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# The Honor of God with Kierkegaard: A Kierkegaardian View of the Play *Becket*

## INTRODUCTION

Using a highly apropos line from the film *Becket*, I will preface this work by stating that these are only the “clumsy musings of a spiritual gatecrasher.” Understanding nineteenth century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s stages of existence is not an easy task when examined only through his writings. Thus, it can be very pedagogically useful to apply the Kierkegaard’s stages to literature to illustrate the nuances. In this essay, I will demonstrate this didactic point through a reading of Jean Anouilh’s play *Becket* (1959) that serves this educative task particularly well.

## KIERKEGAARD AND THE DIALECTICS OF EXISTENCE

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, is acknowledged by many to be one of the most influential thinkers of the modern era. Born on May 5, 1813, Kierkegaard was a native of Copenhagen, where he spent most of his life. Kierkegaard’s father was a wealthy merchant of the Old World city, who provided Kierkegaard economic independence for his entire life. He never married and almost never held any sort of job. Because of this independence, Kierkegaard was able to write extensively, although most of his books were published in small quantities of 500 or fewer. As such, his writing was not widely known outside of Denmark or Scandinavia prior to his death in 1855 at age 42. Some of

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his most notable works are *Fear and Trembling*, *Either/Or*, *Sickness unto Death*, and *The Concept of Anxiety*. Later, at the start of the 20th century, Kierkegaard's writings began to increase in popularity with European intellectuals. By the mid-20th century, his influence had spread to include the entire English-speaking world. By the end of the century, his works were translated into all the major languages of the world, making his impact even more pronounced (Evans, 2009). Enrollment of 60,000 plus learners during the period of 2013 to 2016 in the Kierkegaard Massive Open Online Course, or MOOC, on Coursera, "Søren Kierkegaard: Subjectivity, Irony and the Crisis of Modernity" by the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre only punctuate this impact.

Continued interest in Kierkegaard's writing is easily understood when looking at the pages of his immense authorship that overflow with both moral and religious insights. For Kierkegaard, existence meant facing and responding to fundamental truths about the human condition. Kierkegaard's writings explore such questions as: What does it mean to be human? How can I be true to myself or to another person? How should I use my freedom? How do I live a good life? How do I discover my life's vocation? How should I respond to suffering? These dialectics of existence can provide a valuable contribution to discourses about life and education.

My fascination with Kierkegaard is not longstanding, especially if considered in relation to the community in which I have become deeply involved. I was aware of Kierkegaard through my study of Western history and thought. But it was only during the first year of my doctorate program that my interest was brought to bear on the Dane. And it is from a unique source that I came across a reference to the Lutheran Kierkegaard. The reference was by the Roman Catholic Pope Benedict XVI in his significant theological work, *Introduction to Christianity*. Ratzinger recounts the story of Kierkegaard's clown, which I cite from the Dane's own work, *Either/Or*:

In a theater, it happened that a fire started offstage. The clown came out to tell the audience. They thought it was a joke and applauded. He told them again, and they became still more hilarious. This is the way, I suppose, that the world will be destroyed – amid the universal hilarity of wits and wags who think it is all a joke. (Kierkegaard 30)

Kierkegaard's effort at indirect communication through this story was amusing and poignant; I was hooked. I explored the background and writings of Kierkegaard, discovering after some preliminary reading a writer wrestling with God, humanity, and himself and determining his relevance to modern life. In addition, I found that his writings defied any academic compartmentalization. Kierkegaard studies involve scholars from a variety of fields including philosophy, theology, ethics, sociology and psychology. In Kierkegaard studies, there appeared to be many disciplinary border crossings, allowing me to think that the interdisciplinary perspective that I was obtaining with my doctorate

would be applicable. I continued through my doctoral program while chipping away at the many sources of information on Kierkegaard and developing my ideas of bringing the relevance of Kierkegaard to education with several summer fellowships to the Kierkegaard Library and a culminating doctoral dissertation.

### **THOMAS BECKET AND CHURCH AND STATE POLITICS**

Thomas Becket (1118-1170), Archbishop of Canterbury, once described himself as “a proud, vain man, a feeder of birds and a follower of hound.” (Burns 606). Once a friend and advisor to King Henry II, Becket opposed Henry’s legal reforms in relation to the Church. He thought that no member of the clergy should be subject to the laws of England and vowed to oppose King Henry’s Constitution of Clarendon as long as he lived. His stand represents one of the classic confrontations between Church and state in politics.

