In 1939, on the cusp of war, W. H. Auden could, in Michael North’s words, ‘summarize in one paragraph what had become a familiar indictment’ (North 1991: 2):

The most obvious social fact of the last forty years is the failure of liberal capitalist democracy, based on the premises that every individual is born free and equal, each an absolute entity independent of all others; and that a formal political equality, the right to vote, the right to a fair trial, the right of free speech, is enough to guarantee his freedom of action in his relation with his fellow men. The results are only too familiar to us all. By denying the social nature of personality, and by ignoring the social power of money, it has created the most impersonal, the most mechanical and the most unequal civilisation the world has ever seen, a civilisation in which the only emotion common to all classes is a feeling of individual isolation from everyone else, a civilisation torn apart by the opposing emotions born of economic injustice, the just envy of the poor and the selfish terror of the rich.

(APr II, 6–7)

The social and political crises of the 1930s – from the Economic Crisis and widespread unemployment to the rise of totalitarian regimes in
Russia, Italy and Germany, war in Spain, and a ruptured international order leading to global war – were felt by intellectuals like Auden to place a whole civilization on trial. The verdict remained uncertain. Would ‘liberal capitalist democracy’ survive, and did it even have a right to exist? Would one of the new political religions, socialism or fascism, sweep all before it in revolution or total war, to create a new order, and perhaps a New Man altogether?

The term ‘political religion’ is used here to point to the fact that for many interwar intellectuals, an exclusively political analysis of this situation would have seemed insufficient: the crisis also came to be seen as a religious one, raising with great urgency the question of the survival of Europe’s Christian heritage, as against a possible post-Christian future. Christianity could now plausibly be understood as providing an independent critique and historical analysis of all political ‘isms’; as a bulwark against impending chaos; and as a vital source of values – offering its own regeneration cure for the ills of social atomism and injustice, a technocratic, de-spiritualized civilization, and an impersonal and malfunctioning industrial capitalism. For those drawn to it, Christianity might now be opposed to ersatz secular religions of all kinds; but even for the more sceptical, it could seem a specially useful prop or provider of prestige and social cohesion for one or another of the ambitious political schemes circulating everywhere.

This chapter examines the role of certain Christian dogmas in the political thought, cultural theory and aesthetics of three leading Modernist poets during the 1930s and early 1940s: Hell, or final damnation, in T. S. Eliot, the medieval condemnation of usury for Ezra Pound and the Incarnation in W. H. Auden’s work. Two of them were Christian converts, Eliot from Unitarianism and philosophical scepticism to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927, and Auden, as late as 1939–40, from a half-hearted socialism to a version of the Anglicanism of his upbringing, liturgically Anglo-Catholic, but theologically a coat of many colours. On the other hand, Pound elaborated his own idiosyncratic neo-pagan creed, but began to interest himself in the Roman Catholic Church over the 1930s, to the point where, in an unpublished article from 1940 he could claim (less than convincingly) not to deny ‘any Catholic dogma’ (Pound 1996b: 141). The very idea and function of ‘dogma’ is thus very different for each of these poets, and the particular doctrines under discussion here also engage a striking range of contexts within their work and thought. This