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The Dialectics of Politics and Religion in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*

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ABSTRACT

T. S. Eliot's *Murder in The Cathedral* accommodates politics and religion in its ideological and creative belly. In various discourses, politics and religion share an inevitable, interwoven correlation where the essence of one is upheld by the other through a dialectical alignment. The parallel configuration of both concepts in the text has elicited debates and critical responses regarding their compatibility or otherwise. However, studies have shown that there is a dominant interpretive consensus portraying religion as Eliot's main focus thereby upholding a lopsided narrative which diminishes the thematic potential of the text. This article argues that there is an inevitable synthesis between politics and religion which imbricates their relationship in the text. Through demonstrable dialogism, the article further argues that Eliot propagates a dialectic of mutual dependency between politics represented by King Henry II and religion represented by Archbishop Thomas Becket. Thus, politics and religion are two different branches of the same existential paradigm and should be recognized as such. Eliot's juxtaposition of the two concepts in the text constitutes a genuine reality which provides a new interpretive kernel.

抽象的

T.S.艾略特的《谋杀于大教堂》在其思想和创作的核心容纳了政治和宗教。在各种话语中，政治和宗教之间存在着不可避免的、交织在一起的关联，其中一个的本质通过辩证性的排列得到另一个的支撑。文本中这两个概念的平行配置引发了关于它们是否兼容的争论和批判性回应。然而，研究表明，有一种主要的解释共识将宗教描绘为艾略特的主要关注点，从而维持了一种不平衡的叙述，削弱了文本的主题潜力。本文认为，政治与宗教之间存在着一种不可避免的融合，将它们的关系交织在文本中。通过可证明的对白性，本文进一步论证了艾略特宣传了由亨利二世国王代表的政治与由托马斯·贝克特大主教代表的宗教之间的相互依赖的辩证关系。因此，政治和宗教是同一存在范式的两个不同分支，应该被视为这样的。艾略特在文本中将这两个概念并置构成了一个真实的现实，提供了一个新的解释内核。

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1. Introduction

Renowned English writer and winner of the 1948 Nobel Prize for Literature T.S. Eliot bestrides the global literary scene in different categories as poet, essayist, literary critic, editor, and playwright. His modernist verse drama *Murder in The Cathedral* (from here on, *Murder*) bulks large in global literary environment as one of the most iconic dramatic historical appropriations that continually lubricate the relational machinery between politics and religion. The actual historical event took place in 1170 when the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket was gruesomely murdered by four knights who claimed to be sent by King Henry II. Eliot dramatized the incident in 1935 and it was performed at the Chapter House of Canterbury Cathedral in the Medieval Catholic and Anglo-Catholic tradition. The medieval content of the text at a time of modernist effervescence subliminally points to Eliot's nostalgic reincarnation of an era dominated by spiritual and moral determination. While other modernist writers like Samuel Beckett, D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, and Dylan Thomas remained faithful to propagating the sensibilities of the modern epoch, Eliot chose to rehabilitate medieval consciousness on a modern stage. However, he salvaged himself by dramatizing the intersection of two principal concepts, politics and religion which have combined to define global socio-political realities in the modern period and beyond. In *Murder*, apart from what seems like the triumph of religion through martyrdom, the state also records political success through the death of Becket and the eventual control of the church. Eliot's portrayal of martyrdom as a major thematic cornerstone in the text has attracted the surgical knife of many critics where they x-ray issues like the conflict between temporal and spiritual powers and the supremacy of spiritual convictions over mundane, earthly attachments. Constituting the nucleus of the foregoing are politics and religion in all their annotative immediacy.

Although politics and religion have successfully maintained separate identities as disciplines of acclaimed repute, critics, and writers inevitably juxtapose them in the literature where they are continually reexamined. These efforts uphold their tenets as primal parameters of literary and social analyses. George Moyser profoundly posits that "religion and politics have a lot to do with each other; they interact in a number of important but complex ways" (1). Moyser's admission to the relationship between politics and religion suggests a symbiotic relationship where both concepts operate side by side, prompting responses to public behavior and attitudes toward them. Again, he goes on to assert that "it is very difficult in the modern world to ignore the presence of religion in public affairs. Virtually daily, the media provide instances demonstrating that the people, institutions, and ideas that make up the religious sphere have a continuing and important relevance to the political realm" (1). Jude Onebunne provides a similar interplay of the relationship between politics and religion. According to him "religion and politics are intertwined and it empowers man to function in his society by contesting for a political position so as to contribute his ideology" (133). Whether used euphemistically as temporal and state power, transcendental and material consciousness, the sacred and profane, politics and religion resonate in *Murder* creating in the text a modernist appeal.

