

Murder in the Cathedral was written to shock theatergoers and intellectuals

Michael Butler
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Murder in the Cathedral, by T.S. Eliot, was written for the purpose of shocking pre-war theatergoers and possibly intellectuals out of their complacency and into a sense of urgency of a fundamental problem that was gripping Europe -- at that time. In the years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War, Europe was witnessing the alarming growth of an alternative: ideology -- totalitarianism and especially Nazism -- which threatened the freedom of the Christian-oriented Western world. T.S. Eliot felt the urgency of the times, and had analyzed the nature of the problem, both in his poetry and more explicitly in a group of lectures entitled *The Idea of a Christian Society*, published in 1939.

In T.S. Eliot's work there is not so much an apocalyptic fervor, but more a direct confrontation with the effects of the evil which is controlling the world. Throughout his life he became deeply concerned with evil, the cause of all suffering, and in his writings is expressed the search for some ultimate answer. He finally arrived at a position which brought about his conversion to Catholicism:

Christian patience and humility are achieved when change and the "perpetual struggle of good and evil" are seen from the perspective of God. In *The Rock*, a dual conception of the church is given: on one hand, the church in action must continue the fight against evil in every generation, but on the other, it must be simultaneously recognized with humility that the battle will not be won on earth.

Murder in the Cathedral was written for the Canterbury Festival of 1935. In it, Eliot deals not only with the martyrdom of a twelfth century Archbishop, Thomas a Becket but dramatizes all the disorder and the search for hope experienced in those black years prior to the Second World War. In *The Idea of a Christian Society* Eliot analyzed the position that Western society had arrived at:

"We are living at present in a kind of doldrums between opposing winds of doctrine, in a period in which one political philosophy has lost its cogency for behavior... it is this disorder and not individual insincerity, which is responsible for the hollowness of many political and ecclesiastical utterances."

Western society is at a point where there absolutely must be change, held Eliot. What are the alternatives this society is faced with?

"We might of course merely sink into an apathetic decline; without faith in life and therefore without faith in ourselves, without a philosophy of life, and without art. Or we might get a 'Totalitarian Democracy'... a state of affairs in which we shall have regimentation and conformity, without respect for the needs of the individual soul."

Eliot urged that the problem must be confronted now. Our culture, he maintained, is mainly negative -- only positive in so far as it is Christian. What is needed is a re-evaluation of society in light of "Christian Principles."

"My primary interest is a change in our social attitude... such a change would compel changes in the organization of industry, commerce and financial credit; that it would facilitate, where it now impedes, the life of devotion for those who are capable of it."

Such a change could only come about through the dedicated and sincere efforts of those with strong

convictions. Indeed, Eliot searched for a Christian mirror image of the dedicated Communist militant, fearlessly putting his Marxist principle into practice.

This concern is dramatized in the whole movement of *Murder in the Cathedral*. The play is divided by a sermon interlude into two parts. At the center of the play is Archbishop Thomas a Becket, whose convictions are strong enough to enable him to die for them. His course, in Part I, is analogous to Jesus' struggle in the wilderness. Thomas remains steadfast against the four Tempters, to unite completely with the Will of God, by subjugating his own will. Part II parallels the Passion. Thomas becomes a sacrifice for God as payment:

"Blood for blood. His blood to buy my life, my blood given to pay for His death, my death for His death."

The historical Thomas a Becket was murdered in 1170 after a protracted struggle with Henry II over ecclesiastical privilege. In Eliot's play, Thomas dies to assert the supremacy of the law of God.

Thomas was tempted in four ways: the First Tempter offers Thomas a return to his early life of youthful, sensual pleasures at court; the Second Tempter offers earthly power with which to improve the temporal world, leaving holiness for the hereafter; the Third Tempter offers Thomas both revenge upon the King and domination over the Pope if he will side with the barons. Thomas is able to reject all of these from the standpoint of his initial position proclaimed in his entry speech.

