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Performing Salvation: The Transformation of Religious Ritual from Mystery Cycles to Eliot's Modernist Martyr Play

تحول الطقوس الدينية من مسرحيات الأسرار في العصور الوسطى إلى مسرحية: تمثيل الخلاص

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Abstract:

Performing Salvation is an exploration of how the form and structure of religious rituals change over time and how this effect is reflected in the works of T. S. Eliot. The first half of this study examines how religious rituals evolved from being a communal activity and a part of collective identity in the communal and Civic performance culture of medieval Mystery Cycles, to Eliot's development of his own individual and subjective approach to religious ritual in his play *Murder in the Cathedral*. The second half discusses how Eliot redeems the individual martyrdom of Thomas Becket by interpreting his death in terms of the psychological process of developing a personal relationship with God through the actions taken by Jesus Christ during his earthly life, through his Passion, and through the resurrection, and through the resurrection after three days of death. By examining both the Christian and Greek traditions, the study will demonstrate how Eliot's approach to religious ritual provides an understanding of modern-day Christians who have moved away from communal worship, to a more personal and individual form of worship, allowing individuals to once again become agents of their faith. As a result, there remains an unresolved question of how concepts of salvation, martyrdom, and sacred performance are redefined across time in response to changing cultural, intellectual, and spiritual conditions.

Keywords: Salvation, Mystery, modernism, Martyr, Ritual theory.

المخلص:

يُعدّ "تمثيل الخلاص" دراسةً تستكشف الكيفية التي تتغيّر بها أشكال وبنى الطقوس الدينية عبر الزمن، وكيف ينعكس هذا التحول في أعمال ت. س. إليوت. يركّز النصف الأول من هذه الدراسة على تطوّر الطقوس الدينية من كونها نشاطاً جماعياً يشكل جزءاً من الهوية المشتركة ضمن ثقافة الأداء الجماعي والمدني في مسرحيات الأسرار في العصور الوسطى، إلى تطوّر رؤية إليوت الخاصة التي اتسمت بطابع فردي وذاتي في مقارنته للطقوس الدينية في مسرحيته "جريمة قتل في الكاتدرائية".

أما النصف الثاني من الدراسة فيتناول الكيفية التي يعيد بها إليوت تأويل استشهاد توماس بيكيت، إذ يفسّر موته في إطار العملية النفسية لتكوين علاقة شخصية مع الله. ويتم ذلك من خلال استحضار الأفعال التي قام بها يسوع المسيح خلال حياته الأرضية، مروراً بالألمه وصلبه، ثم قيامته بعد ثلاثة أيام من موته. ومن خلال دراسة كلٍّ من التقاليد المسيحية واليونانية، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى إظهار كيف يقدم منهج إليوت في فهم الطقوس الدينية تفسيراً لتحوّل المسيحيين المعاصرين من نمط العبادة الجماعية إلى شكل أكثر فردية وشخصية من العبادة، بما يسمح للأفراد بأن يصبحوا مرة أخرى فاعلين ومشاركين في إيمانهم. ونتيجةً لذلك، تبقى هناك مسألة غير محسومة تتعلق بكيفية إعادة تعريف مفاهيم الخلاص والاستشهاد والأداء المقدّس عبر الزمن استجابةً للتغيرات الثقافية والفكرية والروحية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الخلاص، مسرحيات الأسرار، الحداثة، الشهيد، نظرية الطقوس.

1.Introduction

In Western dramatic tradition, how it has functioned as a whole since early times, that is as an extension of religious ritual. A primary part of medieval theatre was the invention of the single work for each day of the week, not independent but rather a continuation of the liturgy. All three of these types of medieval plays translate the doctrinal beliefs of Christian faith into a theatrical spectacle for the enjoyment of the audience, so that each member of the audience would have an immediate understanding of their own salvation through performance. Here, performance becomes both a teaching method and an act of devotion to God, as it involves a communal, ritualistic experience of metaphysical order (Beadle, 1994, p. 37).