Dialectically, Becket's office and experience as Lord Chancellor of England, a political position, elevated him to win the confidence of King Henry II which led to his

appointment as the Archbishop of Canterbury, a religious position. Thus, we can profitably infer that there is politics in religion and there is religion in politics. Eliot creatively conveys this dialectical reality by succinctly casting the two principal characters in the play, Archbishop Thomas Becket and King Henry II, to represent each of the concepts in an overlapping affinity. Although the event in the text is a product of history, the inherent conflict of interest, ego tussle, and eschatological nuances have promoted its ideological, thematic potential as a voice heralding politics and religion in the literature. The intricacy of their relationship symbolizes the entangling nature of both concepts and how they complement each other. In many ways, *Murder* can also be described as a combination of literature and history, two disciplines that are inseparably intertwined. Literature and history share a relationship of dependencies where they rely on each other for creative, aesthetic validation. Mark Woollacott puts it more succinctly by remarking that “the main connection between literature and history is that literature is used to report and represent history. The biggest difference between literature and history is that the latter posits itself as fact, while the former is taken to be an artistic form” (2). Many literary creations depend on historical epochs for rehabilitation. Through literature, history is revived, retold, or reinvented offering a broader, new perspective to the research community. The famous English playwright William Shakespeare relied on history to write most of his plays, especially those with political content such as *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka relied on a historical incident to write his play *Death and the King’s Horseman*. Thus, literature and history are never far apart. Through his modernist inclinations, Eliot has made the recreation of history his major fount as a way of revisiting a past event and demonstrating either its relevance in contemporary times or its mutilation which has misguided humanity. The result of the dialectical ordering of politics and religion in the text is Becket’s martyrdom which will continually stimulate more critical responses in literary criticism.

As a dramatic reconstruction of history, Eliot in *Murder* employs different artistic strategies such as foreshadowing, dramatic irony, and anti-climax to give the play multiple identities. At the forefront of his dramatic commitment are three major issues which have informed various degrees of literary engagements. First is the role of the chorus, made up of poor women of Canterbury in the development and management of the conflict between the Archbishop and King Henry II. Right from the Dionysian spectacle in Greece, the chorus, as a major component of drama, has always played significant roles in providing background commentaries before the enactment of tragedy. The chorus in the text perceptively expresses a sense of foreboding and apprehension toward the return of the archbishop to England. Aware of the frosty relationship between the Archbishop and King Henry II, the chorus feared that the king may murder the archbishop which would leave a vacuum in Canterbury. Second is the notion of martyrdom and its multifaceted identities. Through Becket’s character, Eliot challenges the audience to reexamine martyrdom and what constitutes its variables. Furthermore, he encourages the audience to consider whether martyrdom is divinely willed or if people can orchestrate it in pursuit of personal glory. Can individuals on their own decide to become martyrs or does martyrdom come upon people even when they have no knowledge or willingness about it? Thirdly, the acrimony between the archbishop and the king, representing spiritual and temporal influences after their initial friendship, demonstrates the dialectic of religion and politics which remains in a flux even in the contemporary world. Brian

Horne infers that the text “dramatizes the dilemma of the relation between spiritual and temporal power that has haunted Christian ecclesiology since the time of the emperor Constantine” (1). In this study, I argue that politics and religion contain each other in themselves in Eliot’s play as identified in the title. The dialectics of that relationship presuppose a marriage of convenience between the two concepts where they must necessarily accommodate each other.

2. A political, religious play or both: critical reviews

Murder avails itself of multiple interpretative strands given the various ideological and creative possibilities that abound in the text. Abu Saeed Naheed believes that “Eliot wrote the play at the time of rising fascism in central Europe and can be taken as a protest to individuals in affected countries to oppose the Nazi regime’s subversion of the ideals of the Christian church” (74). The socio-political condition in Europe and all the modernist apprehension at that time may have influenced Eliot to write the play when the continent experienced political fervency with fascism, totalitarianism, and communism holding sway. Since then, the text has consistently attracted global commendation due primarily to its religious bent. Religion can be described as any human activity that establishes a connection between the physical realm and the spiritual realm mostly through obedience, supplication, and propitiation. It thrives as the recognition of an ecclesiastical, supreme power higher and more elevated than any other power among men. According to Clement Obagbinoko “religion is believed to be the totality of personal thoughts, feelings and beliefs of the individual operating within a group of people with similar thoughts, feelings and belief with whom the individual relates, interacts and communes with a supernatural or divine being” (35). The religious hue of the text, especially Becket’s tenacious adherence to the matters of God, has become a focal point of reference to rouse the Christian public out of complacency and docile acceptance of worldly, mundane affairs.

