

Auden and God

Edward Mendelson
December 6, 2007 issue

Reviewed:

Auden and Christianity

by Arthur Kirsch
Yale University Press, 207 pp., \$30.00

T.S. Eliot thought of religion as “the still point in the turning world,” “the heart of light,” “the crowned knot of fire,” “the door we never opened”—something that remained inaccessible, perfect, and eternal, whether or not he or anyone else cared about it, something absolutely unlike the sordid transience of human life.

W.H. Auden thought of religion as derived from the commandment “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”—an obligation to other human beings despite all their imperfections and his own, and an obligation to the inescapable reality of this world, not a visionary, inaccessible world that might or might not exist somewhere else.

Auden’s Christianity shaped the tone and content of his poems and was for most of his life the central focus of his art and thought. It was also the aspect of his life and work that seems to have been the least understood by his readers and friends, partly because he sometimes talked about it in suspiciously frivolous terms, partly because he used Christian vocabulary in ways that, a few centuries earlier, might have attracted the Inquisitor’s attention.

His version of Christianity was more or less incomprehensible to anyone who thought religion was about formal institutions, supernatural beliefs, ancestral identities, moral prohibitions, doctrinal orthodoxies, sectarian arguments, religious emotions, spiritual aspirations, scriptural authority, or any other conventional aspect of personal or organized religion. He insisted that only adults can make a religious commitment, that the imposition of religion on children and adolescents was absurd. He had no interest in the megalomaniac sentimentality embodied in what he called the “Creeping Jesus” in Dostoyevsky’s later writings, where the Russian people’s love of Christ becomes an ecstatically satisfying excuse for military conquest.¹ Auden also dismissed the popular notion of hell and damnation as “morally revolting and intellectually incredible because it is conceived of in terms of human criminal law, as a torture imposed upon the sinner against his will by an all-powerful God.”² Some recent defenses of religion, in these pages and elsewhere, make much of an irreducible sense of mystery that religion responds to with feelings of awe. Auden thought such



W. H. Auden; drawing by David
Levine
[Buy Print](#)

feelings were a distraction from religion.

Auden took seriously his membership in the Anglican Church and derived many of his moral and aesthetic ideas from Christian doctrines developed over two millennia, but he valued his church and its doctrines only to the degree that they helped to make it possible to love one's neighbor as oneself. To the extent that they became ends in themselves, or made it easier for a believer to isolate or elevate himself, they became—in the word Auden used about most aspects of Christendom—unchristian. Church doctrines, like all human creations, were subject to judgment.

He made it clear that he understood perfectly well that any belief he might have in the personal God of the monotheist religions was a product of the anthropomorphic language in which human beings think. Late in life, after reading a *Scientific American* article about the microbes that live on the human skin, he wrote a poem that asked what religious beliefs such creatures might devise to make moral sense of their world—and made the unstated point that human theology was as much a projection from circumstances as the theology of microorganisms would be:

*If you were religious folk,
how would your dramas justify
unmerited suffering?
By what myths would your priests account
for the hurricanes that come
twice every twenty-four hours,
each time I dress or undress,
when, clinging to keratin rafts,
whole cities are swept away
to perish in space, or the Flood
that scalds to death when I bathe?*

1.

“To pray,” Auden wrote, “is to pay attention or, shall we say, to ‘listen’ to someone or something other than oneself. Whenever a man so concentrates his attention—be it on a landscape, or a poem or a geometrical problem or an idol or the True God—that he completely forgets his own ego and desires in listening to what the other has to say to him, he is praying.” This may seem a denatured idea of prayer, but Auden took it seriously, and seems to have prayed in exactly this sense. The only value he found in “petitionary prayer”—prayer that asks for something—was that the act of expressing desires can reveal what they are, so that “we often discover that they are really wishes that two-and-two should make three or five, as when St. Augustine realized that he was praying: ‘Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.’” Auden prayed to a God whom he knew he thought about in falsely human-centered terms, but only by doing so could he listen with any attention: “I can see...what leads [Paul] Tillich to speak of God as ‘Ground of Being,’ but if I try to pray: ‘O Thou Ground, have mercy upon us,’ I start to giggle.”