Becket rose from very humble beginnings to end up challenging a king. He was born in London and studied at Paris under a noted teacher, Robert of Melun. He then entered the service of the English monarchy, working with the English sheriffs as a clerk. In 1141, he became a member of the household of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury. Becket made a name for himself as a man with a considerable future. As a result, he was sent to study law at Bologna and Auxerre and in 1154 he was appointed Archdeacon of Canterbury. As a rising young star in English politics, Becket attracted the attention of King Henry II and they became fast friends. Both had similar tastes and interests; both had a love of hunting, women and luxury. Eventually, Henry gave Becket the position of Chancellor of England. Becket wielded vast power in English government and with his gift of administration, he ruthlessly enforced Henry’s political will. As Chancellor of England, Becket reduced the opposition of barons and centralized royal power, often to the detriment of the Church. Since the power of the Church was always a problem for the king, it seemed logical for Henry to appoint his friend and confidante to the post of Archbishop of Canterbury with the death of Theobald in 1161. Becket was reluctant to take the office, but did after Henry’s prompting in 1162.

Becket soon clashed with King Henry II on a number of issues. He excommunicated a baron, one of Henry’s loyal vassals; opposed a tax proposal; and fought against the Constitutions of Clarendon. Becket also rebuffed Henry’s claim that clerics who committed crimes should be tried in secular courts. Henry responded with some harsh measures of his own against his former friend. He had Becket condemned by a council of English bishops loyal to the king. As a result of the condemnation, Becket fled the country and came under the protection of King Louis VII of France. He remained in exile from 1164 to 1170. During this period, Becket appealed his case to Pope Alexander III, while Henry ran the Church of England through the bishop of York, who was loyal to the king. In 1170, Henry and Becket were reconciled. Becket returned to England in November of

that year. The people of England, who saw Becket as a hero, lined the roads to greet him as he made his way to the cathedral in Canterbury.

But the reconciliation did not last. By December, the final break between Henry and Becket occurred. Becket refused to absolve any of the English bishops who supported Henry during his exile unless they took an oath of obedience to the pope. Henry, upset over the public displays of support for Thomas, greeted the news with rage and fury. In the end, Henry, angry and drunk, supposedly referring to Becket, asked some of his knights, "Is there no one to rid me of this troublesome priest?" Four of those knights took Henry's words to heart as a command and murdered Becket as he prayed in the cathedral at Canterbury. Becket's last words, reported by one eyewitness, were, "Willingly, I die for the name of Jesus and in defense of the Church" (Attwater and John 342).

The death of Becket was universally condemned. Miracles were reported at Canterbury shortly after his death. Soon pilgrims began appearing at Canterbury, making it into one of the most popular holy sites during the Middle Ages. Becket received sainthood quickly from Pope Alexander III in 1173. Henry was blamed for the popular Becket's murder and performed penance for his sin, which included being flogged naked by monks. The king also agreed to recognize papal authority in Church law and to exempt clergy from punishment in the civil courts. But this did not end England's conflict between church and state; later another Chancellor of England, Thomas More, would meet a similar fate.

There has been some controversy about Becket's character, with ambitious and imperious most frequently used as descriptors. But his final defense of the Church has resonated through the centuries and attracted dramatists from Tennyson's *Becket* through T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Anouilh's play *Becket or The Honor of God*, which was later adapted into the 1964 film starring Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole, to the musical drama *Becket* in 1970. Anouilh's play has been reproduced several times on the stage with continuing success into the 21st century.

## THE STAGES OF EXISTENCE IN KIERKEGAARD

In Kierkegaard's writings, including *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Stages on Life's Way*, he sketches humans as living in one or more of three different spheres of existence. Kierkegaard refers to these spheres in a couple of ways, including 'the stages of life's way' and 'spheres of existence'. With the importance of these themes to the entirety of his work, Kierkegaard articulates the spheres more clearly in his later writing, *Stages on Life's Way*. In *Stages*, Kierkegaard reduces these to three basic terms: aesthetic, ethical, and religious (Kierkegaard 476). Each stage of existence corresponds with a particular understanding of the world, which includes motivations, values, ideals, and behavior. Through the stages, some humans will express a particular sphere in a less developed way, while others are more pronounced in their

