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Kierkegaard, Public Anxiety, and the Single Individual

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Introduction

"Compel a person to an opinion, a conviction, a belief—in all eternity, that I cannot do. But one thing I can do, in one sense the first thing (since it is the condition for the next thing: to accept this view, conviction, belief), in another sense the last thing if he refuses the next: I can compel him to become aware."[1]

This quote from Kierkegaard's journals captures the ultimate aim of his authorship: to compel his reader to become aware and passionately confront the ultimate meaning of existence. Instead of this kind of existential engagement Kierkegaard sees modern philosophy, theology, the Church, and the culture at large sidestepping and ignoring this task. Rather than living into an ethical or religious commitment, Kierkegaard diagnoses a majority of people living an aesthetic existence. While ethical and religious categories may be bandied about, the underlying modus operandi is a secular mentality, preoccupied with pleasure and material comfort.

In light of this contemporary malaise Kierkegaard seeks to make his reader aware of an existential either/or. "In contrast to the age of revolution, which took action [finding and confronting either/ors] the present age is an age of publicity, the age of miscellaneous announcements: nothing happens but still there is instant publicity."[2]A poignant example of an either/or confrontation can be seen in the lives of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain. Dispirited by the intellectual climate at the Sorbonne in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century (characterized by a smug 'relativism of the wise,' preached by professors 'clinging to skepticism and exhaling their 'que sais-je' like cigarette smoke, finding life otherwise quite excellent") the Maritains "vowed that they would commit suicide if they could not find any purpose to life beyond the sterile materialism" in vogue at the time. What seemed at first to be a compelling philosophy of life proved to be an evasion of the deeper questions about the meaning and purpose of life.

To Kierkegaard the meaning of life for many of his fellow Danes in the 19th century had become a settled affair —provided as it was by the dominant Christian ethos. While Kierkegaard affirms Christianity he deplores the illusion that being a Christian is somehow an easy or natural occurrence. Rather, Kierkegaard describes the journey of becoming a Christian as something incredibly difficult, filled with horrors and wonders. To characterize this odyssey he offers stark images: Abraham's terror on Mount Moriah; a child's horror at first seeing an image of the crucified Christ; faith as treading water alone over seventy fathoms. The journey

[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 50.

[2] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p. 70.

of becoming a Christian involves the difficult work and surrender of becoming a self before God.

It is this existential either/or that Kierkegaard's project seeks to prompt and protect. Often mischaracterized as apolitical or quietist, Kierkegaard is rather wary of how public engagement can undermine the essential either/or that should confront the individual in every situation. Kierkegaard's project does not offer a blueprint for social action, but it does illuminate the pitfalls the single individual needs to be mindful of when engaging the public sphere.

In light of the conference theme, "the role of virtues in the public sphere," our essay, illuminated by Kierkegaard, proceeds accordingly. First, we explore the hazards that confront the single individual engaging with the public sphere in the present age. The present age, Kierkegaard observes (foreshadowing W.H. Auden), is an "age of anxiety," wherein unique, personal existence is leveled by attention to (even an obsession with) public opinion. The very notion of the "public" Kierkegaard sees as but an outgrowth of the anxiety that afflicts modernity. More than the single individual transforming the public, Kierkegaard sees the "public" transforming or deforming the single individual as she becomes "lost in a cloud of anonymity and by means of large numbers (a 'crowd') [is] enabled to escape what each individual faces singly in his own life--a personal decision (either/or)."[3]

In the second part of our essay we then turn to a single individual who was both engaged with the public sphere and with the writings of Kierkegaard: W.H. Auden. Auden was personally and existentially drawn to Kierkegaard. Like many readers he found Kierkegaard's diagnosis of despair and anxiety revelatory. Yet distinct from other notable readers of Kierkegaard in the 20th century (Heidegger, Sartre, Camus et. al) Auden takes Kierkegaard's religious pathway seriously, as the only cure for anxiety. In this way, he exemplifies a single individual charting a course beyond the anxiety that plagues the present age.

The past 20 years or so we have tried to connect thinking with doing with students who are preparing to teach in schools and work in churches. We are often frustrated to the point of futility preparing individuals for work that will be frustrating to the point of futility. Hence, we turn to Kierkegaard, not because he wallows in existential futility but rather because he envisions the possibility of joyful existing on the far side of futility or to a hope beyond despair. Our conclusion is not an argument but a question of how one enjoys participating in the edifying practices of church and classroom, which transcend the public sphere and need to be protected from its intrusions that undermine it.

