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## UNIT 4 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE PLAY - PART II

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Eliot's Christian Perspective
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- 4.3 *Murder in the Cathedral* as a Christian History Drama
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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this unit is to make you aware of

- a) Eliot's Christian Perspective
- b) Explanatory comments on Thomas Becket's Christmas Sermon
- c) *Murder in the Cathedral* as a Christian History Drama
- d) Explanatory Comments on the lives from the First Choric entrance in part II upto the entry of the Four Knights Comments
- e) Explanatory Comments on the Section from the Entrance of the Knights upto their Exit

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### 4.1 ELIOT'S CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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As stated earlier T. S. Eliot was raised in a family which had very strong Unitarian beliefs. However, he did not find Unitarianism sufficient for his own spiritual needs. Contrary to the opinion of many critics, Eliot did not invent his own version of Christianity. He was an "Incarnational Christian," that is, he believed that the coming of Christ was the most important event in history and that "Sacramental Worship" reaffirmed this.

Eliot converted to Anglican Catholicism in 1927 but it was only a year later that he made this fact public. In his preface to *For Sir Lancelot Andrewes* (published in 1928) Eliot declared that he was "a Classicist in literature, Royalist in politics and Anglo Catholic in religion."

The year of Eliot's conversion was also the year that he published "The Journey of the Magi" (an *Ariel* Christmas poem). The poem is based on a Christmas sermon of the seventeenth century Anglican divine, Bishop Lancelot Andrewes. Interestingly, although the devotional prayers of Bishop Andrewes were published after he died, it

was Eliot who showed the world that Bishop Andrews was also a significant preacher. Eliot was introduced to the works of Lancelot Andrews through William Force Stead whom he had met at a party in 1923. He was an American diplomat in England but had resigned his job to get ordained in the Church of England. Both Stead and Eliot shared a common interest in the study of seventeenth century Anglican Divines particularly Sir Lancelot Andrews.

Eliot was particularly lured by Bishop Andrews' ability to temper his emotions with his intellect. He liked his "medieval temper" which was balanced as compared to the flashy brilliance of John Donne. It was through the works of Bishop Andrews that Eliot discovered not only the importance of "Orthodox Christianity" as a medium between skepticism and isolation, but also the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ. In his essay, *For Sir Lancelot Andrews (1928)*, Eliot describes Andrews' appeal for him. He felt that Andrews in his sermon was "alone with the alone." He was not like Donne who was combating a strong emotional personality. Andrews became one with the subject.

Ironically, it is while Eliot was getting acquainted with the doctrines of Lancelot Andrews that he wrote the poem, "The Hollow Men." This poem exposes the spiritual aridity of the modern age. But it also marks the turning point in Eliot's life. Following this in 1930, Eliot published his next major poem "Ash Wednesday" written after his conversion in 1927. The poem is seen as the story of Eliot's conversion with all his skepticism and doubts. It is perceived as a poem which charts Eliot's spiritual ascent from the meaningless world of "The Hollow Men." "Ash Wednesday" was structurally built on a phrase about "Two Turnings" which Bishop Andrews had declared were necessary for conversion. The one looking to God and the other to the sinful past.

After his conversion, Eliot loved a life which was responsible to the doctrines of the Church. Infact, when Eliot finally decided to separate from his first wife, Vivienne, he did not have divorce in mind. Nor did he intend to remarry until she died since that was the official position of the Church of England.

What established Eliot as a "Defendant" of the Church of England was the pageant play, *The Rock*. He was commissioned to write this play. The scenario for this pageant was given to him by Brown and Webb Odell. However, the ten choric passages that Eliot wrote were what made the pageant a success. In *The Rock* Eliot was learning how to use a chorus for dramatic exposition. Bishop Bell of Chichester came to see *The Rock* and was very pleased by it. It was the success of *The Rock* that made Bishop Bell commission Eliot to write a play for the Canterbury Festival. This play was *Murder in the Cathedral*. Thus Eliot's first two plays are both religious verse dramas.