As time has progressed, various influences (secularization, scientific rationalism, and modern life) have broken down the unity of this belief system. The result has been the emergence of modernist drama

which retains some elements of the ceremonial origins of drama. However, modernist playwrights no longer have the same unified and religiously-oriented audience as medieval theatre had. Instead, they focused their themes/subject matter on psychological issues such as introspection, isolation, meaninglessness, and the difficulties faced in daily living. The change from these mystery plays to modern spiritual plays (modernist) is therefore representative of the change from a publicly-conducted ceremonial program to an individual's confrontation with one's own psyche, and, also, a move away from communal beliefs to an emphasis on personal responsibility (Carlson, 2004, p. 112).

While T S Eliot intentionally engages in choral lamentation forms from the medieval period; liturgical cadence and martyr narrative. Eliot uses the medieval form as an investigation into the spiritual disorientation and fragmentation of the 20th begin. Eliot's play engages the architecture of ritual not as a means to reinforce community unity, but as a site to perform the fragility of faith in a time of extreme political instability and uncertainty of the modern age. Eliot has recontextualised the ritualistic site of modernity into the place where contemporary subjects encounter Divine Admission and historical contingency/personality (Scofield, 2015, p. 89).

This research presents the argument that Eliot has transformed medieval performative theology of salvation to modernist martyr drama to address faith, spiritual authority and alienation through the crisis of modernity. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Salvation becomes an internalised self-reflexive enactment of belief through Becket's encounter with temptation and martyrdom rather than a community reenactment of sacred history. This paper views *Murder in the Cathedral* as a combination of an inheritance of and a transformation of medieval ritual dramatic structures. Therefore, Eliot is positioned as a modernist who resuscitated the practice of artful ritual forms to bridge and heal the contemporary spiritual injuries of the age (Eliot, 1935/2019, p. 54).

This study aims on comparing how religious ritual shifts from the communal form of medieval mystery cycles to the individual, modernist vision in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Existing studies treat them separately and ignore how ritual itself is transformed across time.

II. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and comparative method to analyze how religious ritual changes from medieval mystery cycles to Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. It relies on close reading of the texts, focusing on key elements like ritual, salvation, martyrdom, and the role of the audience.

The study also uses ideas from performance theory and theology to understand how ritual is performed and how its meaning shifts over time. By comparing the two periods, it shows how ritual moves from a shared, public experience to a more personal and modern form.

II. Theoretical Framework

Theatre performance as a religious ritual is analysed using the performance theory established by Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. The liminal space is an example of how Turner views ritual as an experience of transitory space, where participants experience transitions and transformations from one state to another through a process of symbolically defined actions, and experience redefined social identities (individual and collective). By viewing ritual as performance and through the lens of Turner's Performance theory, it is impossible to separate ritual from its theatrical qualities. Turner insists that

ritual is a “process enacted, not merely believed,” arguing that its power lies in its performative staging of transition: “In liminality, people ‘play’ with the concepts of the familiar and defamiliarize them, causing them to stand out in relief” (Turner, 1982, p. 27). He further identifies ritual performance as a “social drama” that exposes and repairs fractures in the community through symbolic action. His famous claim “Ritual is a practice of what’s possible” highlights the relationship between ritual and theatre, which has participants entering a ritualized space, participating in acts of transformation and then going back into their ordinary lives. (Turner, 1982, p. 44).

Richard Schechner extends Turner’s logic by framing performance as “restored behavior,” meaning “physical, verbal, or virtual actions that are not-for-the-first-time; that are prepared, rehearsed, and repeated” (Schechner, 2003, p. 28). Schechner emphasizes that ritual and theatre operate on the same structural grammar: “Ritualized behavior is to society what theater is to art: a special ordering of time, space, objects, and roles” (Schechner, 2003, p. 41). Schechner explicitly connects ritual and dramatic form by saying, “theatrical actions are only part of the play’s structure.” There is a common shared performative basis for both ritual and dramatic theory, which supports the role of ritual in dramatic theories.

The connection between religious rituals and drama forms the foundation for modern Western Sacred Theatre. Medieval playwrights recognised that religious doctrine needed to be represented physically through the use of familiar gestures and the involvement of the community, which is why the Mystery cycles depicted the story of salvation. Through their use of stagecraft, playwrights were able to portray the teachings of Christianity in what scholars term “visible theologies” in which believers acted out their faith rather than simply speaking about it. This also aligns with Turner’s statement that ritual “... represents the values by which community lives and the tensions that threaten to tear communities apart.” (Turner, 1982, p. 52) Therefore, dramatic representation provides an avenue for the physical representation of theology in a manner that creates meaning for those involved in the production and reception of such works.