While religion occupies a magisterial position in the text, politics constitutes a symbolic, ubiquitous silhouette which provides a counter-narrative that seeks to decorate the text in a new literary, ideological apparel. Politics is the general aggregation of interests in the quest to influence, control, retain power, and acquire authority. Again, Onebunne opines that “politics is the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live. As such, it is an essentially social activity, inextricably linked on the one hand to the existence of diversity and conflict, and on the other hand, to a willingness to co-operate and act collectively” (134). From Onebunne’s remarks, the two principal operative words are “conflict” and “cooperation.” “Conflict” and “cooperation” as political terms clearly define the relationship between Becket and King Henry II. “Cooperation” united them, “conflict” separated them leading to Becket’s untimely death. However, besides the religious and political complexions of the text, many critics have interpreted it from multiple standpoints. Iman Hammad analyses the text from an individual’s choice of self-abnegation and hedonistic flight on the way to embracing martyrdom. According to him “the intellectual event of the play is Becket, the martyr, who gives his own life for the sake of transcendental principles. As a martyr, Becket gives his own life to defend a deeply rooted ideal which is that God’s will is above man’s desires” (1682). Such interpretation of the text is deeply religious, leaning toward

the Christian faith, dissecting the willingness and commitment of those who profess to worship and serve God. For Hammad, Becket is a genuine signpost and reference point for total spiritual immersion toward heavenly glory in rejection of earthly pleasures and rewards. The fact that it is difficult to establish whether Becket's martyrdom was self-arrogated or divinely predestined has left a big question mark on ascribing martyrdom as Eliot's sole commitment in the play. Perhaps this informs Krysty Michael's remark that "the unresolved question of the validity of Becket's martyrdom leaves the theological significance of the play indeterminate" (35). While it is obvious that Becket jettisons vainglorious, base materialism for ideal spiritual elevation, there seems to be a debate concerning the genuineness of his martyrdom since it seems he willed it. If he willed it, it thus detracts from its religious and theological symbolism.

Ankita Manuja, a feminist critic, examines the text from a gender perspective, scrutinizing the mediating and intervening role of women in the face of social tension in all of its destabilizing potential. Manuja argues that "the women chorus, putting their feminine traits of emotion and subtleness brings out the subject of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. The women's chorus seems to seize the opportunity to question the dominance of logos, the point of reference of truth which is the 'man.' The text is largely male-centric. At the outset of this drama, we get a sense of the rigidity of male hierarchy in the society of twelfth-century England, where the female counterpart takes the position of the 'other'" (13). Although it can be inferred that Eliot characterized women as active participants in social tension, Manuja believes that the playwright unwittingly casts women as second-rated beings. The exchange between the chorus made up of the women of Canterbury and the priests made up of men somehow shows Eliot's biased attitude toward women. While martyrdom, Christianity, and commitment to the Catholic faith have all assumed a dominant analytical kernel in the text, gender rhetoric from the perspective of the role and position of women has also been actively promoted. James Mathew Wilson interprets the text from the prism of artistic compactness, thin plot, and lack of spontaneity. He believes that the compact nature of the text aligns with its modernist appeal given that there are boring, austere, and absurd repetitions of martyrdom, which makes for monotonous reading. According to Wilson "precisely because the play is challenging in its form and style, the substantive challenge of its content may be lost on a contemporary reader, if its historical context and intellectual genesis are not first examined" (167). To a good degree, one can agree with Wilson that *Murder* is not an entertaining text, yet the germane issues of history, politics, religion and the relationship between God and man are all portrayed.

The religious dimension of the play points to its predilection toward divinity exemplified by Becket's character. Nils Holger Petersen is convinced that Eliot ascribes divine qualities to Becket which inevitably affects the religious perception of the audience toward him. In Petersen's opinion "clearly, the play prioritizes Thomas's divine authority, without, however, diminishing the effect of the other voices, which makes it possible for anyone in the audience to find a point of identification from which to experience the play" (12). It remains to be seen if the original Thomas Becket in the actual incident embodied so much divine authority. However, in the textual reconstruction of that historical event, Eliot invests Becket with enormous divine powers which has led people to compare him to the biblical Jesus Christ. Some people have argued that politics is a dirty game therefore, it inevitably contaminates anyone who gets involved in it.