Auden's passion for proper names in his poetry had a moral and theological point: like prayer, it was a form of attention. A proper name was a sign of personal uniqueness, and Auden used the word “miracle” to refer to anyone's sense of the unique value of their own unpredictable individuality. “To give someone or something a Proper Name,” he wrote, “is to acknowledge it as having a real and valuable existence, independent of its use to oneself, in other words, to acknowledge it as a neighbor.” The value that is acknowledged through a proper name is not measurable in any objective sense; it exists in the eyes of the beholder. When human beings imagine

a beholder who finds such value everywhere, they think in terms of God, or, as Auden wrote in another late poem, “the One.../Who numbers each particle/by its Proper Name”—a deity who knows the personal name of every electron in the universe, rather than thinking about them in statistical terms.³

Auden referred to himself as a “would-be Christian,” because, he said, even to call oneself a Christian would be an unchristian act of pride. “Christianity is a way, not a state, and a Christian is never something one is, only something one can pray to become.”⁴ To become a Christian, as he understood it, did not require belief in an immortal soul separable from the body (a Platonic doctrine, he called this, not a Christian one) nor in the resurrection of Christ (which he only mentioned in order to remark that he could not make himself believe in it) nor in miracles that violated the laws of physics.

Both science and religion were at the heart of Auden’s family culture. His father was a physician, medical researcher, and amateur archaeologist who became professor of public health at Birmingham University and Birmingham’s first school medical officer; he seems to have been the first public official in Britain to use psychoanalytic methods, and he wrote the first medical account of autoerotic strangulation. Auden’s mother trained as a nurse after earning an honors degree from London University. Auden, who was born in 1907, impressed his schoolmates with arcane sexual knowledge gleaned from his father’s library.

The family was Anglo-Catholic, members of the most ritualistic and least Protestant wing of the Church of England. As a child, Auden experienced religion as a mysterious and exciting ritual in which he performed the role of boat-boy, the child who carries the incense for the priest to cast over the congregation, and at thirteen he went through a “period of ecclesiastical *Schwärmerei*,” an episode of religious enthusiasm that he later understood as an emotional response to puberty.

In 1922, when Auden was fifteen, one of his school friends was startled to realize in a casual conversation that Auden was religious, and changed the subject by asking him whether he wrote poetry. Auden had never done so, but he now recognized that his vocation was to be a poet. He later recorded 1922 as the year in which he “discovers that he has lost his faith.” For the adolescent Auden, poetry provided the magical excitement that he had once found in religion.

During the next fifteen years Auden explained the world to his friends and himself in terms of psychology and economics, which he more or less explicitly thought of as the triumphant successors to religion. He built an ever-changing intellectual framework for himself out of a jumbled storehouse of ideas derived from Freud, D.H. Lawrence, Marx, and a dozen lesser-known figures who served as temporary heroes, such as the anthropologist John Layard and the mystical polymath Gerald Heard. In 1934 he cited Lenin and T.E. Lawrence as “potent agents of freedom”; but two years later, in *The Ascent of F6*, he portrayed a lightly disguised T.E. Lawrence as a self-destructive megalomaniac, and he began revising his earlier poems to remove any positive words about communism.

Meanwhile, as Arthur Kirsch describes in his lucid and judicious study, *Auden and Christianity*, Auden was still using a Christian vocabulary at a time when he thought he had finished with Christianity forever. Christopher Isherwood, who collaborated with him on three plays, wrote at the time about Auden’s reliance on the tone and form of the liturgy:

When we collaborate, I have to keep a sharp eye on him—or down flop the characters on their knees.... If Auden had his way, he would turn every play into a cross between grand opera and high mass.

In apparently secular poems, he kept hidden what was often their religious starting-point. His ominous ballad “O what is that sound that so thrills the ear” (1932) seems to be set in eighteenth-century England with its “scarlet soldiers.” But as he recalled later, the stimulus for the poem was a painting of the Agony in the Garden,

where the soldiers in the background appear harmless, and “it is only because one has read the Gospel story, that one knows that, in fact, they are coming to arrest Jesus.”⁵

2.

Auden returned to the Anglican Communion in 1940 after seven years of thought about the moral content of Christianity, about what it means to love—or not to love—one’s neighbor as oneself. The process seems to have begun in 1933 with an experience that he later described as “not overtly Christian,” although the memory of it, he said, was “one of the most crucial” factors that helped to bring him back to the Anglican Church years afterward. He called it a “vision of Agape,” that is, of shared unerotic love. The place was the Downs School, where Auden was a teacher:

One fine summer night in June 1933 I was sitting on a lawn after dinner with three colleagues, two women and one man. We liked each other well enough but we were certainly not intimate friends, nor had any one of us a sexual interest in another. Incidentally, we had not drunk any alcohol. We were talking casually about everyday matters when, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, something happened. I felt myself invaded by a power which, though I consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine. For the first time in my life I knew exactly—because, thanks to the power, I was doing it—what it means to love one’s neighbor as oneself.... My personal feelings towards them were unchanged—they were still colleagues, not intimate friends—but I felt their existence as themselves to be of infinite value and rejoiced in it.