The Present Age of Despair

In his time Kierkegaard witnessed two unique phenomenon: the rise of the modern press and the emergence of the amusement park. The printing press, like most industries, was transformed by the industrial revolution, with the first inexpensive penny press developed in 1830. By 1843, when *Either/Or* was published, newspapers were arriving at the doorsteps of most working and middle class homes throughout Europe. Also in 1843 Tivoli, "one of the oldest amusement parks in the world," opened its doors in Copenhagen, featuring one of the

[3] Robert Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008) p. 83

first roller coasters.[4] Both developments seemingly served positive needs. Newspapers informed the general public about the issues of the day and amusement parks provided a respite from the demands of industrialized work.

Kierkegaard's assessment, however, of both trends is critical. Rather than an informed citizenry he sees a distracted mob, leveled by anemic groupthink. Instead of healthy amusement, he diagnoses impoverished souls seeking tawdry diversions. To modern ears, with social media, 24-7 news, and the Disneyfication of entertainment, Kierkegaard's judgment may sound harsh. Yet Kierkegaard appraises both media and amusement culture in light of the self recognizing and embracing a passionate either/or. In light of this standard Kierkegaard sees both trends as deeply problematic.

Rather than progress, Kierkegaard sees the present age losing its way: "Our age," he observes, "is essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose."[5] While we perhaps know more, seeing "which way we ought to go and all the different ways we can go," we lack the desire, passion, or energy to move decisively on questions of meaning and purpose.[6] Kierkegaard sees modern life eviscerating pathos. Existential passion is dissipated by chatter, aimless distraction, and busyness.

Recalling *Sickness unto Death* Kierkegaard understands the self as a fragile synthesis of possibility and necessity. Becoming a self requires striking a balance or properly relating these two parts of the self. Possibility refers to our capacity to imagine and entertain alternatives, an ability to imagine a better self. Necessity refers to the concrete givens of one's existence, one's life circumstances, as well as one's physical and mental capacities. Striving to balance both parts, the self never arrives at a point of stasis, but rather is always striving, always on the way, always struggling, either becoming an actualized self or running from this task.

Veering towards necessity (without possibility) the self falls prey to adopting a narrow view of the self, pessimistic about what it can become or do. At its worse, the self takes on the posture of the cynic who views changing the self (or the world) as a futile endeavor. Turning towards possibility (without necessity) the self is drawn into a world of possibilities that lack actuality for the particular single individual. This can take the form of fantasies about an idealized self or preoccupation with other selves. The cult of celebrity is a manifestation of this proclivity.

Given this internal architecture of the self, Kierkegaard is keenly aware of forces, especially modern media and entertainment, that distract the self. Becoming a self involves constantly envisioning ethical possibilities that are achievable and acting on them. This kind of ongoing interior work and subsequent activity edifies and builds up the self, building up character. "Morality," Kierkegaard notes, "is character; it is something engraved…for character

[4] Caputo, How to Read, p.

[5] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*,

[6] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p.

is inwardness."[7] Instead of this work Kierkegaard sees the self increasingly taken up with "abstract common sense," drawn into a "sea" of possibilities, which have "no character."[8]

The dregs of the self's failure to achieve a proper synthesis are anxiety and despair, either the despair of possibility or the despair of necessity. Consumers of daily news are given to musings about topics and eventualities that have little or no bearing on the self--its particular moral upbuilding. To be taken up with this daily fare (possibilities that distract the self from the task of moral upbuilding) is to succumb to the despair of possibility. Poet Christian Wiman aptly describes this phenomenon accordingly: "Contemporary despair is to feel the multiplicity of existence with no possibility for expression or release of one's particular being."[9] Sharing Kierkegaard's worry, Wiman fears that "we are evolving in such a way that the possibilities for these small but intense points of intimacy and expression…are not simply vanishing but becoming no longer felt as necessary pressures."[10] Instead of attending to these small points of intimacy the self is drawn into concerns on a larger stage, seduced by possibilities which offer "no expression or release for one's particular being."

