Waste Land* echo Eliot's previous involvement in campaigns to save them from demolition (36). Eliot was enrolled in the defense of English churches nearly a decade before he was baptized into the English Church.

The later narrative chapters are invaluable not so much for perspicuity of insight as for wealth of detail. Bringing together a comprehensive understanding of Anglo-Catholic belief and practice and an extensive archive of Eliot's essays and correspondence with fellow communicant Mary Trevelyn, Spurr offers a vivid portrait of Eliot's devotional life, and positions Eliot, the conservative Anglo-Catholic, relative to other branches of Anglicanism (including the High Church variety, with which it is wrongly but often confused) and Roman Catholicism. During Eliot's lifetime, Anglo-Catholicism reached the peak of its influence, transforming the liturgical life of the Anglican Church by drawing it closer to that of Roman Catholicism. To view Eliot as engaged in that transformation is to render the frequent ambiguities in his cultural criticism intelligible to the contemporary reader.

Spurr's most compelling point may be his account of the emphasis of Anglo-Catholic devotion (96). While continental Protestantism and traditional Anglicanism focus chiefly on the cross and the atonement, Anglo-Catholics drew closer to Roman Catholics in centralizing the incarnation of Christ and His continuing presence in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The penultimate chapter points out the centrality of sacrament and incarnation to Eliot's social theory, which underscored attachment to the particular, local community as the foundation of politics—even within the extensive British Empire (183). In his ecclesiology, Eliot resisted the typical Anglican ecumenism of his day because it sought to erase particular and precise beliefs in favor of a vague universalism (197). One may also surmise that he converted to Anglo-Catholicism rather than to Rome because his understanding of the incarnation demanded a respect for local and particular expression of the universal (43).

In the closing chapter, Spurr rightly recounts the places where the incarnation informs Eliot's poetry—above all in *Four Quartets*, which must

be understood chiefly as a meditation on the incarnation even as it is *not* a specifically Anglo-Catholic poem. Having established Eliot as a poet of the incarnation, Spurr descends into brilliant readings of "Ash-Wednesday," *The Rock*, and *Murder in the Cathedral*, revealing their peculiar dependence on Anglo-Catholic practice. He draws out with precision the liturgical form of Eliot's poem of 1930, as it moves from the beginning of Lent to Good Friday, tracing down Eliot's use of language from Anglican prayer and liturgy. Spurr highlights as well the distinctly Anglo-Catholic orientation of the poem's familiar Marian imagery (222). Most impressively, in his account of *Murder*, Spurr traces the origin of some of the play's language to The Book of Common Prayer, and so makes visible Eliot's effort to have the play emphasize the continuity between Anglican and Catholic traditions (238).

Spurr's fluent movement between discussion of Eliot's devotional life and literary work marks the particular achievement of his book. It shows that modernist scholarship of Eliot must pay greater attention to the specificities of Anglo-Catholicism than it generally has, and that recent ecclesiastical history can be as obscured for the contemporary scholar as can that of Shakespeare's day.

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