expression of each stage. The stages are not automatic but require conscious choice through subjective understanding of the self in relation to the world, in part prompted at times by despair at the inadequacies of the current stage. Yet these different stages should not be viewed as self-contained, in which one spends their entire life. Rather, humans can move between stages as they experience and develop in life. Understanding Kierkegaard's stages of existence is not an easy task when examined only through his writings. In part, this is because Kierkegaard is less than systematic with the topic. So it can be pedagogically useful to apply the stages to literature to illustrate. This is an area that can be then connected readily to Thomas Becket. Reading Jean Anouilh's play *Becket* through the lens of Kierkegaard's stages provides an excellent demonstrative text to illustrate the stages. Clearly, it is not that a reading of Kierkegaard directly inspired the play *Becket* or that we have some historical knowledge of Becket's understanding of his self. But sketching these Kierkegaardian stages in relation to the play can bring more meaning to the choices that Becket makes in text. And although the play is not entirely historical, the exercise provides points to consider, not only in Becket's historical biography but in our own biographies.

### **THE AESTHETIC STAGE IN BECKET**

For Kierkegaard, the "aesthetic" stage, as detailed in part 2 of *Either/Or*, is one that is focused on the immediate and pleasurable life of the senses (Kierkegaard 178). It is comparable in modern psychology to Lawrence Kohlberg's pre-conventional stage of morality (Noddings 169). The general result of this focus is a person who is carefree and indifferent. This state is also subject to the charge of amorality since it is not subject to any ethical considerations except by chance. The ambiguity that accompanies this stage leads to a selfishness mired in indifference to right actions and an inclination to deceive oneself and others. According to Kierkegaard, the lack of personal resolution, commitment and temporality of life found at this stage ends in despair.

In the play, the aesthetic stage is exhibited as Becket details the way in which his father was able to do so well in Norman England despite being a conquered Saxon.

BECKET: My parents were able to keep their lands by agreeing to "collaborate," as they say, with the King your father. They sent me to France as a boy to acquire a good French accent.

BECKET: He managed, by collaborating, to amass a considerable fortune. As he was also a man of rigid principles, I imagine he contrived to do it in accordance with his conscience. That's a little piece of sleight of hand that men of principle are very skillful at in troubled times. (Anouilh 5-6)

The conversation then turns to Becket and his view of collaboration, and Becket

discloses his aesthetic tastes, detailing his love of luxury and comfort. He even suggests that the defense of his sister was only a matter of convenience, rather than some ethical or moral code.

KING: And you?

BECKET: I, my Lord?

KING: The sleight of hand, were you adept at it too?

BECKET: Mine was a different problem. I was a frivolous man, you'll agree? In fact, it never came up at all. I adore hunting and only the Normans...hunt. I adore luxury and luxury was Norman. I adore life and the Saxons' only birth-right was slaughter. I'll add that I adore honor.

KING: And was honor reconciled with collaboration too?

BECKET: I had the right to draw my sword against the first Norman nobleman who tried to lay hands on my sister.....I killed him in single combat. It's a detail, but it has its points.

KING: You could have always slit his throat and fled into the forest, as so many did.

BECKET: That would have been uncomfortable, and not a lot of use....My Lord, did I tell you? My new gold dishes have arrived from Florence. Will my Liege do me the honor of christening them with me at my house? (Anouilh 6)

Becket even uses luxury and comfort to end the dialogue of more self-revelatory statements. Later, in a scene after a battle between the invading Norman English and the French, King Henry II inquires about and speculates on Becket's internal motivations and Becket provides more indications of his location within Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage of existence.

BECKET: My prince, shall we get down to work? We haven't dealt with yesterday's dispatches.

KING: Yesterday we were fighting! We can't do everything.

BECKET: That was a holiday! We'll have to work twice as hard today.

KING: Does it amuse you - working for the good of my people? Do you mean to say you love all of those folks? To begin with they're too numerous. One can't love them, one doesn't know them. Anyway, you're lying; you don't love any-

thing or anybody.

BECKET: There's one thing I do love, my prince, and that I am sure of. Doing what I have to do and doing it well.

KING: Always the es-es. . . .What's your word again? I've forgotten it.

BECKET: Esthetics?

KING: Esthetics! Always the esthetic side.

BECKET: Yes, my prince. (Anouilh 44)

### **THE ETHICAL STAGE IN BECKET**

For Kierkegaard, the next stage of existence is the "ethical" stage. This stage is reached after the aesthetic stage brings despair through continual empty choices with which to please the self without gaining the selfhood. The individual at this stage is committed to society and the state, recognizing the benefits of maintaining the social order through positive interpersonal relations, ethics and law. It is most comparable in modern psychology to Kohlberg's conventional stage of morality. This stage is not without danger since the social order can sometimes work counter to the interests of the individual, leaving one who has championed the social order "out to dry."

