

## **ELIZABETH BISHOP AND CHRISTIAN LITERARY TRADITION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry treats primarily secular subjects. Yet religious references saturate her work and signal an imaginative engagement with Christian tradition. My thesis is one of the first to examine the full rhetorical range and force of this engagement. I argue that one cannot deduce a pattern of religious conviction in Bishop's writing, but that Christianity as a belief system, a practice, and a body of literature often provides a critical focus and formal model for her work.

My introduction describes Bishop's religious background and recalls the intellectual debates during her formative years regarding America's religious future and the relationship between religion and art. My first chapter analyzes "Roosters" and "2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" as poems that bring to light Bishop's method of contemplating this dialogue through scriptural allusions. Through these she scrutinizes the historical impact of Christianity on culture and gauges its relevance to modernity, as articulated by such thinkers as Reinhold Niebuhr, Christopher Caudwell, and I.A. Richards. My second chapter examines Bishop's aspiration to write "spiritual" poetry, distinct from both Romantic tradition and the Christian modernism of Marianne Moore. I analyze several works that reveal Bishop's interest in sacraments and relics as

forms that enable incarnative language, including “A Miracle for Breakfast,” “The Baptism,” “The Weed,” and “The Monument.” Chapter three treats Bishop’s appropriation of biblical parable and Christian allegory as a strategy for casting religious longing in secular terms. I posit “The Prodigal,” “The Fish,” “The Unbeliever,” and “At the Fishhouses” as secular parables. Chapter four investigates Bishop’s revision of Christian pastoral elegy and spiritual autobiography. Through allusions to Milton’s *Lycidas* in “Anaphora” and to Augustine’s *Confessions* in “In the Waiting Room,” Bishop affirms the power Christian forms retain in her work while distancing herself from Christian convictions. Finally, I read Bishop’s late poem “The End of March” as a palinode that relinquishes struggle and critique to reveal Bishop’s arduously realized faith in a limited but vital human imagination.