However, Becket's transition from a political office holder to a religious faithful with divine status speaks eloquently of the possibility inherent in politics to transmute to religion and vice versa. The divine authority that Becket wields as recognized by the chorus and the priests shapes their consciousness and prepares them to accept him as a martyr after he is murdered by the four knights. A critical dialectical scrutiny of Becket's death reveals that politics played a very important part in making him a martyr. No doubt he dies as a religious martyr, but the role played by politics in the process leading to his martyrdom cannot be overemphasized. It was Becket's resolve to shun and reject politics while clinging to his religious duties that led to his death. From the content of the temptation by the first three tempters, he was required to return to his political duties as Lord Chancellor and make peace with the King. Therefore, the lure of politics and his determination to reject it become a trials that he must overcome to ascend to saintly status. The question is – could Becket have become a martyr without the political tension between him and the King? The conflict between him and the king resulted in his martyrdom. He rejects political duties and accepts religious duties, both rejection and acceptance culminate in his elevation for which he is celebrated and honored in English history.

Those who argue that martyrdom is the central, overriding idea in the text may have a valid point but such arguments are stranded in the heuristic realm given that the process through which martyrdom is achieved does not get any attention. Becket's martyrdom is a product of the interaction between politics and religion. Both concepts combine in different ramifications to produce a saint and a martyr. Golbarg Khorsand argues that “among the play's themes are conflicts of spiritual and secular power and relation of church and state. But these themes are subordinated to another underlying theme: that of martyrdom” (129). It is the dialectic of politics and religion that inevitably leads to martyrdom in the play. King Henry II, as the political authority of England, knows quite well that he needs to delve into religion by controlling the church to wield absolute political powers. The king recognizes what religion means to the people and that he could probably not exercise absolute political powers without controlling the religious machinery of the state. Therefore, to exercise total political power, in search of coherence in governance, he must necessarily take into account the religious sector of the state. If Becket is today celebrated as a martyr, then the public must recognize that the martyrdom was achieved riding at the back of politics. Therefore, to separate politics from religion in the text would be futile.

In another instance, Ado Magaji Mansur thinks differently by insisting that religion is the central theme of the play from where other sub-themes derive their animation and impulse. According to him, “in *Murder in The Cathedral*, Eliot deploys the theme of religion to highlight some lost religious values among his people whose faith has been shaken as a result of the changes that characterized the modern era” (4). Of course, the lives of many people, including Christians, were significantly altered by the radical, disruptive changes ushered in by modernism in Europe at that time. With the advent of modernism, many Christians lost hope and questioned the existence of God. So, for Mansur, Eliot wrote *Murder* with religion as a central focus to revive the waning faith among many Christians in Europe. But Mansur does not also recognize that politics is no less central to the thematic construct of the play because it provides Becket with the mental gauge to test and uphold his Christian faith. Becket failed in his attempt to

prevent the state from exercising political control over the church. This is because, after his death, King Henry II had his way to bring the church under his political control which was accepted by the priests, the chorus and the entire Christian community. In the dialectics of politics and religion, one can conveniently describe the climax of that conflict as the triumph of politics over religion. Conversely, religion also triumphed over politics because the clash produced a martyr. Perhaps the forgoing informs Mohammed and Hassan's submission that "while serving as the Archbishop, King Henry II attempted to reduce the power of the Catholic Church. Becket did not like the political move and resisted it at all costs. Although the church eventually accepted the changes, Becket never changed his mind on the matter leading to a rift between him and King Henry" (2). To "reduce the power of the Catholic Church" means that the King wanted to whittle down the religious powers of the church and exercise absolute political control all over the country. The king recognized the significance of politics mixing with religion but preferred where politics will have supremacy over religion. In all the different interpretive complexion, there is a sense in which we can argue that Eliot's commitment in the play is to demonstrate that the Christian religion is an integral part of state machinery but that the state cannot manipulate the church to advance its political and economic template.