There are several key moments in the play in which Becket demonstrates his strong commitment to the state of England and consequently the ethical stage of existence. The first comes very promptly after Henry II appoints Becket the Chancellor of England in front of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

KING: I have decided to revive the office of Chancellor of England, keeper of the Triple Lion Seal, and to entrust it to my loyal servant and subject Thomas Becket. (Anouilh 7)

There are some brief very appreciative remarks to the king from Becket, interrupted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who also expresses his congratulations to Becket, who used to be a deacon in his Church.

KING: Etc., etc...Thank you, Archbishop! I knew this nomination would please you. But don't rely too much on Becket to play your game. He is my man. (Anouilh 9)

After a contentious dialogue between Henry II, Becket and the Archbishop of Canterbury over taxes owed to England by the Church for an upcoming war

with France, Becket abruptly ends the conversation with an authoritarian gesture demonstrating his newfound power.

BECKET: I think, your Highness, that it is pointless to pursue a discussion in which neither speaker is listening to the other. The law and custom of the land give us the means of coercion. We will use them.

BISHOP FOLLIET: Would you dare...to plunge a dagger in the bosom of Mother Church?

BECKET: My Lord and King has given me his Seal with the Three Lions to guard. My mother is England now. (Anouilh 13)

Becket continues to demonstrate his loyalty to England and hence the ethical stage later in the play, when he discusses with Henry II some troublesome news concerning the rising power of the Church in England while the monarch is at war in France.

KING: Pay attention. Now is your chance to educate yourself. The gentleman is saying some very profound things!

BECKET: Suppose you educate us instead. When you're married - if you do marry despite the holes in your virtue - which would you prefer, to be mistress in your own house or to have your village priest laying down the law there?

KING: Talk sense, Becket! Priests are always intriguing. I know that. But I also know that I can crush them any time I like.

BECKET: Talk sense, Sire. If you don't do the crushing now, in five years' time there will be two Kings in England, the Archbishop of Canterbury and you. And in ten years' time there will be only one.

KING: And it won't be me?

BECKET: I rather fear not.

KING: What will God say to it all, though? After all, they're His Bishops!

BECKET: We aren't children. You know one can always come to some arrangement with God, on this earth. (Anouilh 46)

## THE RELIGIOUS STAGE IN BECKET

Yet as play develops, Becket moves into Kierkegaard's religious stage, in which the individual's love is centered on an absolute relationship with God. This stage is initially thrust upon him, as King Henry II is able to maneuver Becket's appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury after the death of the former archbishop. Becket is visibly fearful of this appointment but without knowing the reason. There is a sense that Becket understands the fullness of such an absolute commitment to God if he becomes Archbishop. But as with much of Kierkegaard's philosophy, there are some complexities within the religious sphere.

Kierkegaard's religious state is divided into two parts. The first is religious A, which can be present in any culture, Christian or otherwise. In this stage, the individual is aware of the Divine and strives to fulfill its promptings faithfully. It can be considered an easier state of religiousness, as Becket himself attests through his initial experiences centering on the absolute of God through the giving to the poor as Archbishop.

BECKET: There are no invitations. The great doors will be thrown open and you will go out into the street and tell the poor they are dining with me tonight.

1ST SERVANT: Very good, my Lord.

BECKET: I want the service to be impeccable. The dishes presented to each guest first, with full ceremony, just as for princes. I must say it was all very pretty stuff. A prick of vanity! The mark of an upstart. A truly saintly man would never have done the whole thing in one day. Nobody will ever believe it's genuine. I hope You haven't inspired me with these holy resolutions in order to make me look ridiculous, Lord. It's all so new to me. I'm setting about it a little clumsily perhaps. And you're far too sumptuous too. Precious stones around your bleeding Body...I shall give you to some poor village church. It's like leaving for a holiday. Forgive me, Lord but I never enjoyed myself so much in my whole life. I don't believe You are a sad God. The joy I feel in shedding all my riches must be part of Your divine intentions. There. Farewell, Becket. I wish there had been something I had regretted parting with, so I could offer it to You. Lord, are You not tempting me? It all seems far too easy. (Anouilh 63-4)

But the euphoric religious A can eventually give way to Kierkegaard's religious B. The core of Christ's message to love your neighbor and die to the world characterizes this uniquely Christian stage.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up the cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. What profit would there

be to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life?" (Matt. 16:24-26)

