Tongued with Fire: T.S. Eliot's Poetics of Prayer

Kenneth P. Kramer[1]

kramer@cruzio.com

ABSTRACT

What makes prayer valid? For the poet, T.S. Eliot, there is something more, something that is sometimes unnoticed, but which, if realized, can reanimate prayer life. This brief essay unfolds in three steps: (1) pointing to the contemplative influence of Eliot's conversion to the Church of England; (2) depicting the seventeenth-century Little Gidding lay-monastic community as the definitive influence on Eliot's final quartet; and (3) unpacking six interrelated prayer-revitalizing insights from a passage in 'Little Gidding', practices that help make prayer valid.

KEYWORDS: Anglican, contemplative, conversion, Kelham, Little Gidding, monastic, prayer, T.S. Eliot

What makes prayer valid? While the fundamental dynamic of praying involves genuine communication with the infinite partner, one's experience of prayer matures, even radically, with practice. In my life, praying has progressed from saying remembered prayers, to praying more spontaneously from the heart, to becoming a prayerful person. The most important break-through for me was discovering that prayer's purpose was not raising life to a higher spiritual level but engaging God in an ever-unique, inner dialogue, especially one that spills over into everyday life. That is, God's presence is not just a feeling, or insight, but has become dialogically perceivable through a double-directional relationship: between myself and others and, simultaneously, between myself and the Eternal.

1. Kenneth P. Kramer is Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religious Studies, San José (CA) State University, USA.

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From my early encounters with the unmistakable elegance of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets,* I have been attracted to the poem's spiritual substance, especially to the poet's exploration of the intenser human feelings associated with prayer. In what has been called his 'greatest poetic achievement',[2] *Four Quartets* ('Burnt Norton', 'East Coker', 'The Dry Salvages', and 'Little Gidding'), Eliot takes the reader inside the Little Gidding chapel 'Where prayer has been valid'.[3] But how does that occur for Eliot? What happens when prayer becomes valid? This brief essay unfolds in three steps: (1) pointing to the contemplative influence of Eliot's becoming a member of the Church of England; (2) depicting the seventeenth century Little Gidding lay-monastic community as the definitive influence on Eliot's final quartet; and (3) unpacking six interrelated prayer-revitalizing insights from a passage in 'Little Gidding', practices that contribute to making prayer valid.

Eliot's Conversion

On 29 June 1927, T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), who thought of himself at the time as a 'skeptic with a taste for mysticism',[4] was received into the English Catholic Church by William Force Stead, Chaplain of Worcester College, Oxford. In the afternoon quiet of St. Peter's Day, Eliot entered the inconspicuous Finstock Parish Church in the Cotswolds. The doors remained locked behind him and a verger was posted in the vestry to guarantee the privacy of the proceedings. His wife, Vivienne, was not present. Since the Unitarian Church of Eliot's birth does not recognize or practice the sacraments, Eliot had to first be baptized to enjoy full membership in the Church of England. Stead, who performed the baptism, later noted that 'it seemed odd to have such a large, though infant, Christian at the baptismal font'.[5]

On the following day, Eliot received the sacrament of confirmation from the bishop of Oxford and when he described himself as

2. Cleo McNelly Kearns, 'Religion, Literature and Society in the Work of T.S. Eliot'. in A. David Moody (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 77–93 (91).

3. T.S. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', in *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950*. (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 138–45 (139). All references to Eliot's poetry are from this edition.

4. T.S. Eliot, 'Eeldrop and Appleplex', *The Little Review*, IV. 1. (1917), pp. 7–11 (8).

5. William Force Stead, 'Mr. Stead Presents an Old Friend', p. 6, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

'Anglo-Catholic in religion'[6] (refusing at first to capitalize the title) it surprised and even alienated many of his admirers, particularly those who had come to associate him with *The Waste Land*. While Ezra Pound expressed the suspicion of many intellectuals of his generation that religion was an opiate, a dogma, or a mere manifestation of private ecstasy, Eliot departed from this view, writing to Paul Elmer More (3 August 1929) that instead of settling 'in an easy chair' of religion he had 'just begun a long journey afoot'.[7] To sympathetically co-experience his sensibilities, then, one needs to realize that, for Eliot, religious traditions mattered because they addressed the deep and recurring longing within human beings for a redemptive timeless presence.