3. The dialectic incursion

The sparse artistic identity of *Murder* is sustained by the dialectic flourishes between politics and religion dramatized by the juxtaposition of the Catholic Church and the State of England. Usually associated with German idealist Frederick Wilhelm Hegel, dialectics explains the interaction of opposites and how, through that interaction, the operating concepts are contained in and benefit from each other, thus we have the Hegelian dialectic. Marek Otisk perhaps has a slightly different opinion about dialectics which is not so far away from the Hegelian dialectic. According to him "dialectic is the art of good disputation. It is concerned with dividing genera into species and resolving species to genera, with definitions and arguments" (8). If the Hegelian dialectic is centered on the interaction of opposites at the level of ideas, it presupposes an argument which is why it is not far from Marek's reasoning of the concept. However, the dialectic has permeated various academic disciplines including the arts and social sciences. Also, its original meaning and explications from the time of Hegel have undergone a radical transformation so that in the 21st century, dialectic, in addition to being applied to examine the symbiotic, mutual relationship between opposites, is now deployed to scrutinize the relationship of various elements that occur together, not necessarily opposites. Politics and religion are not, by any stretch of the imagination opposites, but they co-habit in every modern and ancient community given that the exercise of political power must necessarily take into account the religious mentality of the people. Perhaps that is why Karl Marx submits that "religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (171).

In *Murder*, Eliot does not present politics and religion as opposites. Both concepts are inexorably aligned to operate side by side in nourishing Becket's martyrdom which many critics believe is the playwright's focus. Two characters are at the forefront of the religion/politics dialectical ordering, Thomas Becket and King Henry II. To establish the

dialectical import of the future rift between them, Eliot first of all cast them as secular friends who occupied political positions. While Thomas was the Lord Chancellor, Henry II was the paramount political head of England. However, Thomas had a religious background as a young man. He was inclined to the Christian faith as an adherent of the Catholic doctrine. By first casting them as secular friends, Eliot promotes the intensity of their eventual rift where they subscribe to different ideologies. As a ruler interested in absolute powers, King Henry II recognizes the importance of the Church in exercising that absolute power. Calasan, Danijeta, Dokovic and Rajka remark that “the relation between the state and religious communities throughout history were different and complex, ranging from absolute symbiosis and unity to deep separation, from conflicts and a fight for dominion” (1). From the foregoing, it is obvious that the relationship between politics and religion over the years has always maintained a dialectical struggle for supremacy and this is evident in Eliot’s play.

Beyond the fight for supremacy, politics and religion in the play conspire to make Becket a martyr. Therefore, it is difficult, almost impossible to talk about his martyrdom or discuss martyrdom in the play without considering the roles played by both politics and religion. While politics forces Becket out of England to France in exile for seven years, the lure of religious duties brings him back to England on his way to becoming a martyr. The tempters’ offer of political power provides Becket an opportunity to prove his religious and spiritual doggedness on his way to martyrdom. All through the play, Becket’s religious, and spiritual identities are upheld by his resolve to resist political power and positions. The triumph of King Henry II, symbolized by the death of Becket, indicates the recognition of the state’s political machinery regarding the importance of religious power. If religious power and influence were not important factors in the overall absoluteness and effective, total control of the people, King Henry II would not have insisted on controlling the church. It is in his resolve to control and acquire power, basic elements of politics, that he appointed Becket as the Archbishop of England. Becket’s appointment to the exalted position of Archbishop is the most fundamental political activity in the text. His position as a religious leader marked the beginning of the conflict between politics and religion, the dialectic of two fragmented modes of consciousness, which produced one of the most iconic historical events in the secular world and Christendom.

Dialectics has made successful incursions into all aspects of academic enquiry. One can profitably argue that there is no aspect of knowledge where the principle of dialectics cannot be utilized including the physical sciences. In contemporary times, dialectics is no longer used in terms of the occurrence of opposites but in terms of generally examining the close relationship which exists between related concepts. So, we can speak in terms of the dialectic of crime and justice and at the same time of crime and punishment. While crime and justice are not opposites, crime and punishment are opposites. We can also speak in terms of the dialectic of education and wealth and the dialectic of education and illiteracy. While education and wealth are not opposites, education and illiteracy are opposites, yet dialectics can be gainfully utilized to interrogate the two concepts. Gradually, dialectics is becoming an effective tool for the critical interpretation and examination of various concepts irrespective of their relationships as long as these concepts can be juxtaposed to establish their inevitable relationship within the matrix of human advancement. In the literature, we can speak in terms of the relationship that

exists among all the different genres. For example, the dialectic between prose and drama, the dialectic between poetry and drama and so on. These genres are not opposites but their relationships with one another can be examined to establish how they operate when placed side by side with each other. Politics and religion are not opposites but they constitute one of the most used and applied pairs in the arts and social sciences.

