

Thad Arnold

Dr. Davis

EN 386

8 December 2023

Body or Spirit: The False Distinction Underpinning Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

Virginia Woolf's critical stance towards the Christian religion makes her portrayal of the religion in *Mrs. Dalloway* seem, at first glance, overwhelmingly negative. The explicitly Christian Doris Kilman shows up as a haughty religious zealot. A more nuanced analysis of Woolf's relationship to Christianity, however, reveals her openness to repurposing some aspects of the religion, especially outside the bounds of the church. Christian, or at least pseudo-Christian, symbols come to life in the novel in the forms of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. Through these characters, Woolf repurposes Christian symbols in service of a new, freer spirituality. Her exploration of a new spirituality with Clarissa and Septimus and criticism of the old through Kilman, however, both rely on a false distinction between the material and the spiritual realm, which fails to consider the incarnational nature of Christian belief.

Throughout her life, Woolf publicly disparaged traditional Christian beliefs, describing the news of T.S. Eliot's conversion as "shameful and distressing" (Griesinger 438). Although her grandparents had been prominent voices in the Evangelical movement, Woolf's parents were "outspoken agnostics who challenged the Evangelical faith of their parents and raised their daughter to do the same" (Griesinger 439). Another experience that informed her rejection of Christianity was her cousin's repeated attempts to convert her throughout her youth (Griesinger 441). This experience informed Woolf's bias against "forms of Christianity that emphasize

conversion” (Griesinger 441-442). This rejection of an emphasis on conversion manifests in *Mrs. Dalloway* in the form of the “Goddess Conversion” who “feasts most subtly on the human will” (Woolf 98). When led by the Goddess Conversion, religion becomes an avenue for oppression and domination, leading to “the tyranny of a strong personality over a weaker one” (Fortin 25). Conversion desires not only spiritual achievement for its devotees but also the enforcement of beliefs onto others. Besides the domineering of beliefs, another one of Woolf’s primary criticisms of Christianity was the barring of women from the priesthood, opining that this came not from “the founder of Christianity,” but from the exclusively male clergy (Gualtieri-Reed 207). Her invoking of the “founder of Christianity” reveals her criticism of the Christian religion is less an opposition to a deity and more a rejection of an institution where “the desires of men...supersede those of God” (Gualtieri-Reed 209). For Woolf, the rigid, patriarchal, and oppressive structure of institutional Christianity prevents Christian ideas from doing any significant amount of good. Her opposition to Christianity, then, does not equal a wholesale rejection of a higher power. Woolf seems to be interested in doing away with a God who reflects “the limited capacities of the fallen, human self” (Gough 61). Therefore, her use of Christian symbols in *Mrs. Dalloway* serves as an attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff of Christianity in service of a new approach to spirituality.

Christian, or at least Christian-like, symbols permeate the novel, most notably in the character of Septimus Warren Smith. Septimus, a war veteran suffering from intense psychological trauma and hallucinations, acts as a Christ figure throughout the novel, preaching to the world around him his own prophetic truths and eventually killing himself in a gruesome death (Woolf 146). Septimus’ utterings, such as that “there is a God” and “universal love: the meaning of the world,” mark him as a prophetic character bent on a message of human

reconciliation (Woolf 24, 124). An analysis of Septimus alone, however, does not do justice to the Christ figure imagery present within the novel. The Christ metaphor, however, is extended in the form of Clarissa. Woolf originally intended for Clarissa to die at her party at the end of the novel and for Clarissa and Septimus to reflect each other as representations of the sane and the insane respectively (Griesinger 452). There are hints of this original vision in the finished novel when Clarissa learns about Septimus' death and sympathizes with him. She feels "somehow very like" Septimus despite never physically meeting him (Woolf 182). This connection serves to double Clarissa and Septimus, resulting in the convergence of their storylines during the party scene at the end.

This doubling also means that Septimus' role as a Christ figure extends to Clarissa as well. At first, the way Clarissa fits into this role does not seem as obvious as that of Septimus. The key to understanding how she fits into this imagery lies in her role as party hostess towards the end of the novel. While Septimus reflects the story of the life and death of Christ, Clarissa serves as a representation of one of the ways Christians believe Christ exists in the world after his earthly life. The news of Septimus' death transforms Clarissa in a way that is at least in some ways visible to others, leading her to lean into her duties as party hostess (Woolf 182). This transformation can be compared to the Christian sacrament of the Holy Eucharist (Fortin 29). Just as in the traditional understanding of the Eucharist, plain bread and wine transform into the body and blood of Christ, Clarissa transforms into the "perfect hostess" (Gualtieri-Reed 220). The lead in for this comparison is seen earlier in the novel when Clarissa categorizes her parties as offerings, or, more specifically, offerings "for the sake of an offering" (Woolf 119). This way of viewing her parties resembles the Anglican understanding of the Eucharist as an offering to God, reflecting the offering of Christ on the cross (Fortin 29). When her party is paired with