Losing sight of the inner work that needs to be done Kierkegaard notes a collapse "between subjective and objective truth, so that one ventures a view about anything, having picked up an opinion from the latest newspaper."[11] With the rise of the the press and daily chatter, Kierkegaard contends that "life's existential tasks have lost the interest of reality…"[12] The sea of possibilities, he explains, "cannot build a sanctuary for the divine growth of inwardness which ripens to decisions.[13]

From newspapers to television to virtual media this phenomenon continues to ramp up. George Steiner, commenting on modern journalism, notes how it "throngs every rift and cranny of our consciousness," articulating "an epistemology and ethics of spurious temporality. Steiner's keen analysis merits quoting at length:

> Journalistic presentation generates a temporality of equivalent instantaneity……
> All things are more or less of equal import; all are only daily….Political enormity and the circus, the leaps of science and those of the athlete, apocalypse and indigestion, are given the same edge. Paradoxically, this monotone of graphic urgency anaesthetizes...[14]

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[7] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p.

[8] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p.

[9] Christian Wiman, My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 49.

[10] Wiman, p. 49.

[11] Caputo, How to Read, p.

[12] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p. 15.

[13] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p. 15.

[14] George Steiner, *Real Presences,*

Steiner's insight into this paradoxical anaesthesia is key. Our age, Kierkegaard presciently observed, "is essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose."[15] The present age, and its creation of the modern press, which Kierkegaard derisively describes as its lap dog, promotes an anemic reflection. In the thrall of public spin "....reflection does everything in its power to thwart...discernment and maintains the flattering notion that the possibilities which reflection offers are much more magnificent than a paltry decision."[16]

Rather than interior reflection that strives to synthesize possibility and necessity, reflection is pulled outward, forgetting "what it means to exist and what inwardness is."[17] Resonant with Kierkegaard's analysis Cistercian Jan Walgrave sees in our contemporary life "a conspiracy against the silence necessary for the interior life."[18] This generation, Kierkegaard remarks, "no longer believes that inwardness enriches the apparently poor contents, whereas change in the external is only the diversion that world-weariness and life-emptiness clutch at."[19]

The reflection that is prompted by the present age is laced with an envy that tears down other selves rather than build up one's flagging self. Recalling the character building that self must do Kierkegaard notes how envy is the just the opposite: It "does not understand that it is itself a negative acknowledgement of excellence but wants to degrade it, minimize it, until it actually is no longer excellence, and envy takes as its object not only excellence which is but that which is to come."[20]

Nietzsche makes a similar observation noting how modern equality expresses itself as either "a desire to draw everyone down to oneself (through diminishing them, spying on them, tripping them up) or to raise oneself and everyone else up (through recognizing their virtues, helping them, rejoicing in their success)."[21] Kierkegaard agrees, noting the how the phenomenon of leveling or an obsession with public opinion pervades modernity:

> Envy in the process of establishing itself takes the form of leveling, and whereas a passionate age accelerates, raises up and overthrows, elevates and debases, a reflective apathetic age does the opposite, it stifles and impedes, it levels. [Leveling] at its peak is like a deathly stillness in which a person can hear himself breathe, a deathly stillness in which nothing can rise up but everything sinks down into it, impotent.[22]

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[15] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p.

[16] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p.

[17] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p.

[18] as quoted by Ronald Rolheiser, see: http://ronrolheiser.com/a-conspiracy-against-interiority/#.WivkCLQ-eRs

[19] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p.

[20] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p. 84

[21] Fredrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*,

[22] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p. 84.

While leveling may come from particular individuals, "each in his own little group," it is fundamentally "an abstract power and is abstraction's victory over individuals."[23] Although "the individual selfishly enjoys the abstraction during the brief moment of pleasure in the leveling, he is also underwriting his own downfall."[24] Anticipating Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan's notion of the gaze, Kierkegaard diagnoses how the abstract phenomenon of leveling annihilates individuality and personality.