Eliot felt that preserving Christianity was important for civilization. In his essays, "The Idea of a Christian Society" Eliot described the kind of Christian society needed to be built in "England's green and pleasant land." For him the disappearance of Christianity was the end of western civilization. Eliot believed that a Christian elite would head an ideal community because for him a neutral society would not live long. He felt that the Church needed to intervene and point out what was right and wrong. But, for the Church to be effective, he felt there must be a Christian community studying and supporting these ideals. He also claimed that Christian views could not be private because it is hard to be a Christian in a non-Christian society. This is why he felt that Churches and Christian institutions were important.

In 1948, Eliot's *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* was published. This was his first book length study in which he spoke about his social and spiritual concerns for "Christendom," in a post World War world. The main aim of this book was to show the relation between religion and culture. For peace in the post World War age a common faith was needed. That faith for Eliot was Christianity.

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## 4.2 BECKET'S CHRISTMAS SERMON : EXPLANATORY AND CRITICAL NOTES

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The sermon begins with the 14<sup>th</sup> verse of Ch. 2 of the Gospel of St. Luke. Becket addresses the congregation which has gathered for the sermon in a very loving way as "dear children of God." He tells them that his Christmas sermon is going to be a short one and asks them to meditate upon the mystery of the Christmas mass. He says that whenever mass is celebrated, Christ's death is celebrated. What he means by this is since Christ died to save human beings from sins, his death becomes a celebration. Becket then goes on to say that on Christmas day mass has a special meaning because that was the day Christ was born. So when one celebrates mass on Christmas one celebrates Christ's birth and death simultaneously. He then goes on to say that it was on the night before Christmas that Angels appeared before the shepherd at Bethlehem, saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will." The fact that the Christmas mass is both a celebration of Christ's birth and his death on the cross, Becket points out, may appear strange to the world. This, he says, is because no one mourns and rejoices in the same moment. In the Christian mystery, however, to mourn and rejoice at the same time is possible. Becket then goes on to ask the congregation whether it seems strange that the angels should have spoken of "peace" considering the fact that the world has had ceaseless wars or the fear of war. Becket presents the congregation with a rhetorical question. Could it be that the angles were mistaken or was the promise "a disappointment and a cheat?"

Becket asks the congregation to reflect on how the Lord (Christ) spoke of "peace." He said to his disciples "peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you." He questions whether by peace Christ meant what we mean by it? That is, England at peace with its neighbours, the barons at peace with the king, the householder counting over his peaceful gains etc. He further adds that Christ's disciple did not know of these things. They gave up everything to spread God's words through land and sea. They faced torture, imprisonment and disappointment to "suffer death by martyrdom." What did Christ mean by peace? Christ had said "not as the world gives, give I unto you." So the peace he gave his disciples is not the peace the world gives.

Becket asks the congregation to note the fact that on Christmas not only is Christ's birth and death celebrated together, but on the very next day we celebrate the martyrdom of his first martyr, the blessed Stephen. Is it a coincidence that this should happen? By no means. That is, Becket says, just as we celebrate the birth and death of Christ, similarly we do the same for the martyrs. We mourn for the sins that led to their martyrdom but we also rejoice in these martyrs becoming saints in heaven "for the glory of God and for the salvation of men."

Becket once again addresses the congregation with affection as "beloved" and says that we do not view a martyr "simply as a good Christian because that would be only to mourn. Nor do we see the martyr as only saint because that would be to only rejoice." Neither our mourning nor our rejoicing is as the world sees. "A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for saints are not made by accident" nor is a Christian martyrdom the will of a man to become a saint because this would lead him to be a ruler of men. "A martyrdom is always the design of God," to lead men back to God's ways. It is the ability of man to surrender his will to God, to desire nothing for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr. Just as on earth the church mourns and rejoices at once which the world cannot understand, so in heaven the saints are honoured for having made themselves low on earth. They are seen not as we see them but in "the light of the Godhead from which they draw their being."