Besides the popular Hegelian dialectics, other forms of dialectic have emerged such as the Marxist dialectic, which can be explained and understood through the dialectical materialistic purview. Given Marx's interest in social dynamics and the material interaction of class relations in every society, his component of dialectics mirrors how wealth is shared and distributed within the various classes that make up a society. Also, there is historical dialectic which focuses on the transmutation and interaction of various elements that make up history and their contributions in shaping the present and future. In the present study, dialectics is applied to examine the relationship between history and literature but primarily to explain the relationship between politics and religion as they occur in *Murder*. While Eliot may have had other purposes for writing the play, while many critics may have interpreted the play from different, multiple perspectives, the relationship between politics and religion and their inexorable unity has been muted and not received the critical attention it deserves. This study attempts to establish that in the play there is an overlapping, interconnecting relationship between politics and religion through the characters of Thomas Beckett and King Henry II. The relationship between the two collapsed not because politics and religion could not co-mingle but because Thomas Becket possesses inherent, uncompromising character traits which could not foster or sustain the continual existence of politics and religion as separate entities. After the knights murdered Becket, they offered different excuses for their acts. The state under the authority and power of the king took over the church, a move accepted by the entire Christian community which made Becket's death slightly inconsequential. Besides becoming a martyr, his death serves no purpose to the Christian community in the play because the church lost out to the state after his demise.

4. Murder in the Cathedral: politics and religion coalesce

Thomas Beckett can be regarded as both a political and religious character. As a religious character, he undergoes enormous spiritual tribulation as an archbishop. As a political character, he was once Lord Chancellor, a political position under King Henry II. He eventually dies for firmly holding on to his religious beliefs. Becket's stellar performance and excellent leadership qualities as a chancellor and political leader qualified him as a religious leader and Archbishop. Politics brought him to prominence and ushered him into a prestigious religious position. As a young boy, Becket adhered to the Catholic faith. However, he could not attain popularity and national acclaim for his religious beliefs. Through a combination of politics first and later religion, he achieves popularity as a sacred persona which ultimately leads to his becoming a martyr. To effectively discuss Becket's martyrdom, one must necessarily understand the depth of politics and religion and how both concepts in the play jointly inspired his enduring legacy in English history and literature.

At the beginning of the play, Becket returns to England after seven years in France in exile. His return is heralded by the poor women of Canterbury who form the chorus and

intuitively prognosticate about the danger posed by his presence. The women express a sense of reservation and foreboding knowing full well the friction and unease that exist between him and King Henry II. In their lamentations, they urge the Archbishop to depart to France fearing that his return to England may spell doom for him and the church. The women recount their different experiences which range from good and bad in his absence. These religious women acknowledge that Becket was nice to them but that they would prefer he does not return because it would imperil their existence, plunging them further into the abyss of suffering and agony. From the musings of the chorus, the absence of the archbishop affected them but they managed well without him and would prefer to continue to live their lives without him in England:

4.1. Chorus

Seven 1 years and the summer is over,
 Seven 2 years since the archbishop left us,
 He who was always kind to his people.
 But it would not be well if he should return.
 King rules or baron rules;
 We have suffered various oppression,
 But mostly we are left to our own devices,
 And we are content if we are left alone. (Eliot, 12)

The women of Canterbury, by their admission avow that Becket was not invited back to England by the church neither did he return because the women wanted him to do so. The question is – why did Becket return to England? In his absence, Canterbury made progress and would have continued to make progress without him. Religious duty to God is a personal indulgence. If indeed he was moved by his desire and convictions to serve God, he would have done it seamlessly in France. He returned to England for two reasons – first to seek martyrdom knowing full well that King Henry II would not take kindly to his presence if he was not going to submit to temporal powers. Second, he returned to England to play the politics of Canterbury leadership which buttresses a general notion that there is politics even within the church. Therefore, while Becket is presented to be religiously and spiritually minded, he is deeply committed to temporal and mundane pastimes which is signified by his desire for martyrdom. If indeed he was sincere in his return to England, if he was selfless, he would not have jeopardized the lives of the poor women of Canterbury by his return. Therefore, it is safe to submit that he climbed to religious glory riding on the back of political desires even if he rejected the political office offered by the king. Becket's sense of inordinate ambition to become a martyr is underscored by Ignatius Nsaidzedze's remarks that "Thomas coming back knows that he will be killed. He is even advised not to come back but he refused" (49). We can therefore say that his return was religiously and politically self-serving.