Modernism’s return to rituals has greater immediacy due to an increasing sense of spiritual detachment from the world around us. Schechner notes that as crisis affects a culture, “Those societies in distress will capitalize on their historic relationship to restored actions (or behaviours) during moments of cultural unrest; at such times, cultures re-establish and/or reassess many aspects of their social structure” (Schechner, 2003, p. 149). This creates many opportunities for modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot to rediscover and reformulate elements of liturgical art such as chants, choruses and symbolic martyrdom to help convey his thoughts relating to the experience of alienation, the loss of faith, and the metaphysical vacuum so apparent during the 20th century. Turner’s assertion that “communitas or disintegration can emerge from liminality, depending on the cultural moment” is important here (Turner, 1982, p. 57).

III. Medieval Mystery Cycles and the Drama of Salvation

As Hardison notes, the modified “mapped sacred history onto the civic body, making drama a theological chronicle performed in time” (Hardison, 1965, p. 112). From their origins in liturgical practices, medieval mystery cycles (specifically the York, Chester, and Wakefield cycles) became large civic performances mapping biblical history, represented from Creation to the Day of Judgment. Each of the cycles’ episodes fit in with their respective Craft Guilds that had a relevant occupational relationship to what was performed.

The York *Creation* play opens with God declaring;

“I make all thing withouten hoolle;

Sun and moone, both great and smale,

Ye shall have neither spot nor coloure foule” (York, *Creation of the World*, ll. 1–3).

As God speaks, creation takes place, and the stage becomes an extension of holy cosmology, this authoritative divine voice becoming the structural backbone of the cycles. Similarly, in Chester’s *Fall of Lucifer*, God proclaims;

“I am maker of might most;

Father and Son and Holy Ghost” (Chester, *Fall of Lucifer*, ll. 1–2),

Trinitarian theology serves as the performance's foundation. These introductions show how heavenly discourse represented in performance was used in medieval play to directly communicate dogma. The sustainability and functionality of these cycles depended heavily on community involvement. Since the plays were the result of guild labor rather than the work of a single playwright, the creation itself was an act of collective commitment.

As Richmond argues, “The mystery cycles were not merely watched; they were lived, crafted, funded, and sustained by the entire community” (Richmond, 2012, p. 57). The multiple writers of these plays stressed that the main purpose of the plays was to teach religious principles. The audience’s level of understanding was based on what they could see and hear. Dillon (1998, p. 76) states that the cycles acted as catechisms when representing God's salvation plan to an audience that was largely illiterate.

The cycles generated their greatest impact by depicting salvation through action; the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection were depicted in performance for audiences as opposed to as an abstract theory of theology. This staging activated what Clifford Davidson calls “a sacramental imagination,” where the visible action carried spiritual weight: “To see Christ bleed was to confront one’s own redemption in the immediacy of performance” (Davidson, 2007, p. 91). The medieval community saw “salvation” being transformed from its first use as meaning “safe arrival” to being portrayed through a sign, a set of clothing or costume, sound, and ritual. Therefore, the drama made the teaching about salvation a tangible, moral, and spiritual way for people to relate to and experience the acts of divine intervention as they were performed (Creed 1990 p.44).

The use of “temporal” and “spatial” characteristics of the sites of performance created special theatrical spaces on common town squares. As cycle plays were structured in accordance with the liturgical calendar and were designed to create an experience that would coincide with both civil time and the Church's calendar, they were generally produced as an all-day event. Heather Hill-Vásquez notes, “When the cycle wagons entered the square, the town itself became a holy stage, a temporary Jerusalem” (Hill-Vásquez, 2007, p. 63). According to Bevington (1975, p. 28), the cycles connected community and identity with a sacred narrative and turned the medieval town into a theatrical space, where salvation was re-enacted through these different factors: site, time, and ritual.