Becket concludes his sermon by referring to the congregation as the "children of God" saying, he has asked them to remember the martyrs of the past especially the

martyr of Canterbury, Archbishop Elphege; because on Christmas day it is important to remember "that Peace which he brought," and also because Becket feels that he may not preach to them again and maybe in a short time they may have another martyr and perhaps not the last. He ends saying, "I would have you keep in your hearts these words that I say, and think of them at another time. In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

### **Critical Comments on the above Sermon**

Just as Christ's temptation is followed by the Sermon on the Mount (see Gospel according to St. Matthew), similarly Becket's temptation is followed by this sermon. In this sermon Becket highlights the paradox and mystery of Christianity and the meaning of Christian martyrdom. When he talks about the world possibly interpreting the angles' declaration of peace as a "disappointment and a cheat" he may be referring to his own doubts during his temptation. John the Baptist in the prison also felt this way. When Becket asks the congregation to reflect on the word "peace," which Christ spoke of, he tries to distinguish between two notions of peace. For Christ peace did not mean "peace" as status quo at the temporal level but "peace" in terms of spiritual calm at the eternal level. The peace chorus wants is the peace as status quo. However, they grow and come to understand its true meaning through Becket's martyrdom.

In the sermon Becket deliberately enlists the martyrs who follow Christmas day. He wants to make the people aware that martyrs re-enact Christ's sacrifice from age to age as a reminder. As stated earlier, it is in this sermon that Becket explains the process of Christian martyrdom. He tells us that martyrdom is always the design of God. Man has to submit his will to God's will and desire nothing for himself, "not even the glory of being a martyr." From this remark it is clear that Becket has obviously overcome his fourth temptation. Becket's statement that just as on Christmas mass, Christ's birth and death are simultaneously celebrated, the person who is made a saint and honoured in heaven has to lead a humble life on earth, touches upon a basic tenet of Christianity. In the sermon on the Mount Christ tells his disciples that to follow God one has to give up everything at the materialistic level. The opening lines of the Sermon, known as the Beatitudes, encapsulate these beliefs: "whosoever is rich on earth will be poor in heaven and the meek and mild on earth will be rewarded and honoured in heaven."

For martyrdom total submission to God is important. The wheel image expresses this in the play. Just as the different spokes of a wheel submit to the centre for coordination in order to turn smoothly, similarly, for God's design to be carried out man must coordinate his individual will with God's will.

Becket concludes his sermon by referring to the martyr of Canterbury, the blessed Archbishop Elphege. St. Elphege lived between ad 954 and 1012 and became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1006. When the Danes sacked Canterbury, he was murdered. It is appropriate that Becket should refer to him in the face of his own impending death.

The sermon is beautifully symbolic of the still centre of anarchy loosed around Becket. It is appropriate that the sermon (the interlude) divides parts I and II of the play.

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### **4.3 MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL AS A CHRISTIAN HISTORY DRAMA**

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The notion of Christian history is very different from traditional notions of history. While the latter, records events without any relation to a metastory, the former,

specifically refers to all happening on earth as one metastory centring around God. It starts with the creation of Human beings by God then goes onto the fall of Adam and Eve from paradise and moves in a linear progression right upto the day of judgement. This history's true meaning at the linear of temporality is manifested best in Christ's death for the sins of human beings and his resurrection (rising again from death). In Christ's death, the temporal and the eternal, time and the timeless, human and the divine intersect, giving a new meaning to temporal events in history. It is important to note that the entering of the timeless into time, finite creates the paradox of the "Still Point" which is both inside time and yet outside of it.

After Eliot's conversion in 1928, he was becoming increasingly "committed to the dogma of Incarnation" (See, "The Pensees of Pascal," Selected Essays). It is important to remember that this is indeed the basis of the Christian notion of history. Becket, in his Christmas sermon (which forms the Interlude in the play), explains the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. That Eliot should have placed the Interlude (structurally at the centre of the play) to express this central notion of Christian history speaks for itself. *The paradoxes of the human and the divine, time and the timeless etc. which are embodied in Christ are emphasized by Becket in his sermon which highlights the simultaneity of rejoicing and mourning in Christianity.* Christian history is a "providentially oriented history of salvation." All paradoxes in time resolved only in God at the end of time which is the Last Judgement in Christianity .