The poem Auden wrote at the time about this experience, “A Summer Night,” is exuberantly grateful for it without quite saying what it was—it is “this for which we dread to lose/Our privacy” or simply “it”—and the poem ends by hoping that “it” might reemerge after a social revolution as a force that brings forgiveness and calm.

Neither this nor any later religious experience gave him any self-satisfaction. His poem looks forward without regret to a revolution that will destroy himself and his class. He wrote in his later recollection that he knew at the time that the experience would end sooner or later, and that, “when it did, my greeds and self-regard would return.... The memory of the experience has not prevented me from making use of others...but it has made it much more difficult for me to deceive myself about what I am up to when I do.” The same idea is behind a statement he once made that the purpose of art, to the extent that it has one, is to make self-deception more difficult, and, “by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate.”

The Nazis’ rise to power in that same year, 1933, made large moral questions seem suddenly more urgent. “The novelty and shock of the Nazis,” he wrote later, “was that they made no pretense of believing in justice and liberty for all, and attacked Christianity on the grounds that to love one’s neighbor as oneself was a command fit only for effeminate weaklings.” Moreover, he continued,

this utter denial of everything liberalism had ever stood for was arousing wild enthusiasm, not in some remote barbaric land outside the pale, but in one of the most highly educated countries in Europe.... Confronted by such a phenomenon, it was impossible any longer to believe that the values of liberal humanism were self-evident. Unless one was prepared to take a relativist view that all values are a matter of personal taste, one could hardly avoid asking the question: “If, as I am convinced, the Nazis are wrong and we are right, what is it that validates our values and invalidates theirs?”⁶

Communism opposed Nazism but offered no answer to this question. The Communists, Auden wrote, promised to create a future world in which everyone would love their neighbors, but they claimed that in order to do so, “one must hate and destroy some of one’s neighbors now.”

Then, early in 1937, as Kirsch reports, Auden made his way to the republican front in the Spanish civil War:

On arriving in Barcelona, I found as I walked through the city that all the churches were closed and there was not a priest to be seen. To my astonishment, this discovery left me profoundly shocked and disturbed. The feeling was far too intense to be the result of a mere liberal dislike of intolerance, the notion that it is wrong to stop people from doing what they like, even if it is something silly like going to church. I could not escape acknowledging that, however I had consciously ignored and rejected the Church for sixteen years, the existence of churches and what went on in them had all the time been very important to me.

After visiting the front, and discovering for himself the moral ambiguities that George Orwell described in *Homage to Catalonia*, he abruptly returned to England. He wrote his poem "Spain" in support of the Republic, but, unlike "A Summer Night," "Spain" was a public oration that said nothing about his feelings, and he was uncharacteristically silent in public about his visit.

The next stage occurred a few months later, when he met the writer and publisher Charles Williams. For the first time in his life, he said later, he felt himself "in the presence of personal sanctity."⁷ As in 1933 when he found himself loving his neighbors for themselves, now, although he and Williams talked only business, he "felt transformed into a person who was incapable of doing or thinking anything base or unloving."

The moral language of Christianity now became more and more explicit in his work. He wrote an essay on the conflicts between the rational, conscious side of the mind and the instinctual, unconscious side, and ended with the speculation: "Perhaps...the only thing that can bring them together is the exercise of what Christians call Charity."⁸ He wrote a ballad, "As I walked out one evening," in which a lover proclaims in clichés his perfect, faithful love, while the chiming clocks of the city remind him of the realities of mortality and imperfection. The clocks end by commanding, "You shall love your crooked neighbor/With your crooked heart." This does not contradict the biblical commandment, but restates it in terms suitable to the flawed reality of human beings.

A few weeks later, he wrote "Musée des Beaux Arts," a commentary on Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1558, in the collection of the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels) and the indifference with which everyone in the painting turns away from Icarus's suffering and death. The poem also sketches the outline of the Christian story; it mentions, as if in passing, a "miraculous birth," a "dreadful martyrdom," and the "forsaken cry" of the dying Icarus—an echo of the victim in the gospels who "cried with a loud voice, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"

The moral point of the poem—a meaning that hardens into sanctimony as soon as it is stated rather than implied—is that human indifference, no matter how commonplace, is a moral failure, a refusal to love one's neighbor. And that commonplace failure has universal significance. As Auden noted, the gospels describe the commandments to love one's God and to love one's neighbor as "like" each other, and for Auden the moral significance of one's neighbor becomes clear when one thinks of him as created in the image of God.