Septimus' death, his last words seem to reflect this offertory nature: "I'll give it to you" (Woolf 146). The Christ figure within *Mrs. Dalloway* is then not one person but two. Of course, this imagery differs in significant ways from the Christian understanding. The sacrifice is offered for the sake of itself rather than to an almighty God (Fortin 30). The use of a female character as a sort of vessel for the rejuvenating power of the Christ figure can be read as a reaction by Woolf to the patriarchal nature of institutional Christianity. By linking Clarissa and Septimus, Woolf divorces the image of the divine sacrament from "the enslavement of patriarchal interpretations" (Gualtieri-Reed 211). The inclusion of Clarissa within this new religious interpretation makes it so that men cannot use their shared gender with the Messiah to justify the exclusion of women anymore.

Septimus' role as a Christ figure places him in the middle of a conflict which runs throughout the novel. Woolf's writing reflects a conflict between the spiritualist idea that the mind is the ultimate reality and the materialist idea that matter is the ultimate reality. This conflict plays out in the life of Septimus (Morris 58). Septimus, in a moment of clarity, attributes his prophetic visions to a "heat wave, operating upon a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution" (Woolf 66). The idea of the biological influence on his thinking discrediting any of the ideas of his mind points to a domination of materialism over spiritualism. This materialism has its deity, the twin goddess to Conversion, in the Goddess Proportion (Woolf 97). The principal devotee of Proportion, Sir William, orders the "Christs and Christesses" to "drink milk in bed," a repudiation of their claims to spiritual truth (Woolf 97). In the solely material world of Sir William, where everything and everyone has its place cleanly marked out, any claim to a reality outside the material must be insanity. Sir William believes the answer to this insanity is "common sense" (Fortin 25). In a space where his spiritual identity and material body cannot

coexist, Septimus believes his only recourse is to kill his mortal body and rid himself of the material world altogether. In doing so, Septimus chooses the spiritualist supremacy of his own mind's reality over the materialist focus on the material. In her dual role with Septimus, Clarissa likewise chooses the supremacy of the spiritual over the material when she immediately turns the news of his death into a symbol. His death is a "defiance" as well as an "attempt to communicate" and an "embrace" (Woolf 180). As someone who has never met Septimus, her notion of what his death could have been like is completely in the abstract. She "buffers the harsh truth by complicating it," philosophizing his death into a statement rather than facing the harsh material fact of the loss of life (Bell 108). Her ideas about his death supersede the actuality of it, reflecting the spiritualist focus on the mind as the ultimate reality. Clarissa seems to be reinforcing the reading of Septimus' death as a victory of the spiritual over the material.

Within *Mrs. Dalloway*, this tension between the material and the spiritual is treated as inevitable. One will always have to win out over the other. Within the Christianity Woolf rejects, however, this tension does have another solution: the incarnation. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, which Woolf parodies in the party offering of Clarissa, the effect is not merely spiritual: "mankind does not become a society of angelic beings tolerating the temporary embarrassment of corporeality" (Fortin 29). Unlike a traditional understanding of the Eucharist, where Christ is seen as truly present in the physical bread and wine, Clarissa experiences only a spiritual or symbolic transformation (Fortin 31). As such, Woolf's repurposing of this sacrament loses the emphasis on materiality found in the Eucharist. Another key point missing from the repurposing of the Eucharist is the role the Resurrection plays in the sacrament (Griesinger 450). The sacrament is not merely a remembrance of Christ's death but a reminder of his resurrection. The Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead means the victory over material struggles is

not simply about achieving some higher incorporeal existence but about giving new life to matter, in the form of the corporeal body, itself. If “real life mean[s] embodied life,” then any promise of eternal life must not only focus on the spirit but on the body as well (Wright 618). This contradicts both the spiritualist rejection of matter and the materialist rejection of a higher spiritual reality. Instead, there is a higher material and spiritual reality combined within the power of the resurrection. Septimus, of course, does not rise from the dead. His victory can only be purely spiritual; he fails to redeem the flesh of the material world.

This false distinction between the material and the spiritual does not just show up in Woolf’s appropriation of Christian symbolism. Woolf’s depiction of Christianity reveals hints of this tension as well. Doris Kilman is the clearest characterization of Woolf’s perception of Christianity within the novel. As a zealous recent convert obsessed with her supposed moral superiority over others such as Clarissa, she exemplifies the worst of institutional religion. Kilman is a devotee of the Goddess Conversion. She has the “overwhelming desire to overcome” Clarissa with “a religious victory” (Woolf 122). Kilman’s desire for the conversion of others seems to stem from a desire to vindicate the superiority of her beliefs as much as, if not more than, genuine spiritual concern for others. Kilman represents a Christianity which is more concerned with enforcing its ideas onto the public than the actual physical, mental, and spiritual needs of others. Kilman’s characterization, however, does not stop at her devotion to the Goddess Conversion. Literary critic Vereen M. Bell urges readers to avoid taking “Miss Kilman at Clarissa’s evaluation” (102). Clarissa picks up on Kilman’s zeal for conversion due to both Kilman’s focus on her and her daughter, but conversion is only one part of Kilman’s character (Woolf 123). While Kilman could be written off as a one-dimensional religious bigot, the reader learns her faith stems not from some sense of moral superiority but rather from her own suffering