Becket's religious life and glory are all products of political benefits and protection. The King of France, the principal political authority in France, had granted him permission and protection to live in the country for 7 years. As a religious character, Becket needed the political authority of the king of France to live peacefully and protected in the country. The king of France, representing the highest political authority in his country, did not demonstrate any apathy toward religion or draw any demarcation between

politics and religion. By protecting Becket, the king of France was inadvertently courting a political face-off with King Henry II. Thus, religion and politics intermingle in an intricate web of supremacy. Becket, upon resigning as the Chancellor of England and focusing on his role as the Archbishop, relinquished all political associations with King Henry II maintaining that the spiritual and temporal could not co-exist. However, he flees to the embrace of another temporal power, who through a political decision, welcomed and protected him in his country. This is reminiscent of the character Man, the protagonist in Ayi Kwei Armah's novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, who claimed to be clean from corruption but assisted his friend Koomson, a corrupt politician to escape through a latrine when the military took over power in that country. By accepting to live in France in exile through a political decision, Becket lost the moral justification to insist that politics and religion could not co-exist.

Upon his return to England, spurred on and encouraged by the priests, he remains adamant and suggests his inclination to martyrdom. The priests scold the old women constituting the chorus, reprimanding them for their lack of faith and belief. Together, the priests praise Becket and welcome him back to England, assuring him of their loyalty:

4.2. *Second priest*

Yet our Lord is returned. Our Lord has come back to his own again.
 We have had enough of waiting, from December to dismal December
 The Archbishop shall be at our head, dispelling dismay and doubt.
 He will tell us what we are to do, he will give us our orders, instruct us.
 Our Lord is at one with the Pope, and also the King of France.
 We can lean on a rock, we can feel a firm foothold
 Against the perpetual wash of tides of balance of forces
 Of Barons and landholders.

The rock of God is beneath our feet, let us meet the archbishop with cordial thanksgiving:

Our Lord, our archbishop returns and when the archbishop returns
 Our doubts are dispelled. Let us therefore rejoice
 I say rejoice and show a glad face for his welcome.
 I am the archbishop's man. Let us give the archbishop welcome! (Eliot, 17–18)

By declaring their support for the Archbishop's return, the priests conflict with the chorus and conflict is a major political ingredient. While the Archbishop's return would not favor the women of Canterbury, it would favor the priests who immediately pledge allegiance to his authority. If indeed the priests would take orders and obey the instructions of the Archbishop, they are showing a preference for religious authority over temporal, secular powers exercised by the king. Thus, the priests admitted that they would clash with the political authority of the king. In this way, the tension between politics and religion continues to build up which culminates in the murder of the Archbishop. The Archbishop's selfish desire to become a martyr is only well-known to him but not known to the priests who imagine that he was acting selflessly on behalf of the church. Thomas had earlier nursed the ambition to become a martyr which is why

when the tempters arrive, he is not able to resist the fourth tempter who tempted him with his earlier desires.

The four tempters arrive to tempt him, each with a different subject. The first tempter asks him to remember all the good times he had with the king in the past and make peace with him. The second tempter reminds him of what a wonderful strategist he was as a chancellor and asks him to embrace the opportunity to serve the state again as a chancellor. Once more, he dismisses him. The third tempter advises him to align with the king of France and overthrow King Henry II in England. He rejects the idea. The fourth tempter directly suggests the idea of martyrdom to him, reminding him of the glory that waits for him after death. The idea of martyrdom by the fourth tempter struck Becket, an idea which he had always considered to be the highest spiritual endeavor and glory. His encounter with the fourth tempter is redolent of Sigmund Freud's postulations on the return of the repressed emotion in his famous work *The Uncanny*. The desire for martyrdom was always present in the archbishop's mind and the appearance of the fourth tempter only revived it:

4.3. Fourth tempter

What can compare with glory of Saints,
dwelling together in the presence of God?
What earthly glory, Of King or Emperor
What earthly pride that is not poverty,
Compared with richness of heavenly grandeur?
Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest
on earth, to be high in heaven,
And see far off below you, where the gulf is fixed.
Your persecutors, in timeless torment,
Perched passion, beyond expiation.

4.4. Thomas

No!
Who are you, tempting with my own desires?
Others have come, temporal tempters
With pleasure and power at palpable price.
What do you offer, what do you ask?

4.5. Fourth tempter

I offer what you desire, I ask
What you have to give, is it too much
For such a vision of eternal grandeur? (Eliot, 39–40)

The exchange between the fourth tempter and Becket unravels the partial mystery surrounding the play – the notion that Becket is truly a martyr who died defending the tenets of his Christian religion and protecting his spiritual leaning. It is apparent from the above exchange that he embraced martyrdom for superfluous, unconscionable reasons.