IV. Ritual, Martyrdom, and Sacramental Performance

Martyr characters in holy theatre serve as a dramatic means of communicating theology (theological beliefs) through action (to convert theology into action). In the context of medieval and contemporary religious theatre, the martyr's perseverance is a point of ceremonial focus. In the past, the way martyr

tales have been viewed by scholars has been to describe them as "performative acts of witness", where the body of a martyr is used to test and validate spiritual authority (Moss, 2012, p. 64). The martyr's embodiment of redemption through extreme measures provides the basis for the dramatic representation of the struggle between earthly power and divine loyalty as exemplified in the liturgical/narrative dramatisation of trial, temptation and sacrifice (Boyarin, 1999, p.112).

Thus, the martyr's body functions as a sacred text, a live book that the audience may read, interpret, and inscribe with theological significance. "The holy body speaks where words fail, bearing doctrine in its wounds and gestures," according to Bynum (Bynum, 1995, p. 78). Portrayal of religious practices in contemporary dramas or through medieval Passion plays illustrated how pain reveals obscure religious themes and elucidates religious experience to an audience. The martyr's bodily remains serve as the basis for understanding and interpreting martyrdom as a form of divine communication. In the enactment of martyrdom, the physicality of martyrdom becomes an instrument for understanding the spiritual dimension through actions of the body instead of through doctrinal discourse (Kilde 2008: 91).

The stage is transformed into a pedagogical altar where ideology is performed, explained, and reaffirmed by the group. Martyrdom is therefore transformed into a didactic event through ritual performance, which unites the audience into a transient spiritual community (Schechner, 2003, p. 70). All in all, the Shared Experience of an embodiment of Ritualized Activity gives the collective experience of Performance a spiritually educational character; thereby creating a body of Community Knowledge. Through the visual, auditory, and emotional components of performance, theatre has provided its audience with an interactive experience to the Religious Mysteries, termed by Grimes (2013), as a "sacramental medium" (Grimes, 2013, p. 134).

V. Eliot's Modernist Reinterpretation: Murder in the Cathedral

Murder in the Cathedral reflects T. S. Eliot's mature Anglo-Catholic worldview, which uses sacred aesthetics to restore intellectual seriousness to modern theater. Eliot believed that poetry and liturgy shared a sacramental power to reconstruct consciousness, and that "the Church remains the most coherent framework for spiritual perception in a disordered age" (Eliot, 1936, p. 14). Eliot makes use of medieval sacred forms in his antiphonal patterns, liturgical cadences, and symbolism of the Eucharist; not because he wants to be nostalgic about that era, but because he saw them as an effective way for him as an artist to counteract the emptiness of modernity. Furthermore, Eliot's use of the theatre as a setting allows for transcendence to overcome the tragedies of named men through symbolic embodiment and ritualistic use of language (Moody, 1994, p. 102).

The central focus of this modernist spiritual exploration is Thomas Becket, a tinkered martyr who goes through both a spiritual (theological) struggle AND a psychological struggle. Unlike the strictly hagiographical martyrs of the medieval period, Eliot's Becket also has internal battles to test him. Becket must deal with inner temptations and face temptations based on vanity, fame and position as well as his own motivations. Becket's insistence that;

“the last temptation is the greatest treason,

To do the right deed for the wrong reason” (Eliot, 1935/2019, p. 56).

Martyrdom is reinterpreted as an inward cleansing. Eliot describes martyrdom as a crisis of self-knowledge in this inner battle, transforming Becket into a contemporary character confronting spiritual authority, authenticity, and the shattered moral landscape of modernity (Gardner, 1988, p. 77).

Eliot takes the idea of the medieval 'Chorus' that appears within the Context of Medieval Theatre and uses that idea to generate 'anxiety', which creates a feeling of alienation from the world around him and from himself. Instead of a confident medieval community reenacting salvation history, Eliot's Chorus speaks with fear, fragmentation, and longing: "We fear the injustice of men less than the justice of God" (Eliot, 1935/2019, p. 22). Eliot's use of rhetoric represents a combination of the experienced loss and brokenness of a community together with the conflicting pull of the impending divine judgment. Eliot transforms the medieval choral form into a vehicle for the contemporary existential fear of the community and becomes the voice of the community's conscience (Kenner, 1959, p. 143).