Since Eliot's shifting spiritual attentions, evident throughout his career and culminating in his conversion, resulted from forces that intermixed over a long period of time, the spiritual biography behind Eliot's decision to become Anglo-Catholic can never be fully apprehended.[8] Even Eliot was unable to account for it completely. Suggestively, he once remarked after becoming Anglo-Catholic that the 'Christian thinker – and I mean the [person] who is trying consciously and conscientiously to explain to himself the sequence

6. T.S. Eliot, 'Preface', *For Lancelot Andrews* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 11. In contrast with the pre-Vatican II official Roman Catholic teaching that the English Church was established at the Reformation, for Eliot the Eastern Church, the Roman Church and the Church of England were three branches of the Universal Catholic Church. Indicating that commentators on Eliot's faith often confuse Anglo-Catholicism with Roman Catholicism, or present it as if it were another term for High Church Anglicanism, Barry Spurr writes that 'the three branches sprang from the common root of apostolic Christianity'. *'Anglo-Catholic in Religion': T.S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2010), p. 67.

7. T.S. Eliot letter to Paul Elmer More, 3 August 1929, Princeton University Library, Rare Book Room.

8. While Eliot occasionally used the word 'conversion' to describe his own experience, noting however that no one ever tried to convert him, as Barry Spurr suggests the term 'conversion' can be misleading in Eliot's case because it 'tends to diminish the importance of all the diverse elements that lead up to his baptism and confirmation over so many years and, by implying certitude and finality, contradicts Eliot's conception of the individual Christian's experience … as a much more complex phenomenon, shot through with doubts and backslidings, throughout one's earthly pilgrimage'. *'Anglo-Catholic in Religion'*, pp. 112–13. I use the term instead as Eliot used it in 1948 when he spoke of 'the convert – and I think not only of conversion from one form of Christianity to another, but indeed primarily of conversion from indifference to Christian belief and practice ….' T.S. Eliot, *Notes toward the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949), p. 80.

which culminates in faith, rather than the public apologist – proceeds by rejection and elimination'. Every person 'who thinks and lives by thought must have his own skepticism, that which stops at the questions, that which ends in denial, or that which leads to faith and is somehow integrated into a faith which transcends it'.[9] Through a process of spiritual and intellectual elimination and evaluation, Eliot joined the Church of England with the belief that he had chosen a faith that was 'less false' and that balanced his 'profound skepticism with the deepest faith'.[10]

To trace Eliot's spiritual development and sensibilities from his liberal Unitarian family background, through his years of philosophical skepticism and Indic metaphysics, his move to England and unsuccessful marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, his ten-year period of mental stress and depression, to becoming a member of the Church of England, requires a broad collection of biographical information beyond the immediate scope of this essay. A most compelling ingredient, however, informing his new spiritual sensibilities was his discovery that he required a degree of 'contemplative withdrawal'.[11] This can be seen in Eliot's attraction to the contemplative monastic tradition. For Eliot, contemplation was an attitude of mind, a proclivity of soul, a process of perceiving (and communicating) a penetrating aliveness.

Two examples dramatically illustrate the significance of monasticism in Eliot's spiritual life. The first is provided by Wallace Fowlie in a rare and privileged eye-witness account of Eliot's devotional practice. He writes that in the early 1930s when Eliot was the Charles Eliot Norton lecturer at Harvard University, he often attended mass at the Episcopal Church of St John the Evangelist on Beacon Hill in Boston. Eliot was drawn there in part because the Church was served by the Cowley Fathers whose monastery was in Cambridge. During his time at Harvard, Eliot was a daily communicant at the monastery chapel. At one mass,

9. T.S. Eliot, 'The ''Pensées'' of Pascal' in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, new edn, 1950), p. 363. Eliot was attracted to Christian conversion stories, especially that of Pascal, a prominent mathematician who was converted in 1654.