The modern press intensifies and exacerbates leveling process. In clairvoyant fashion, Kierkegaard predicted how, with the leveling process, the private would collapse into the public, with a culture of increasing exposure. We see this now in full force, as sociologist Zygmunt Baumann observes:

> Everything private is now done, potentially, in public – and is potentially available to public consumption; and remains available for the duration, till the end of time, as the internet 'can't be made to forget' anything once recorded on any of its innumerable servers….This erosion of anonymity is a product of pervasive social media services, cheap cell phone cameras, free photo and video web-hosts, and perhaps most important of all, a change in people's views about what ought to be public and what ought to be private.[25]

Mark Edmundson sees a modern variant of the leveling process in his students, observing a prevailing sentiment among his students "that if you step aside for a moment, to write, to travel, to fall too hard in love, you might lose position permanently….You're made to feel that even the slightest departure from the reigning code will get you genially ostracized.[26] Regardless of class or clique, Edmundson sees students "nearly across the board" as "very, very self-contained. On good days they display a light, appealing glow; on bad days, shuffling disgruntlement. But there's little fire, little passion to be found."[27] Almost echoing Kierkegaard, Edmundson asks, "How did my students reach this peculiar state in which all passion seems to be spent?"[28]

Another indication of leveling's power is the ambivalence Kierkegaard sees towards solitude. Recognizing a need for solitude, notes Kierkegaard, is a sign that a person "has a deeper nature."[29] "Generally the need for solitude is a sign there is spirit in a man after all, and

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[23] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p. 84.

[24] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p.

[25] Zygmunt Bauman, "Is this the End of Anonymity?", The Guardian, June, 2011

[26] Mark Edmundson, "On the Uses of a Liberal Education: As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students," *Harper's Magazine*, September 1997.

[27] Mark Edmundson, "On the Uses of a Liberal Education: As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students," *Harper's Magazine*, September 1997.

[28] Mark Edmundson, "On the Uses of a Liberal Education: As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students," *Harper's Magazine*, September 1997.

[29] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p. 84.

it is a measure for what spirit there is."[30] In contrast to this felt need Kierkegaard notes how "in the constant sociability of our age people shudder at solitude to such a degree that they know no other use to put it but ….as a punishment for criminals."[31]

To counter these forces, leveling and a public sphere that is rife with anxiety, the single individual must "acquire the essentiality of the religious by means of the examan rigiorusm [rigorous examination] of leveling."[32] The reformation, Kierkegaard notes, "should begin with each man reforming himself." [33] We now turn to a single individual: W.H. Auden.

Aesthetic, Anxiety and Ascent

The kind of question we should prepare to answer was posed by Auden, in his poem, "A Thanksgiving," where he asks, "Who are the tutors I need?"[34] The question was incited by the "hair-raising things that Hitler and Stalin were doing," which "forced me to think about God." Having seen personal faith as a rational response to large-scale evil, Auden asks another question, "Why was I sure they were wrong?" "They" included "Wild Kierkegaard," Charles Williams and C S Lewis, who became Auden's tutors and guided him "back to belief." Auden's essay, "Presenting Kierkegaard," offers scattered clues regarding Auden's attraction to Kierkegaard's religious faith. It was not, as with so many of Auden's contemporaries, that Kierkegaard was a so called existentialist philosopher, but that he understood himself to be a *preacher* of "Christian doctrine and Christian conduct."[35] Kierkegaard's *sermons* to the "unbelieving world" were not academic essays,[36] but creative explosions of characters and concepts that characterized existing under the condition of anxiety. Kierkegaard's brilliance was to describe what psychology called anxiety as a lack of faith that seeks religious faith.[37]

Auden, being attracted to Kierkegaard's phenomenology of anxiety, helped solidify the cultural consensus that modernity is an age of anxiety. This kind of attraction is fictionally characterized by Tubby Passmore, in David Lodge's novel *Therapy.* Tubby turns to Kierkegaard upon realizing that "somewhere, sometime, I lost…the knack of just living."[38] The attraction meets frustration when Tubby realizes that reading Kierkegaard "is like flying through a heavy cloud. Every now and again there's a break and you get a brief, brilliantly lit view of the ground, and then you're back in the swirling grey mist again with not a f….ing clue where you are."[39] The

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[30] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p. 84.

[31] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p. 84.

[32] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p. 87.

[33] Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, p. 87.

[34] W H Auden. "A Thanksgiving." May, 1973. http://library.globalchalet.net/Authors/Poetry%20Books%20Collection/W.%20H.%20Auden%20Selected%20Poems.pdf (Consulted:12/1/17)

[35] W H Aden ed. *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard.* "Introducing Kierkegaard." 3. http://www.nybooks.com/media/doc/2010/02/09/living-thoughts-kierkegaard-introduction.pdf. (Consulted; 12.1.17)

[36] Auden quotes Cardinal Newman's observation that it "'as absurd to argue men, as to torture them, into believing." 17.