Eliot's play revolves around the conflict between the secular and spiritual forms of authority. The play's moral center is Becket, who rejects the political allegiance of kings and seeks a higher moral order. The knights, however, are a representation of the state apparatus of Eliot's day. Becket's martyrdom ultimately becomes an inner act of obedience to the Christian God, rather than a public celebration. The audience becomes witnesses of a sacred drama through Becket's consciousness and the terrified experience of the Chorus, who gain an understanding of salvation as a journey through the internal experiences of the individual, and not through the shared experiences of the group. (Childs, 2001, p. 91).

VI. From Collective Ritual to Individualized Spiritual Crisis

The dramatization of salvation and religion underwent a significant shift from medieval communal ritual to the personal spiritual crises of contemporary theater. By integrating theology into a common civic rite, public performance in medieval cycle theater confirmed communal belief. However, modernist theater breaks this unity by emphasizing the lone believer facing existential uncertainty. According to Taylor, a "turn inward, where faith becomes an interior trial rather than a communal certainty" characterizes contemporary spirituality (Taylor, 2007, p. 89). This change turns religious drama into an examination of psychological fragility and individual spiritual struggle rather than a celebration of divine order (Acheson, 1993, p. 41).

The fragmentation of the sacred itself is a reflection of the twentieth-century breakdown of philosophical coherence. Instead of assuming a stable theological universe, modernist playwrights present the challenge of finding the sacred in a secularized, disillusioned society. Holiness is viewed by Eliot and his contemporaries as illusive, transient, and sometimes hidden by moral ambiguity and historical brutality. According to Bradshaw, "the scattering of the sacred into symbolic residues, gestures, and shadows rather than unified ritual systems" is what shapes modernist drama (Bradshaw, 2011, p. 98). Instead of being boldly presented, the stage becomes a place where the sacred is sought, questioned, or lamented.

Dramatic inquiry takes the place of theological certainty as the theatrical form itself becomes an instrument of spiritual questioning. Modernist theater employs discourse, silence, fragmentation, and internal monologue to examine the sincerity of conviction rather than portraying salvation as a set story. Characters and spectators encounter the ambiguity of meaning in performance, which turns into a questioning space. This dramatic style, modified by Schechner, "performance does not confirm belief but tests it," transforming the stage into a ritual of inquiry as opposed to affirmations (Schechner, 2003, p. 112).

VII. Comparative Analysis

According to Victor Turner's theory that "Ritual performance" is a "Social Drama" manifesting itself in predictable stages - Breach; Crisis; Redress; Reintegration - we can see the same structural parallel between the Medieval Mystery Cycles and Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (Turner, 1982, p. 24). Eliot applies the same ceremonial logic attributed to medieval cycles to depict Becket's final days. Turner refers to the play's structure as "the patterned revelation of transcendence through action" (Turner, 1982, p. 40). The medieval dramaturgical architecture was echoed in Eliot's liturgical rhythm and processional motion (Turner, 1982, p. 40).

Through the setting of Advent and Becket's sermon, Eliot creates an experience of liminality. Turner's concept of liminality also includes a suspension of chronological time. However, medieval cycles representing holy time on municipal calendars do so in a different manner. Becket transports the community to a ceremonial temporality in which divine presence breaks historical time when he preaches, "Our peace is the peace he left behind, a rest in Him we cannot understand" (Eliot, 1935/2019, p. 43). This is consistent with Turner's assertion that individuals are "lifted out of secular time into the time of eternal return" during ritual (Turner, 1969, p. 96).

Eliot's reworking of the medieval Chorus is made clearer by Richard Schechner's idea of restored conduct. Eliot utilizes the chorus to depict contemporary estrangement, while medieval cycles employed choral voices to assert common conviction. According to Schechner, ritual performance "restores actions previously known, but under new circumstances they acquire new meanings" (Schechner, 2003, p. 28). "We are afraid in a fear that we cannot know, cannot face, cannot bear to remember" is how Eliot expresses this (Eliot, 1935/2019, p. 9). The significance of the Chorus's performance of the restored medieval form is contemporary worry (Schechner, 2003, p. 28).