10. T.S. Eliot in *The Listener*, 9 January 1947. In his review of Bertrand Russell's, *What I Believe* (London: Kegan Paul, 1925), (written in 1927) Eliot wrote: 'I am amazed at Mr. Russell's capacity for believing … within limits … I cannot subscribe with that conviction to *any* belief …' T.S. Eliot, 'Literature, Science, and Dogma', review of *Science and Poetry* by I.A. Richards, pp. 239–43 (242).

11. Raymond Preston, 'T.S. Eliot as a Contemplative Poet' in *T.S. Eliot: A Symposium for his Seventieth Birthday* (2nd Series; ed. Nevill Braybrooke; New York: Farrar, 1963), pp. 161–69 (161–62).

attended by Eliot and only two others (including Fowlie), after Eliot received the Eucharist and returned to his place, he seemed to fall 'flat on his face in the aisle, with his arms stretched out'. But Fowlie adds, 'it was obvious at a glance he had not fallen'. Indeed, when Fowlie helped Eliot to his feet, almost no physical effort was required. Fowlie continues, 'I realized that Eliot had just undergone a mystical experience'.[12]

Another telling example of Eliot's relationship to contemplative spirituality is found in his participation with the monastic community at Kelham. In September 1933, he paid the first of many visits to The Society of the Sacred Mission, Kelham (a quasi-monastic Anglo-Catholic male religious community near Newark in Nottinghamshire) to which he retreated from his work two or three times a year until the Second World War. At Kelham, along with monastic companionship, he enjoyed periods of profound quietude. Indeed, Eliot became, for a period after separating from his wife, a kind of lay monk**,** feeling at times like a hermit without a hermitage. It would not lead us too far afield, therefore, to intimate that the root and branches of Eliot's conversion gradually grew out of the silent depths of contemplative life as he studied it intellectually and, later, practiced it.[13] His visits to Kelham provided Eliot with the enjoyment of the company of lay brothers and students, a community that worked and studied in complete silence. These monastic silences echo through the moods and voices of *Four Quartets,* bringing readers to the frontiers of what cannot be spoken.[14]

Why then did Eliot become Anglo-Catholic? In an essay on Lancelot Andrews, he called Anglicanism the *via media* because of 'its persistence in finding a mean between Papacy and Presbytery [such that] the English Church under Elizabeth became something

12. Wallace Fowlie, *Journal of Rehearsals* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1977), p. 138.

13. Thomas Merton distinguishes two ways in which the word 'contemplative' is used: (1) juridical (synonymous with 'clustered life'), and (2) mystical (individual, interior realization and practice). Merton writes that contemplation simply cannot be institutionalized. See *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971), p. 207. Along these lines, interreligious dialogian Raimundo Panikkar suggests that 'monkhood (i.e., the archetype of which the monk is an expression) corresponds to one-dimension of the *humanum*, so that every human being has potentially the possibility of realizing this dimension'. See *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), pp. 5–25.

14. Some material in this section appears in a slightly different form in my book, Kenneth Paul Kramer, *Redeeming Time: T.S. Eliot's* Four Quartets (Lanham, MD: Cowley/Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), pp. 4–5, 10–11.

representative of the finest spirit of England of the time'.[15] In light of this remark, when I asked Eliot's friend George Every (1909–2003), whom Eliot met in 1933 as a lay brother at the Society of the Sacred Mission, Kelham, why Eliot did not become a Roman Catholic, Every replied:

> I would say that his real choice was between being an Englishman and still being an American. Once he got clear of America, he wanted to discover something that couldn't be found in America. Buddhism and Christianity were still hypothetical possibilities. They are universal religions. At the time of *The Waste Land*, they [Buddhism and Christianity] were on par. But when decisions have to be made under really intense spiritual pressure, they have to be made in the here and now. He joined the Church of England because the meaning of its ritual was flexible. It was something he could accept. I don't really think that to become a Roman Catholic in England, in 1927, was for him really an option.[16]