and loneliness. Kilman, who has German blood, lost her job during the war for her refusal to see all Germans as the enemy (Woolf 121). Facing ostracization and struggling to find consolation, she eventually wonders “bitter and burning” into a church (Woolf 121). Kilman seems to find comfort in how Christianity can sanctify her emotional suffering. She is drawn to the Reverend’s insistence that “knowledge comes through suffering” (Woolf 126). In describing the circumstances of Doris Kilman’s conversion, Woolf appears to be aware of how aspects of the Christian religion appeal to victims of social and mental anguish. Although she may be critical of how the church as a system transforms that need into a drive to convert others, she still treats the plight of Kilman sympathetically. This treatment points to an understanding that some form of spiritual salvation must be sought, even if it is to be found outside of the traditional avenues such as the church. Kilman’s spiritual struggles, however, fall into the same pitfalls as the non-Christians within the story.

Kilman’s conversion seems to point to a worship style reflecting the incarnational ideas of Christianity. Music, lights, and the singing of choir boys all form a part of the experience of the church that draws her in (Woolf 121). All these experiences have to do with the senses and reflect the existence of the body reacting to material stimuli in the present moment. Kilman, however, seems to not be able to reconcile the idea of the body and the idea of the spirit together. She must “control” her “flesh” (Woolf 125). Her material reality is the enemy here, and she must escape it to achieve some higher spiritual reality. Like Septimus and Clarissa, Kilman thinks an escape from her material suffering can only come through forsaking matter. Her inability to reconcile the material and the spiritual might give a clue as to why, despite the intensity of her devotion, worship is still a struggle for her (Woolf 130). Because she has not reconciled the existence of her body with that of her soul, she feels unconnected to God. In orthodox Christian

belief, God became fully human in the person of Jesus Christ. By failing to account for her own humanity, Kilman's identification with the suffering of Christ does her no good. She is defined by onlookers as "not a woman, but a soul" (Woolf 131). Here the same problem facing the atheist Clarissa trips up the devout convert. While Woolf might have attributed this failed idealism to Christian religious fervor, Kilman's lack of solace in religion stems less from the religion and more from the false idea that the spiritual and the material are diametrically opposed, placing her in the same conflict between these two realms as Clarissa and Septimus.

Within *Mrs. Dalloway*, references to the Christian religion depict it as an obsolete approach to achieving spiritual transcendence. In a world where the spiritual and the material are intrinsically opposed, the salvation of the spirit will always mean the destruction of the body, as can be seen in Septimus' suicide. What Woolf fails to account for, however, is Christianity's focus on raising both the body and the soul. The problems Woolf therefore associates with Christianity are just as applicable to the new spirituality she explores using Septimus and Clarissa.

Works Cited

- Bell, Vereen M., and Vereen Bell. "Misreading 'Mrs. Dalloway.'" *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 114, no. 1, 2006, pp. 93–111. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27549779>. Accessed 1 Dec. 2023.
- Fortin, Rene E. "Sacramental Imagery in Mrs. Dalloway." *Renascence: Essays on Literature and Ethics, Spirituality, and Religion*, vol. 18, 1965, pp. 23–31. EBSCOhost.
- Gough, Val. "'That Razor Edge of Balance': Virginia Woolf and Mysticism." *Woolf Studies Annual*, vol. 5, 1999, pp. 57–77. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24906415>. Accessed 1 Dec. 2023.
- Griesinger, Emily. "Religious Belief in a Secular Age: Literary Modernism and Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway." *Christianity & Literature*, vol. 64, no. 4, Sept. 2015, pp. 438–64. EBSCOhost.
- Gualtieri-Reed, Elizabeth J. "Mrs. Dalloway: Revising Religion" *The Centennial Review*, vol. 43, no. 2, 1999, pp. 205–25. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23740014>. Accessed 1 Dec. 2023.
- Morris, Pam. "Mrs Dalloway: The Spirit of Religion Was Abroad." Jane Austen, *Virginia Woolf and Worldly Realism*, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, pp. 55–80. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g09tv4.6>. Accessed 2 Dec. 2023.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1925.
- Wright, N. T. "Jesus' Resurrection and Christian Origins." *Gregorianum*, vol. 83, no. 4, 2002, pp. 615–35. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23581348>. Accessed 5 Dec. 2023.