Turner's observation that ritual generates a "sacred enclosure" where identity is stripped and recreated is reflected in the alteration of ritual space (Turner, 1969, p. 102). Eliot sacralizes the interior of the church, whereas medieval dramas sacralized the streets. "Here let us stand, in our appointed place" (Eliot, 1935/2019, p. 5) opens the play, designating the cathedral as a transitional space. According to Turner (1982, p. 45), ritual space turns into a threshold where "the structure of the world is open to reordering." This spiritual pressure chamber is where Eliot's entire drama takes place.

Ritual's purpose also changes. Eliot saw ritual as contemplative, but medieval audiences saw it as an educational display. According to Turner (1969, p. 94), liminal persons experience a shift in awareness rather than only a change in their outward identity. This psychological liminality is portrayed by Eliot in the moment where Becket is tempted. "You shall triumph in victory, but do the right deed for the wrong reason" (Eliot, 1935/2019, p. 57) is the insight that provokes him in the Fourth Tempter. As a matter of facts, ritual takes on the role of interior cleansing instead of public education (Turner, 1969, p. 94).

Schechner describes a shift from dramatic external events to personal challenges due to religious beliefs. Schechner asserts that modern performances often take on the form of "rehearsing one's identity" where one's identity is being tested; because, as stated by Becket, "True martyrs are those whose egos have been replaced by becoming instruments of God," for they have given up all personal desires and surrendered themselves entirely to God (Eliot, 1935/2019). Today, salvation is analyzed through psychological means rather than through the stories told in the traditional cycles (Schechner, 2003).

Another link and metamorphosis is revealed by Turner's concept of *communitas*, a transient spiritual togetherness established via shared liminality. Eliot's theater creates *communitas* by shared fear,

whereas medieval drama created it through group involvement. "Clear the air!" the chorus exclaims. Make the sky clean! They represent Turner's "collective effervescence" (Wash the wind!) (Eliot, 1935/2019, p. 72), but this effervescence is a result of trauma rather than joy. Eliot transforms *communitas* into a mutual understanding of spiritual instability (Turner, 1969, p. 128).

Ritual Theory also clarifies the difference between salvation as performance and salvation as philosophical quest. Christ is crucified in front of the audience in medieval cycles, which present redemption as an embodied activity. Eliot shifts redemption to the martyr's inner existence. According to Turner (1982, p. 51), ritual becomes "a mirror in which individuals confront their deepest motives" in contemporary situations. The real location of redemption is found in Becket's self-examination—the internal conflict between pride, obedience, and motivation (Turner, 1982, p. 51).

In the grand scheme of things, Eliot creates a new kind of ritual theater by combining the ideas of Turner and Schechner. Turner describes Becket as a liminal figure whose death creates an upheaval of the established order of society and spirituality. As Schechner suggests (Schechner, 2003, p. 89), the outcome of these types of performances is to "challenge, stretch and change" the performer and the audience. Thus, Eliot's drama develops into a modern-day rite that examines oneself through an intimate lens, investigates one's spiritual path to salvation, and ultimately creates a sense of disquieting anxiety within the mind of the individual and audience member on stage rather than a public performance with an audience looking on.

VIII. Conclusion

Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* illustrates how the development of ritual play has shifted from being a communal external display (such as with medieval mystery cycles) to being an internally motivated, psychologically charged experience (such as with contemporary spiritual theatre). Medieval plays presented divine history as a shared moral event through embodied action, public involvement, and holy spatial alteration. Eliot transforms the ritual architecture—choral voices, liturgical tempo, and martyr story—into a drama of reflection rather than group affirmation. In his hands, ritual becomes a place to address the uncharted territory of contemporary faith, reveal spiritual brokenness, and test reasons. Eliot's accomplishment is that he modernized holy play without undermining its philosophical significance. He transforms the martyr into a location of intellectual inquiry rather than theological certainty, shifting redemption from the public sphere to the inner life. The holy is now a crisis to endure, understand, and absorb rather than a show to watch, which changes the possibilities of contemporary spiritual theater. This study shows that;

1. Religious ritual shifts from a communal performance in mystery cycles to an individual inner experience in Eliot's play, where salvation becomes personal rather than collective.
2. Martyrdom changes from a clear religious act to a self-aware and complex struggle, where intention and authenticity matter.
3. Time moves from a cyclical sacred model to a modern fragmented one, reflecting uncertainty and questioning of faith.

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