Significantly, the death of saints and martyrs also ennoble mundane history at the temporal level by transforming it into events willed by God. Becket, the Chorus (who represent a type of the common man), the Priests and the Knights must understand this and affirm it. This is "the dramatic action that the play presents."

The history of salvation then, offers everyman the same religious duties to fulfill towards God. The path to those duties is through temptation, sin, repentance, penance and regeneration. Becket's Christmas (Interlude) explains that he has found his place and role in this history of salvation: "A martyrdom is always the design of God." This is an insight that other characters—Chorus, Priests and Knights—have yet to acquire.

The soul becomes the "battlefield of timeless forces, where good and evil struggle perpetually for supremacy." But it is the notion of history as salvation which makes Christians believe that ultimately good will triumph over evil. Infact this is a notion to any concept of Christian history and this is again the reason why Christian history does not focus particularly on the political, social and economic events so important to traditional history. The development of T.S. Eliot's own historical thinking before and after his conversion is an example in point. In his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" published in 1919, he had spoken about the notions of "pastness and presentness" in the context of cultural and literary history. However, after his conversion we notice a change. He now sees tradition and history as gaining meaning and existence only through the Christian notion of history which centres around God. This is illustrated best in Eliot's use of the image of the "wheel." The historically acquired meaning of this image ranges from the seasonal cycle's inevitability to other meaning, in a Christian frame it refers to the perfection of God.

In the above context, it is significant that the feasts of different saints and martyrs that follow Christmas are mentioned in Becket's Christian sermon. In doing this, Eliot lifts history and time from the linear and the chronological to the eternal and ahistorical. The history of salvation is privileged over traditional history. Again the scenic presentation of the assassination strikingly demonstrates that linear time has been exploded. The Knights kill Becket by encircling him. Becket becomes a version of Christ and the history of salvation is again repeated.

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#### 4.4 EXPLANATORY AND CRITICAL NOTES ON PART II OF THE PLAY FROM THE FIRST CHORIC ENTRANCE IN PART II UPTO THE ENTRY OF THE FOUR KNIGHTS

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##### PART II: CHARACTERS

Three Priests  
Four Knights  
Archbishop Thomas Becket  
Chorus of Women of Canterbury  
Attendants

SCENE            The Cathedral. December 29, 1170.

The speech of the Chorus begins bleakly with a note of sorrow. It refers to "sea birds" who are driven "inland by the storm," to the "still and stifling air" and the owl that rehearses the "hollow note of death." But, it claims that "a wind is stored up in the East." It questions the fact that even near the time of Christ's birth (celebrated in Christmas) there is no peace nor good will among men. The Chorus then states that peace among men is never certain unlike peace with God. Wars in this world create evil in man, Christ's death renews life. Unless life is cleansed in winter only a bad spring will follow which will result in a "parched summer, an empty harvest."

The Chorus once again questions what work can be done between Christmas and Easter? According to it life will merely carry on with the ploughman going out in march to turn the "same earth / He has turned before," the birds too shall "sing the same song." When spring arrives and old people and children are seen outdoors, what work, the Chorus says would the people have done? "What wrong / Shall the bird's song cover, the green tree cover, what wrong Shall the fresh earth cover?" The Chorus then states that they will wait, although the time for a change is short, the waiting is long.

At this point the first Priest enters with a banner of St. Stephen and the "Introit of St. Stephen" is heard. The Introit is a sentence or a phrase that is taken from the Psalms, or elsewhere in the Bible. This is either said or sung as the Priest approaches the altar to celebrate the Eucharist (which is the Body of Christ symbolised by bread or white wafer-like biscuit, known as the host and wine which represents his blood). This is the most important part of the Mass. When the first Priest says, "since Christmas a day: and the day of St. Stephen, First martyr," he refers to the day after Christmas which was also the feast day of St. Stephen. Feast days are special days when martyrs and saints are remembered. The line spoken by the first Priest, "Princes moreover did sit, and did witness falsely against me" is a line taken from Psalm 119, V: 23 from the Bible. The feast of St. Stephen, the first Priest says was always very dear to Becket. The second Priest soon enters with a banner of St. John the Apostle and the Introit of St. John is heard. The second Priest refers to St. John the apostle whose feast day follows that of St. Stephen. He quotes from Psalm 22 V22 of the Bible: "In the midst of the congregation he opened his mouth." The line following this psalm is taken from I John, Ch. 1 V. 1.