37 Alan Jacobs, ed. *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*, W H Auden. Introduction, Xxxi. http://assets.press.princeton.edu/chapters/i9412.pdf.

[38] David Lodge. *Therapy.* Penguin. 1996. 29.

[39] Ibid, 109. C S Lewis expresses what many experience when trying to make sense of Kierkegaard's obscurity, stating, "I can't read him (Kierkegaard) myself, which I am sure is my own fault, for I hear him well spoken of by

frustration achieves its intended aim by bringing Tubby to the recognition that Kierkegaard somehow "names my condition like arrows thudding into a target," and that the slow contemplation of his unhappiness has him "grinning all over my face as I read?"[40]

Scott Stossel's, *My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind,*[41] exemplifies the aesthetic attractiveness of Kierkegaard in a grinding account of the author's frustrated attempts to overcome anxiety. Unsurprisingly, Stossel is put off by Kierkegaard's conception of anxiety as a "spiritual condition,"[42] caused by "our uncertainty about the existential choices we make and in our fear of death." Rather than a leap of faith, Stossel wonders if Kierkegaard might have been better helped by learning "the right techniques for controlling his hyperactive amygdala.[43] Stossel acknowledges that Walker Percy's turn to Kierkegaard helped him see the causal connection between anxiety and "the reductionist worldview that claimed science as the philosophical basis of ethics and of all human knowledge." Seeing this connection, Percy saw the Christian faith as a plausible "alternative repository of meaning."[44] This gets Stossel to wonder if, rather than converting to Catholicism, "How differently might Percy's life and philosophy have turned out if he had been treated with iproniazid."[45]

Auden's, *The Age of Anxiety*, poetically advanced the Kierkegaardian analysis, that anxiety defines modernity. Writing on the poem's importance, Alan Jacobs claims that it was the title, and not the poem, that generated this consensus because the poem is more often cited than read and rarely read with understanding.[46] The title somehow captured "the imagination of culture,[47] by expressing a common experience in "a terse and widely applicable diagnostic phrase" that evoked "an extraordinarily acute anatomy of our self-images, and a diagnosis of those images' power not just to shape but to create our ideas."[48] Auden saw in Kierkegaard's view of suffering, what so many missed, that suffering was essential to existence because it ignited our desire for ascent. This ascent contrasts with the leveling that Kierkegaard predicates to modernity, which flattens out human desires so that contentment is conceived in in material, this-worldly terms. Modernity is scandalized by the experience of the suffering because it frustrates material fulfillment. Modernity is further scandalized by the religious claim that suffering reveals a "Gospel" about the goodness of ascent to the eternal.[49] Auden sees the

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many whose opinion I value." "But I could not find it myself. Perhaps I did not give him a long enough trial. The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis (Vol. 3). Ed. Hooper, pp. 1273 & 1349.

[40] Ibid. 102.

[41] Scott Stossel. *My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind*. Vintage. 2015.

[42] Stossel. 14.

[43] Stossel. 54.

[44] Stossel. 223.

[45] Stossel. 223.

[46] Jacobs. xl.

[47] Signs of its importance, notes Jacobs in his introduction to a critical edition of the poem, was the glowing review by Jacques Barzun in Harper's, a *Time* magazine profile, a Pulitzer Prize and a Leonard Bernstein Symphony. Jacobs xli.

[48] Jacobs xli-ii

[49] Kierkegaard characterizes the desire for ascent in the pseudonymous author, Johannes Climacus, who was aptly named after the 7th century author of the ascetic work, *The Ladder to Paradise*. Johannes, who is not a Christian, sees the value of faith in that it must reject Hegel's materialism that flattens human desire, settling for a this-worldly fulfillment. In contrast to Hegel's reductive immanence, the religious faith in the eternal seems ridiculous and so scandalous.

scandal evident in the reaction to two of Jesus' invitations. In the first instance, Jesus invites all to "'Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you,"' and the second is "the worst possible news—'Take up thy cross and follow me.'" We can see the value of a religion that gives consolation to the suffering, but are scandalized by an invitation to "voluntarily" accept suffering as a good.[50] Within the logic of levelled existence, suffering is an absurdity that provokes a "demonic defiance" against an incompetent or malicious God who mismanages existence. This "demonic defiance" turns to "demonic despair" when hope in eternal possibility is purged but temporal suffering persists.