He has always wanted to be a martyr, to be celebrated as one and not necessarily because he despised political power or abhorred the control of the church by the king. He could resist the first, second, and third tempters because he already had his mind fixed on martyrdom. This buttresses the argument that one is weak when one is tempted by one's desires. Indeed, religion can find relevance within a political supreme platform and gradually influence political actors. If Becket was selfless and genuinely concerned about the position of the Christian religion in England, he would have been foresighted enough to understand that religion can seamlessly find its foot in any political setting given that both concepts overlap and are intricately intertwined. Becket eventually gives in to the idea of the last tempter because it appeals to his ambition of becoming a martyr.

The interlude can be described as the unraveling and most important part of the play. It begins with Becket giving a sermon on Christmas morning. In his sermon, he extols the virtues of faith in God and the glory of the spiritual over temporal powers. He emphasizes the importance of dying as a martyr, for something that one believes in because it grants the soul greater glory. In a way, Becket's Christmas sermon can be described as a political sermon because he seizes the opportunity to extol spiritual, and religious powers over temporal, and political powers. He also seizes the opportunity to pry on the conscience of Christians and scurry their sympathy by extolling the virtues of Biblical Christ. Rick de Villiers argues that "the sermon constitutes a crucial dramatic component of a play that balances on the knife edge between pride and humility" (1). By identifying "pride and humility," Villiers identifies a major character trait inherent in Becket which beclouds his sense of judgment to understand that politics and religion can advance the human course. His sermon shows an uncompromising, obstinate man willed in his ways.

4.6. *The archbishop*

For whenever Mass is said, we reenact the passion and death of our Lord
and on this Christmas day, we do this in celebration of his birth
So that at the same moment, we rejoice in his coming at the salvation of men,
And offer again to God His body and blood in sacrifice,
oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. (Eliot, 47)

The four knights enter, insisting to see the archbishop having come from the king. They interrogate the archbishop and accuse him of challenging the authority of the king and undermining the throne of his power. Also, they accuse him of not honoring the invitation to the coronation of the king's son but went on to suspend the bishops who graced the occasion. The archbishop remains adamant and replies that he is focused on his religious duties and will no longer partake of the duties of the king and all political involvements. The knights attempt to attack the archbishop but the priests intervene and bar the doors of the cathedral against the knights. However, motivated by his resolve to die as a martyr, the archbishop refuses to escape when he has the opportunity to do so. The knights return and murder him inside the cathedral. Immediately after his murder, three knights give reasons why they murdered him with the first knight electing not to speak or give any reason for his action. All the reasons given by the knights are political which means that politics played a primary role in the eventual murder of the Archbishop. He left politics for religious reasons but he was killed for political reasons.

There is a parallel between the actions of the knights and Becket's action in facing the audience and defending their decisions. Becket, as a religious character, extols the virtues of spiritual power over temporal power while the knights by defending their killing of Becket extol the virtues of political power. Kohzadi and Azizmohammadi conclude that "the action Thomas undertakes is different from that of the world to which the action of the knights (in their temporal activity) belongs" (2228). The difference between both actions is religion and politics.

5. Conclusion

Eliot demonstrates in *Murder* that politics and religion exist in a mutual, progressive, dialectical continuum. Events in the text establish that the theatrical and ideological successes of the text are a combination of both concepts so that each relied on the other for fulfillment. The character of Becket and his eventual martyrdom is achieved through his involvement, first in politics and second in religious duties. His avowal of "action and suffering" during the famous Christmas sermon is implied to justify his decision to become a martyr. Narayana Chandra corroborates the foregoing assertion by insisting that "a complete evacuation of self-will, determination, and desire is the ultimate direction toward which Thomas's 'action and suffering' must move" (49). He capitalized on a political situation to seek a personal religious ambition. King Henry II and his political aspirations became for him a tide, a contrary force that he must conquer to emerge mentally and spiritually victorious. Although Eliot may have used Becket's character to portray his religious convictions, in doing so he inadvertently promoted politics and temporal power as an inevitable accomplice of religion. If politics must be understood as the aggregation of interest, then it goes beyond the acquisition or exercise of temporal, state powers. It must necessarily include all activities to win favor, sympathy, and people. Becket played politics although not temporal politics. He rode on the emotions of the Christian community to pursue his ambition to become a martyr. By suspending the bishops that attended the King's son's coronation, he was also playing politics. By resisting the attempt to control the church through state powers, he also played and indulged in politics. Thus, we can distinguish from the play two types of politics: temporal politics and religious politics. Given the intricate alignment of the two concepts, it becomes impossible to separate them. Therefore, we can profitably assert that politics and religion are two sides of the same coin and this idea is overtly conveyed in *Murder in the Cathedral*.

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