The third Priest enters next with the banner of the Holy Innocents. The feast day of "Holy Innocents" follows the feast day of St. John. This is what his opening lines refer to. The quote from the bible is taken from Psalm 8, V.2 which says, "out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies." The line "They sung as it were a new song" is taken from Psalm 96 V.1. His following line refers to Psalm 79 V 2-3 and Psalm 79 V.3 where a reference is made

to the flesh of the saints being given to the beasts of the earth and their blood being shed like water in Jerusalem. There was no one there to even bury their bodies.

The third Priest's line "Avenge, O Lord, the blood of thy saints" is taken from Deuteronomy XXXVII, V. 43 from the Old Testament. This line refers to the belief that God will avenge those who shed the blood of his believers in his name. The line "In Rama, a voice was heard, there was weeping" is taken from the Gospel of St. Matthew Ch. 2 verse 18 in the New Testament. This is actually a reference to an Old Testament prophecy that was fulfilled in the New Testament.

Next the three Priests stand together with their respective banners and together quote from Psalm 42. V 4 "Rejoice we all, keeping holy day." The first Priest then refers to Christ's death on the cross for the sins of the people. "He lays down his life for the sheep" is a quotation from John X V. 14-15 and it refers to Christ's willing death on the cross to redeem human beings from their sins.

The three Priests then talk about whether "To-day" is the holy day. That is, the "day" that they "hope for or fear for." The third Priest goes on to say that every day we hope for or fear for and it is "only in retrospect, selection, / We say, that was the day." He concludes by saying that the "eternal design" may appear even now in "sordid particulars." It is at this point that the Knights enter.

#### **Critical Commentary on the Passage Explained Above**

We notice a change in the Chorus now. Although their speech begins bleakly there is no despair. Some knowledge of God's purpose has crept into their understanding. This is expressed through phrases like, "The peace of this world is always uncertain, unless men keep / the peace of God, " or "the world must be cleaned in the winter, or we shall have only / A sour Spring" etc. Towards the end of their speech the maturity of the Chorus is evident from their remark that they are willing to wait voluntarily: "We wait, and the time is short / But waiting is long." This also refers to the martyrdom of Becket. They no longer seek to escape it.

Interestingly, part II opened originally with the lines spoken by the Priests. In the second edition (1936) these lines were substituted by the lines of the Chorus which now opens Part II. It is important to note that the three Priests mark the passage of three days after Christmas. These three days precede Becket's murder. The three days that follow Christmas were important because they were the feast days of St. Stephen, St. John and the Holy Innocents. The scene is deliberately made ritualistic by Eliot. He makes the Priests quote in a formula-like fashion from the Psalms and other books of the Old and the New Testaments. Eliot believed that such ritual and religious like elements lay at the root of drama. When the third Priest says, "only in retrospect, selection, / We say, that was the day" he is referring to the fact that it is in "time" that we "conquer" time. This is a very crucial concept both in this play and in Christianity.

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#### **4.5 EXPLANATORY AND CRITICAL NOTES ON THE SECTION FROM THE ENTRANCE OF THE KNIGHTS UPTO THEIR EXIT**

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The first Knight enters saying "Servants of the King" to the Priests. The first Priest tells the first Knight that he is known to them and enquires if he has travelled far to get to them. The first Knight says that they (the four knights) arrived from France the previous day by ship because they have "business with the Archbishop." The first Priest tells the first knight that he and his men must dine with the Archbishop. He also adds that they will be looked after well and asks them "Dinner before business."

