CHAPTER 13

Old Dogmas for a New Crisis

Hell and Incarnation in T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden

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In 1939, on the cusp of war, W.H. Auden could, in Michael North’s words, “summarize in one paragraph what had become a familiar indictment”:2

The most obvious social fact of the last forty years is the failure of liberal capitalist democracy... By denying the social nature of personality, and by ignoring the social power of money, it has created the most impersonal, the most mechanical and the most unequal civilisation the world has ever seen, a civilisation in which the only emotion common to all classes is a feeling of individual isolation from everyone else, a civilisation torn apart by the opposing emotions born of economic injustice, the just envy of the poor and the selfish terror of the rich.3

The social and political crises of the 1930s—from the Economic Crisis and widespread unemployment to the rise of totalitarian regimes in Russia, Italy, and Germany, war in Spain, and a ruptured international order leading to global war—were felt by intellectuals like Auden to place a whole civilisation on trial. The verdict remained uncertain. Would “liberal capitalist democracy” survive, and did it even have a right to exist? Would one of the new political religions, socialism or fascism, sweep all before it in revolution or total war, to create a new order, and perhaps a New Man altogether?

The term “political religion”4 is used here to point to the fact that for many interwar intellectuals, an exclusively political analysis of this situation would

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1 My thanks to Palgrave Macmillan for allowing me to reprint parts of Chapter 3 of my monograph Modernism and Christianity (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
4 Emilio Gentile is the leading proponent of this term, especially within the modern historiography of interwar totalitarianism; but he also points out how contemporary observers themselves consistently characterised these movements as political religions. See Emilio Gentile, “The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections on the Question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism,” translated by Robert Mallett, Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions 1, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 18–55 (40–49).
have seemed insufficient: the crisis also came to be seen as a religious one, raising with great urgency the question of the survival of Europe's Christian heritage, as against a possible post-Christian future. In his classic *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), Frank Kermode drew attention to the apocalyptic mood of Decadence and Transition so widespread in modernist writing. More recently, the historian of fascism, Roger Griffin, has vastly expanded this insight by arguing that the whole cultural and political movement we call “modernism” can be understood as a revolt against modernity-as-decadence: a terrifying crisis of values eroding the Sacred Canopy of established meanings in the West, and evoking an unprecedented range of efforts to diagnose this cultural illness and propose some means of revitalisation or rebirth. However, Griffin treats Christianity itself too lightly, associating it more or less exclusively with a shattered and definitively past “Sacred Canopy.” But in a looming interwar crisis, Christianity could also plausibly be opposed to *ersatz* secular religions of all kinds. For some, it provided an independent critique and historical analysis of all political “isms”; it could be seen as a bulwark against impending chaos and a vital source of values; and as offering its own regeneration cure for the ills of social atomism and injustice, a technocratic, despiritualised civilisation, and an impersonal and malfunctioning industrial capitalism. Thus, ancient Christian dogmas could be given a new lease of life by being interpreted and re-applied to this new crisis. This essay examines the surprising creative investment by two prominent modernist convert-poets in Christian dogma in light of the interwar crisis: Hell, or final damnation, in T.S. Eliot; and the Incarnation in W.H. Auden’s work. In their political thought, their cultural theory, and their aesthetics, these poets did not simply apply traditional formulae: they tried in their own way to define a whole new start for an ailing and threatened culture.

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6 See Griffin *Modernism and Fascism*, Chapters 2 and 3.

7 Of course, Christianity is not Griffin’s main subject in *Modernism and Fascism*, and he refers to it mostly in passing (e.g. p. 110, “the crisis of the credibility of both Christianity and the progress myth as stable sources of transcendence deepened”). Thus the idea of Christianity itself as a potentially “revitalising” force for modernist writers, thinkers or cultural activists is nowhere considered, although such an emphasis does not discredit his theory.