The Little Gidding Community

Eliot's *Four Quartets* contemplate how timeless moments shine through physical landscapes and release the poet from temporal enchainments. The final quartet is named for Little Gidding, a remote village with a few cottages, a farmhouse, and a secluded, medieval chapel in Huntingdonshire, near Cambridge. There, Nicolas Ferrar established the first lay community of the English Church in 1625. Since then, it has become a place of spiritual pilgrimage. Originally, the Little Gidding community consisted of about thirty men, women and children who adopted a common rule of disciplined prayer and daily work. The community's regimen – 6.30 am Morning Prayer followed by breakfast; 10.00 am Litany, followed by lunch; 4.00 pm Evening Prayer followed by supper – would have reminded Eliot of the contemplative rhythms he experienced at Kelham.

Before Eliot visited the secluded tiny hamlet in the county of Huntingdonshire, north of London, Little Gidding already occupied a special place in his spiritual imagination. Eliot's 1936 pilgrimage to Little Gidding's restored medieval chapel (after being ruined by fire it was rebuilt in the nineteenth century) generated his final quartet, 'Little Gidding', where we encounter the most intensive reflections of Eliot's high church Anglican sensibilities. Having moved, through the

15. Eliot, *Selected Essays,* new edn, pp. 302–303.

16. George Every in a recorded conversation with the author at Oscott College, Sutton Coldfield, England, 27 May 1989.

visionary, airy images of 'Burnt Norton', and through the earthy 'East Coker' and watery 'The Dry Salvages', here in the final quartet, we encounter the Pentecostal fire, which 'stirs the dumb spirit'[17] and quickens the soul. At this place of spiritual pilgrimage, the first movement (the prayer tongued with fire) and the related temporal illumination of the second movement (a dialogue with the compound ghost) leads to the spiritual discipline in the third movement (purifying the motive) and the associated purgatorial lyric of the fourth movement (pyre or pyre). The quartet culminates in a unitive vision of the 'complete consort dancing together'.[18]

Recalling those who visited the Little Gidding community (the likes of Nicolas Ferrar and George Herbert), Eliot says in the first movement of 'Little Gidding':

> If you came this way
> Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
> At any time or at any season,
> It would always be the same: you would have to put off
> Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
> Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
> Or carry report. You are here to kneel
> Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
> Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
> Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
> And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
> They can tell you, being dead: the communication
> Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.[19]

Eliot, in this passage, is not trying to describe a higher kind of prayer or a deeper way of knowing God. Instead, in this place 'where prayer has been valid', and at this moment in history, the poet recognizes that what he used to think – that prayer is 'the conscious occupation/Of the praying mind' – no longer holds. In what follows, we will contemplate several prayer-revitalizing insights that can be gleaned from this passage.

Where Prayer Has Been Valid

1

> If you came this way,
> Taking any route, starting from anywhere,

17. Eliot, *Collected Poems and Plays*, pp. 138–45 (138).
18. Eliot, *Collected Poems and Plays*, p. 144.
19. Eliot, *Collected Poems and Plays*, p. 139.

At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same:

The line 'If you came this way' frames what the poet will say about prayer. Striking a conditional mood, it is as if the poet says that he will speak from his personal perspective of having come this way. Prayer, the poet suggests, becomes meaningful for those who actually make of praying a pilgrimage, a journey away from ordinary, self-reflective consciousness. Analogous to making a pilgrimage, the prayerful person first departs from what is familiar (whether place or world view) to enter into a new matrix (praying selflessly). Then, after crossing-over into another realm (communicating with the Divine), one returns to everyday life with new insights, new life-direction. Coming this way involves retreating, involves entering into a private space, not outside the world, but a space that hallows the world by making it holy. And while this way refers to a place set apart – Little Gidding – it can refer to any place that one sets apart for prayer, even in one's own home. What is most important to the poet is finding that private place, whether in the desert or in the city, whether in a physical desert or in the desert within one's heart, and then going there to pray.