Do you like roast Pork?" To this the first Knight says that they would like business before dinner and that they will "roast" their pork "first, and dine upon it after." By this they mean that they will first murder the Archbishop and then celebrate. The third Knight rudely tells the priest that they do not need the Archbishop's hospitality and will find their own dinner. The Priest sends for Becket who arrives. He tells the Priests that no matter how well prepared one is when the actual moment comes one is "engrossed with matters of other urgency." He tells the Priests that all his papers on the table are in order and that the documents are all signed. Becket then welcomes the Knights and asks them what their business with him is. The first Knight says that the business is from the king and that he would like to talk to Becket alone. Becket asks the Priests to leave him and asks the Knights to tell him about the business. The Knights together accuse Becket of revolting against the King and the law of the land; of showing ingratitude to a king who made him the Archbishop and insensitivity to the person who raised Becket "the tradesman's son: the backstairs / brat who was born in Cheap side: . . . / Creeping out of London dirt, "by endowing him with position and power.

Becket retorts by saying that none of it is true and that he has always been a loyal subject to the king except when he has asked him to overrule God's law for the state law. The Knights--who are bigoted to the King's cause--volunteer to pray to God so that he can help Becket. Becket then asks the Knights if their "urgent business" was merely to scold him? The knights argue back by telling Becket that they are expressing their "indignation, as loyal subjects,." Becket asks them "Loyal to whom?" and the third Knight says, "The King." Becket then tells them that if they have anything to tell him as a command from the King, then it should be done in public. If charges are made against him, in public he will refute them. The first Knight tries to attack Becket but the Priests and the Attendants intervene. Becket then says that he will face the charges "now and here." The first Knight says that he does not want to repeat the misdeeds that Becket has committed in the past because they are too well known. Becket, the Knight says, instead of being grateful for being made an Archbishop by the King, fled to France in the hope "of stirring up trouble in the French dominions." Moreover, Becket also played the French King against the English King. The Pope was also made to believe "false opinions" of him.

The second Knight goes on to say that the King was charitable enough to show kindness and make a peace pact with him and sent Becket back to Canterbury as he demanded. The third Knight adds that the King even restored all honours and possessions despite Becket's transgressions. But Becket showed no gratitude. The first Knight says that this ingratitude was expressed in Becket's suspending "those who had crowned the King's son, the young Prince" by claiming it an illegal act. Becket responds by saying that it was never his wish to "uncrown the king's son, or to diminish / His honours and power." On the contrary, he would have wished "him three crowns rather than one." The Bishops who were excommunicated (thrown out of the Church) were done so by the Pope. The first Knight insists that it was done through Becket and he must amend the act by "absolving them." The first Knight says that the King's command is that Becket and his servants depart from the land. Becket replies that if this is the King's command then, it is seven years since he left his flock and he has lost those years. But, he says, this will never happen again. The first Knight tells Becket that in speaking like this he is insulting the King and Becket responds by saying that it is not him who insults the King "But the Law of Christ's Church, the judgment of Rome." The three Knights accuse Becket of treachery and treason and Becket says that he submits his cause to the judgement of Rome and if they kill him he will rise again to submit his cause to God. Becket exits. The four Knights feel that they should restore order in the king's land. They say that they have come with swords to implement the "King's justice."

### Critical Comments on the Above Passage

The important thing to note about these passages is that the charges the Knights make against Becket are all false and baseless. Becket's integrity and calm contrasts with



the Knights lack of integrity and their agitated condition. The accusations made by the Knights give a historical context to Becket's conflict with the King. When Becket says :

It is not I who insult the King,  
And there is higher than I for the King  
It is not I, Becket from Cheapside. . .

he is demonstrating how he has surrendered his will to that of God. "Not I" is repeated to highlight this. The egocentric "I" is given up. This passage clearly shows that Becket has overcome the fourth temptation--the sin arising from pride.

The above passages are also important because they show the church and State conflict clearly. The Knights view themselves as the King's men and Becket views himself as God's instrument.

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## **4.6 EXERCISES**

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1. Outline Eliot's understanding of Christianity.
2. Critically comment on the significance of the Interlude (Becket's Christmas Sermon) to the play.
3. What is the notion of martyrdom that emerges in Becket's Christmas sermon?
4. Highlight the Christian paradoxes that Becket discusses in the Christmas Sermon.
5. Compare and contrast the two opening speeches of the Chorus in Parts I and II.