This defiance/despairing dynamic is expressed in an obscure Kafka passage, stating, '"The joys of this life are not its own but our dread of ascending to a higher life: the torments of this life are not its own but our self-torment because of that dread.'"[51] Modern levelling is first enjoyed as a defiant discarding of religious ascent. It is then experienced as *torment* when "delay, blockage, interruption, delusion (and) corruption" discloses that materialist levelling commits one to an existence without the hope of ascent.[52] Anxiety is the existential experience of the suspicion that time is the measure of our diminishment; despair is the experience of the elimination of all doubt.[53]

Edification is Kierkegaard's term for the religious alternative to the modernity's anxiety-ridden experience of time. Edification is a moment where a single tutor meets the single searcher in the personal movement "from faith, to faith." When this moment is repeated, it gains a momentum that overcomes the gravitational pull to despair. Edification is an act of faith that will seem ineffective to the system's managers because its effect takes place in incalculable increments, within single individuals, over a large swath of time. Edification is a hope that will seem useless or superstitious to those occupied by quantity and calculation. Edification is a work of love that passionately rejects the leveling that has drained passion from existing. Kierkegaard did not think modernity would try edification and find it wanting (to paraphrase Chesterton), but that it would find edification unattractive and leave it untried. Untried, that is, until conditions prevail that drive demonic defiance to the demonic despair that ignites the religious desire for the hope of ascent to transfigure time. Suffering achieves its religious aim when it ignites the desire for ascent by edification, which Walker Percy's, Binx Bolling characterizes:

> As for my search, I have not the inclination to say much on the subject. For one thing, I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of such matters in any way other than the edifying. For another thing, it is

[50] Auden 5.
[51] Auden. 5.
[52] C.f. Soren Kierkegaard. *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing.* Introduction: "Man and the Eternal." https://www.religion-online.org/book/purity-of-heart-is-to-will-one-thing/ (Consulted: 12.1.17).
[53] 7. This despair is humorously expressed by several stanzas from the song, *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*, from the film, *The Life of Brian.* "For life is quite absurd/and death's the final word/You must always face the curtain with a bow/ Forget about your sin/Give the audience a grin/ Enjoy it - it's your last chance anyhow. & Life's a piece of shit/When you look at it/Life's a laugh and death's a joke, it's true/ You'll see it's all a show/Keep 'em laughin as you go/Just remember that the last laugh is on you." Curiously, on 21 November 2014, the BBC reported, "Monty Python's *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* has become the most popular tune to play at a UK funeral," which has overtaken Frank Sinatra's My Way as the preferred choice of music." One funeral director suggested that this change reflected "'a generational shift in attitudes towards funerals.'" http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-30143250

> not open to me even to be edifying, since the time is later than his, much too late to edify or do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as opportunity presents itself – if indeed asskicking is properly distinguished from edification. Further: I am a member of my mother's family after all and so naturally shy away from the subject of religion (a peculiar word this in the first place, religion; it is something to be suspicious of.[54]

Edification is the cumulative movement that gains momentum through repetition. This repetition must be quickly distinguished from addictions (e.g., porn, gaming, shopping, drugs), where repetition diminishes the user's existence. As quickly, it must be distinguished from the habituation that conduces to soul-numbing boredom (e.g., compulsory general education courses). Edification's cumulating ascent to the eternal is existentially enjoyed only if institutions of repetition are sustained that join tutors with seekers. This is our delight and our difficulty. It is our delight to have been aesthetically attracted to and enlivened by the institutions of repetition of church and classroom. It is our difficulty because we are not attracting sufficient numbers of good students to become tutors to the next generation. Our task, it would seem, is be prepared for conditions to ignite the desire for edification by recovering our enjoyment of edifying repetition. Kierkegaard expresses this enjoyment, stating:

> "My proclamation is similar to someone's declaring: What a beautiful sight the starry evening sky is. Now if thousands were willing to accept this proclamation and said to him: 'What do you want us to do, do you want us to memorize what you said'— would he not be obliged to answer: 'No, no, no, I want each one to gaze at the starry evening sky and, each in his way—it is possible for him to be uplifted by this sight.'"[55]

[54] Walker Percy. *The Moviegoer.* Vintage. 1998. Epilogue, 237.
[55] Søren Kierkegaard. *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers.* Vol. 6. 6917.