Nor does it matter what your particular circumstances are when you pray. It would always be the same – you would always have to turn away from self-reflective interests and toward the infinite partner. 'Taking any route' suggests that no matter how you pray, whether silently or with words, whether alone or with others, whether sitting or standing, moving or remaining still, all genuine prayer reaches the ultimate listener. No matter how one is raised, no matter what religious tradition you follow, or none, no matter when or where you pray, when genuine, prayer is always 'the same'. The dynamics of authentic prayer, as great spiritual teachers across religious traditions have affirmed, can happen anywhere and always involves an immediate, intimate communication with the source of prayer. The act of praying directs one's deepest attention toward the infinite Other, the perfect listener, the perfect responder. Whatever else prayer involves, at its core God's presence becomes perceivable in uncountable ways through signs and insights, memories and inspirations, encounters and events. Prayer is always, thus, a matter of God's living presence becoming real in our lives.

2

… you would have to put off/Sense and notion.

If 'you' were to come to this place, you too, like the pilgrim, Eliot is saying, would first have to empty yourself of the reasoning mind.

You would have to put off, at least temporarily suspend, ordinary subject-object consciousness, worldly sensations, opinions, viewpoints, beliefs, indeed even what you think or imagine about God. It is necessary to unlearn everything that you have ever heard about who God is in order to be fully open to the utter surprise that God's speaking takes.

The nature of prayer, according to the poet, its essence, involves entering into the deepest reciprocity with God through self-surrender. Indeed once, while visiting Virginia Woolf in her London home, Eliot was asked about what he experienced while praying. In response to this question, leaning forward, head bowed, Eliot 'described the attempt to concentrate, to forget self, to attain union with God'.[20] Recalling his study of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras,* in which the practice of yoga begins with 'controlling' or 'stopping' physical distractions and calming the mind, the prayer into which we are invited demands yogic-like concentration.

For prayer to become valid, the person praying must let go of 'sense and notion'. This is why Eliot writes that while the first step on a spiritual path necessarily involves renouncing private wisdoms, this emptying out of self-reflective concerns cannot finally be achieved by one's own efforts. Rather, grace infuses the practitioner with emptiness, in which the incessant chatter of will is stilled. This graced negation of thought, by which one slips into stillness, becomes a sacrament of the whole spiritual quest. For this reason, deepening his resolve, the poet says to his soul 'be still, and wait without hope/For hope would be hope for the wrong thing'.[21] Difficult, if not impossible to understand intellectually – 'Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought'[22] – this sought-for stillness suspends ordinary consciousness, even though consciousness of the person naturally remains.

3

> You are not here to verify,
> Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
> Or carry report.

There are many reasons for prayer, many well-intentioned motives. Yet not all of these intentions are prayerful; indeed, some may even invalidate the experience itself. One that Eliot points to here, and what continues to challenge my prayer life is my state of subjectivized

20. Russell Kirk, *Eliot and his Age: T.S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the 20th Century* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2nd edn, 2008), p. 56.
21. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', pp. 123–29 (126).
22. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', p. 126.

reflection – not only that *I* am praying but also that I am praying. How easy it is, while praying, to lose focus, to slip into self-reflective awareness. How easy to become distracted, or as Eliot says 'Distracted from distraction by distraction'.[23] Genuine prayer requires as its necessary first step complete openness to God's presence, in all forms, in all places, in all times. This radical openness combines turning, as W.S. Merwin writes, from 'Going too fast for myself [that] I missed/ more than I think I can remember' to being 'ready this time'.[24] Radical openness, when maintained, disarms that which disturbs, divides and diverts attention from God's presence with endless thoughtless thoughts, and unbelievable agendas.

