

Nature and Religion in the Cultural Criticism of T. S. Eliot

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The modern era has brought into increasingly stark contrast two opposing views of the relationship between nature and culture. The assumption of scientific materialism is that the natural world is itself an accidental concatenation of substances, obeying certain physical and chemical laws but essentially random and meaningless. Our species is supposed to have arisen in this world by a further accident. Given that humans have a large and active brain, they have come up with certain interpretations of the world around them and have created (again more or less randomly) cultural conceptions and practices—most of which have been motivated by fear and greed. Cultural notions are thus seen as inevitably arbitrary and ultimately without any objective foundation. The opposing view is the traditional one, which assumes that the universe was created intentionally by a divine being and that the material world is inherently meaningful to human beings. On this assumption, culture is not altogether random and arbitrary. The creator has given us the possibility of understanding our own nature and (to some degree) the deep meanings of the world itself. According to this worldview, although different cultures have various ideas and customs, certain fundamental ideas are objective, natural, and universal.

In his cultural writings, Eliot argues that culture must be grounded in religion, but he also claims that culture must be grounded in nature, and that nature and religion are intimately related. “We may say,” Eliot writes, “that religion, as distinguished from modern paganism, implies a life in conformity with nature. It may be observed that the natural life and the supernatural life have a conformity with each other which neither has with the mechanistic life . . .” (*Idea*, 60). By “modern paganism” he seems to mean secularism. The claim that the natural and supernatural are in conformity may seem surprising but is based on the connection of religion to physical objects and their symbolic meaning. The “mechanistic life” of the modern world is seen by Eliot as a result of the Cartesian split and the scientific revolution, which have stripped nature of its sanctity and significance, allowing us to manipulate it without limit for our purposes. Eliot goes on to say that “. . . a wrong attitude towards nature implies, somewhere, a wrong attitude towards God,” and adds, “. . . it would be well for us to face the permanent conditions upon which God allows us to live upon this planet”(62).

In this talk, I would like to explore this nexus of nature, culture, and religion in Eliot’s writings. He addresses issues of church and state in subtle and carefully qualified ways, asserting that religious belief must not be regarded as a purely private matter but warning that anything approaching a theocratic organization of society would be destructive to both religion and culture. As he concludes at one point, “We know from our reading of history, that a certain tension between Church and State is desirable. When Church and State fall out completely, it is ill with the commonwealth; and when Church and State get on too well together, there is something wrong with the Church” (*Idea*, 91).