"Neither does the actor suffer Nor the patient act. But both are fixed in an external action, an eternal patience to which all must consent that it may be willed and which must suffer that they may will it."

It was God who has established the "eternal action." All self-willed actions will conflict with the fundamental pattern so that those who "will it" suffer. The Fourth Tempter comes unexpectedly, urging Thomas to "seek the way of martyrdom." Thomas must also overcome this desire. We can understand this more fully from what the Archbishop preaches in the sermon interlude.

"Ambition fortifies the will of man to become ruler over other men: it operates with deception, cajolery and violence, it is the action of impurity upon impurity. Not so in Heaven. A martyr, or saint is always made by the design of God for His love of men... a true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God... "

In Part II there is the contrast between Thomas, who has by now "lost his will in the will of God," and the four Knights, whose actions are totally motivated by their ambition. Thomas goes to his death with a spirit that reflects the Crucifixion.

Yet *Murder in the Cathedral* is more than a liturgical drama celebrating the martyrdom of a 12th century Archbishop. What is unusual and unique about this play are the actions of the four Knights who, after drunkenly insulting and then violently murdering Thomas, step forward and justify their actions in an idiom more at home in 20th century politics than in liturgical drama. They argue to assert the necessity of their actions and lament that they were landed with the task. They ostensibly take a stand behind order and stability in the temporal world.

"Unhappily there are times when violence is the only way in which social justice can be secured. At another time, you would condemn an Archbishop by vote of Parliament and execute him formally as a traitor."

The Four Knights totally deny the fact that freedom can only come from God, when one allies with the will of God. They stand in the position of one of the alternatives Eliot cited in *The Idea of a Christian Society*. They represent those working for "a state... in which we shall have regimentation and conformity without respect for the needs of the individual soul." This is especially clear when one reads the final speech of the First Knight.

"I think there is no more to be said; and I suggest that you now disperse quietly to your homes. Please be careful not to loiter in groups at street corners, and do nothing that might provoke any public outbreak."

Yet these words are not the final position of the play. It is the Chorus which voices the final speech. Throughout *Murder in the Cathedral*, the Chorus has led the audience through all fear, doubt and anguish concerning the future. The Chorus is made up of the poor women of Canterbury, who are common people, suffering the effects of so much spiritual and ideological struggle. Their final words are in the form of a prayer.

"Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as a type of common man, Of the men and

women who shut the door and sit by the fire; Who fear the blessing of God, the surrender required, deprivation inflicted; Who fear the injustice of men less than the justice of God. Who fear the hand at the window, the fire in the thatch, the fist in the tavern, the push into the canal... Less than we fear God; We acknowledge our trespass, our weakness, our fault we. acknowledge That the sin of the world is upon our heads, that the blood of the martyrs and the agony of the saints Is upon our heads. Lord have mercy upon us -- Christ have mercy upon us -- Lord have mercy upon us Blessed Thomas, pray for us.

Eliot was writing in a time when Europe was threatened by the spread of the most powerful and most efficiently organized totalitarian ideology yet to appear on the face of the earth. What will happen when the people, like these warmth seeking poor women of Canterbury, are faced with such possibilities? Will the faith of the people be strong enough to unite them against such a powerful threat?

Europe has been ravaged twice already, by power-seeking individuals. In 1914, Kaiser Wilhelm introduced the realities of 20th century warfare, bringing about destruction never before precedent in world history. Again in 1939, Europe was again brought into turmoil by Hitler's ambitious reach for power with the freedom-denying totalitarian ideology. On both occasions, the common people have been able to unite against these threats, just in the eleventh hour. However, the possibility of a materialistic alternative to individual freedom is still very much a reality. Freedom seeking people have still to unite against these threats with a completely freedom-giving way of life, such as Eliot hoped for, in order to prevent the actuality of worldwide destruction, a possibility that will be made a reality by the spread of Communism.