If you came this way, the poet could have said, you would be here to listen. You would be here to pray in silence, in inward stillness. You would be here to stand in the immediate presence of God with an intense conviction that God is listening and replying. Yet we are surrounded by noises, noises that interrupt, drown out and distract attention. It is for this reason that contemplatives practice breathing more slowly, often using a centering mantra while praying: a word, sound or phrase that is repeated whenever distractions arise. Aligned with inhalation and exhalation, one may rhythmically repeat a word or phrase like 'Yah-weh', or 'Jes-us', or 'Mer-cy'. Quietly repeating 'thank' (as I inhale) and 'You' (as I exhale) returns me to a more open praying heart and mind. Contemplatively praying is waiting patiently, listening attentively and glimpsing insights that challenge us at every level of our being into action.

4

> You are here to kneel
> Where prayer has been valid.

Commenting on these lines, Eliot once noted:

> What I mean is that for some of us, a sense of place is compelling. If it is a religious place, a place made special by the sacrifice of martyrdom, then it retains an aura. We know that once before a man gave of himself *here* and was accepted *here*, and it was so important that the occasion continues to invest the place with its holiness.[25]

23. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', p. 120.
24. W.S. Merwin, 'Turning', *The New Yorker*, 16 May 2011, p. 49.
25. Quoted in *Affectionately, T.S Eliot*, by William Levy and Victor Scherle (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1968), pp. 41–42.

As an Anglo-Catholic, Eliot knew well that prayer had been valid in Little Gidding's consecrated chapel because there, the apostolic sacraments of the Church were offered, especially the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. At the same time, I think that if Eliot was making this comment today, he might also express the insight that a sense of place can be anywhere. Just as the divine cannot be limited, neither is the divine presence more perceivable in one place rather than another. Any place can become and is made holy by God's revealing and redemptive spirit in relation to the one who prays.

What makes prayer valid for Eliot is the depth of one's surrender. The act of kneeling is not to be confused with submission, but refers to complete surrender into relationship. The phrase 'here to kneel' seems to focus on the physical posture of praying, of using the kneeler in the chapel; yet, valid prayer goes much deeper than a physical gesture. As with practicing Muslims, who prostrate themselves on the ground five times a day in prayer, the physical act embodies a deeply spiritual act of submission before the awe-inspiring Creator of the world. Such surrender is the beginning of valid prayer. The physical act itself is secondary to the spiritual act of the heart. In contemplative prayer, in fact, the mind descends into the heart. In this context, the word 'heart', as the Eastern Orthodox contemplative Kallistos Timothy Ware says, 'is meant not simply the seat of the emotions and affections, but, as in the Bible, the primary organ of [one's] personality, the center of [one's] whole being'.[26] More precisely, a contemplative is not called to descend from but with the mind into the heart. The goal is not just prayer of the heart but prayer of the whole person.

There is no single way of receiving God's address. God's voice emerges in surprising ways and with surprising messages. If I had met T.S. Eliot, while discussing this passage I would have said that prayer for me becomes valid when I practice: (1) turning wholly away from self-absorption toward encountering the creative source of life; (2) addressing God by praising, adoring, and being thankful for God's immediate and intimate presence; (3) listening silently with my whole heart for God's spirit-infused signs, instructions, promptings; and (4) responding to revealed hints which press inward and stir my heart by bringing these insights into life.

26. Kallistos Timothy Ware, ' ''Pray without Ceasing'': The Ideal of Communal Prayer in Eastern Monasticism', *Eastern Churches Review*, II 3 (1969), p. 258.

5

> And prayer is more
> Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
> Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.

After many years of reading this passage without noticing it, one word suddenly lit up – the word 'more'. If prayer is more than self-conscious, self-reflective activity, what is that 'more'? Eliot does not say, not directly at least. Yet does he not infer that more than words, whether spoken or silent, more than anything which originates from the person praying, valid prayer involves listening deeply in God's presence for God's 'voice' directed uniquely to each person. Listening for God's speaking voice involves waiting attentively in the silence to glimpse traces of God's response to the person praying. At times, nothing seems to happen that quickens awareness or deepens one's relationship to God. At other times, as if from nowhere, recollected words, passages and events glisten with new meaning.