The demand of Christ to die to the self is filled with tension. The world attracts the individual with its pleasure and convenience, while the radical demand of Christ is inherently resigned to the suffering of the individual. In addition, Kierkegaard would suggest through *The Sickness Unto Death* and *The Concept of Anxiety* that this stage encompasses a deep sense of individual sin and dependency on the grace of Christ. For Kierkegaard, this is the beginning of Faith and the "Knight of Infinite Resignation," who is resigned to the suffering of Christ but who may eventually become a "Knight of Faith." In *Fear and Trembling*, focused on the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, Kierkegaard sharpened the distinction between the two Knights. According to Kierkegaard, Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac – a teleological suspension of the ethical or the Absolute over the ethical – through his Faith. For Abraham climbing Mount Morai, Isaac will be restored to him after his sacrifice. He has such faith in an unseen God that Isaac's restoration is absolute despite the absurdity of such a belief. Thus Abraham is the "Knight of Faith" through the paradox of faith and the virtue of the absurd. This is a bridge too far for Kierkegaard; he suggests in *Fear and Trembling* that he does not have the Faith of Abraham: "I cannot make the movement of faith, I cannot shut my eyes and plunge confidently into the absurd.... Be it a duty or whatever, I cannot make the final movement, the paradoxical movement of faith, although there is nothing I wish more" (Kierkegaard51). To a degree, we can see this movement into religious B in the final scene of the play with Becket as he prepares for evening Vespers service with an innate awareness that he may soon become a martyr after his return to England and Canterbury from a lengthy and contested exile.

BECKET: I'm ready, all adorned for Your festivities, Lord. Do not, in this interval of waiting, let one last doubt enter my soul.

PRIEST: Your Grace! There are four armed men outside! They're breaking the door in! You must go into the back of the church and have the choir gates closed! They're strong enough, they'll hold!

BECKET: It is time for Vespers.

PRIEST: I know, but....

BECKET: Everything must be the way it should be. The choir gates will remain open....Here it comes. The supreme folly. This is its hour. One does not enter armed into God's house. What do you want?

1ST BARON: Your death.

BECKET: It is time for the service.....Oh how difficult You make it all! And how heavy Your honor is to bear! Poor Henry. (Anouilh 114-6)

This, Becket's final line, is followed by his painful death and mutilation by the four knights. To a degree, this begs the question: was Becket a Knight of Infinite Resignation, resigned to the suffering of Christ through faith? Or was Becket a Knight of Faith, believing the paradox of Faith and the virtue of the Absurd? For Kierkegaard, there is no answer since we can't know the secret life of the Knight of Faith. In fact, Kierkegaard suggests that Knights of Faith may be silently walking alongside us, in the world but not of this world. But through the exercise of applying Kierkegaard's Knight of Infinite Resignation/Faith, we gain a deeper understanding of Kierkegaard's religious stage and possibly the depth of personal faith.

### THE FINAL STAGE

Indeed, there are several questions that the play asks of its audience regardless of spiritual perspective or religious persuasion. These can be summed up in the dialogue in the play with King Henry's barons, who do not care for the upstart Thomas Becket the Chancellor. They are discussing Becket's character but one of the barons inserts his desire to wait on his decision concerning Becket's character.

4th BARON: I'm waiting.

1st BARON: Waiting for what?

4th BARON: Till he shows himself. Some sorts of games are like that: you follow them all day through the forest, by sounds, or tracks, or smell. But it wouldn't do any good to charge ahead with drawn lance; you'd just spoil everything because you don't know for sure what sort of animal you're dealing with. You have to wait.

1ST BARON: What for?

4th BARON: For whatever it is to show itself. And if you're patient it always does in the end. Animals know more than men do, nearly always, but a man has something in him that an animal hasn't got: he knows how to wait. With this man Becket - I'll wait.

1ST BARON: For what?

4TH BARON: For him to show himself. For him to break cover. The day he does, we'll know who he is. (Anouilh 40-1)

And in the end, this dialogue begs the question of us if we examine Becket through

the lens of Kierkegaard's stages of existence. When we "break cover" and finally show ourselves, who will we be? Where will we be on the spectrum of Kierkegaard's stages of existence? Aesthetic? Ethical? Religious? A Knight of Infinite Resignation? Or a Knight of Faith? And therein lies the real rub of Kierkegaard and the play *Becket*. They both ask the fundamental question of each of us: Who are we really? Even if you don't accept Kierkegaard's categories, the play can provoke an assessment of our personal and spiritual commitments in our lives. And the final result of a reading of the play *Becket* through the lens of Kierkegaard's stages is the didactic ease in which the stages are demonstrated to the reader.

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