It was this spirit of contemplative prayer that Eliot drew from the seventeenth-century Anglican bishop, Lancelot Andrewes. Andrewes was the first great preacher of the English Catholic Church because he was, as Eliot once noted, born spiritual. Though Eliot saturated himself with Andrewes' devotional prose and sermons, arguing that Andrewes' devotional writings were superior to those of John Donne because Donne was primarily a personality, whereas Andrewes spoke with the authority of the Church, Eliot was most deeply influenced by a slim volume called *Private Prayers*. Printed posthumously, these prayers, like his sermons, harmonized intellect and sensibility and took a place, for Eliot, beside the *Exercises of Saint Ignatius* and the works of Saint Francois de Sales. Andrewes' ability to constantly find objects adequate to his feelings and, by being wholly absorbed in the emotions of the object, led Eliot to remark that 'Andrewes' emotion is purely contemplative; it is not personal, it is wholly evoked by the object of contemplation, to which it is adequate; his emotions wholly contained in and explained by its object'.[27]

6

> And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
> They can tell you, being dead: the communication
> Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.

27. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, new edn, pp. 308–309.

Eliot provides us with a subtle but powerful clue to prayer's 'more' in a highly enigmatic closing to this passage. The 'more' involves the speaking voice of those who have died. In one of the most memorable lines of 'Little Gidding', Eliot writes: 'the communication/Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living'. What he learns from communicating with the dead, he learns because the language used is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living. But what does this mean?

The phrase 'tongued with fire', along with its obvious reference to the Pentecostal event reported in the book of Acts, also refers to inspired and inspiring language, language graced by a transcendent source. In the fourth movement of 'Little Gidding', Eliot says that our life purpose is to 'be redeemed from fire by fire',[28] and then in the fifth movement says that we are redeemed by the spontaneous, timeless 'tongues of flame'.[29] What inflames language with 'tongues of fire' for the philosopher of religion Martin Buber (1878–1965) is what happens when language as speech-with-meaning passes back and forth between persons united in manifold togetherness. There, 'a light is kindled from leaping fire. Leaping fire is indeed the right image for the dynamic between persons in We'.[30]

Prayer's 'more', in this sense, is the never-to-be fully understood dynamic of true togetherness. In lines remarkably similar to Eliot's, Buber writes that 'the genuine We, which where it fulfills itself embraces the dead who once took part in colloquy and now take part in it through what they have handed down to posterity'.[31] Prayer's 'more' arises in the realm of the Between which has no boundary, cannot be located in physical space, and is always beyond knowing. In genuine togetherness, there is something unnamable, something larger than ourselves, something beyond the ordinary that transcends every objective experience.

What makes prayer valid for Eliot is now clearer. Genuine prayer is co-creative across generations and lifetimes. In genuine prayer, suddenly the wisdom of a dead parent, friend, spiritual teacher flashes into awareness as if divinely inspired. What the dead had no language for when living (i.e., their speaking did not resonate at that time) now, in consort with others, takes on deeper meaning, a

28. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', pp. 138–45 (144).

29. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', p. 145.

30. Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man: A Philosophy of the Interhuman*, (trans. Maurice Friedman; New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 107.

31. Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, p. 106.

meaning which in the context of prayer has a powerful impact. The clearest mark of this type of communication arises when we become aware of God's presence in and through recollected voices of others that resonate within the heart and mind of the person praying. Prayer is made valid by these on-fire messages that do not let us go and arise from the relationship itself between us and God and between us and others, living and dead. Prayer is valid, as Eliot says at the end of *Four Quartets*:

> When the tongues of flame are in-folded
> Into the crowned knot of fire
> And the fire and the rose are one.[32]

What ensues is nothing less than amazing grace. Eliot's understanding of valid prayer finally arises from complete trust that God is present in every moment of our lives, and that entering into relationship with God's presence leads not away from others but back into their midst.

32. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', pp. 138–45 (145).