3.

When World War II broke out in September 1939, Auden tried to console himself with a fantasy about historical inevitability. He told himself and his friends that a just and loving society would emerge inevitably, that the horror of Nazism was a disastrous but temporary detour on the road to a secular New Jerusalem. When he drafted his poem "September 1, 1939," he included a stanza "To testify my faith" that all human error "can/Delay but cannot prevent/The education of man."

This stanza answered his question of what validated his values and refuted the Nazis by stating his belief that the universe was on his side, not theirs. Sooner or later, everyone would be forced into loving their neighbors whether they now wanted to or not. Auden later realized that this idea makes nonsense of the commandment to love one's neighbor, because a commandment assumes that everyone is free to refuse it; no one needs to hear a commandment before deciding to breathe or sleep. Auden crossed out this stanza before sending off the poem, and later renounced the most famous line in the poem, "We must love one another or die," because, by treating love as a physical necessity like breathing rather than as a matter of personal choice, it affirmed the same nonsense.

Even at the time, Auden seems to have been hoping half-consciously for some moral or intellectual shock that could dislodge his fantasy of inevitable universal love. He found it in November 1939 when he went to a German-language cinema in Manhattan which was showing an official German newsreel celebrating the Nazi victory over Poland. (Until the United States and Germany declared war, German films could be shown freely in American theaters.) Auden was startled by the shouts of "Kill the Poles!" that rose from the audience of ordinary German immigrants who were under no coercion to support the Nazis. He told an interviewer many years later: "I wondered, then, why I reacted as I did against this denial of every humanistic value. The answer brought me back to the church."

A few weeks later, in 1940, he began attending church ("in a tentative and experimental sort of way") near his flat in Brooklyn Heights, and began reading Søren Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, and other Protestant theologians whose theology emphasized ultimate moral absolutes and who tended to ignore supernatural beliefs as vestiges of older folk religions.

Auden said and wrote nothing about his churchgoing, and when he began to take communion again in the autumn, he continued to keep it secret even from his friends. When he wrote to T.S. Eliot that "thanks to Charles Williams and Kierkegaard I have come to pretty much the same position as yourself, which I was brought up in anyway," he added in parentheses, "Please don't tell anyone this." He had been keeping his secret from his readers by filling his prose with polysyllabic exhortations about the need for "absolute presuppositions" and a "metaphysics" that can give a culture its intellectual framework, and his vocabulary pointed toward a philosophical view, not the religious one that he had himself adopted.

The motives for his secrecy can only be guessed at. Part may have been embarrassment at having arrived at an intellectually unfashionable view that contradicted the Freudian and Marxist doctrines for which he had been lionized. Part seems to have been a reluctance, which he retained throughout his life, to use his public status as a platform from which to preach. But in 1941 he began to expound his views, in a somewhat schoolmasterly way, by reviewing books that stated similar views, such as Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World*. He concluded his review of the latter:

In the last few chapters of his book Mr. de Rougemont states the Christian doctrine of marriage, which will seem absurdly straitlaced to the hedonist and shockingly coarse to the romantic. But perhaps the unpleasant consequences of romantic love and romantic politics [Auden's shorthand for fascism] are making thoughtful people more willing to reconsider it than they were while a bourgeois convention [i.e., bourgeois marriage], which professed to be Christian but was nothing of the kind, was still *à la mode*.²

A few weeks after he wrote this, a crisis occurred in his relationship with Chester Kallman, a relation that he had thought of as a marriage along the lines expounded by de Rougemont. Kallman broke off their sexual relations because he could not accept Auden's demand for mutual faithfulness; Auden's response seems to have been a murderous rage, to which he alluded in print only once, in an essay about his return to the Church:

And then, providentially—for the occupational disease of poets is frivolity—I was forced to know in person what it is like to feel oneself the prey of demonic powers, in both the Greek and the Christian sense, stripped of self-control and self-respect, behaving like a ham actor in a Strindberg play.¹⁰

The crisis had the effect of knocking the pompous metaphysics out of his prose and replacing it with an aphoristic sharpness that included himself among its targets. In 1943 he wrote an exposition of his theology with a title, “Purely Subjective,” that disclaimed objective or philosophical authority. He raised the question of what answer a “man who professes himself a Christian” could give if asked, “Why Jesus and not Socrates or Buddha or Confucius or Mohammed?” The only plausible answer he could imagine was: “None of the others arouse all sides of my being to cry ‘Crucify Him.’” This was the farthest possible distance from the magical excitement that he had found in religion as a child; and in later years he made a point of quoting Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: “There is a great difference between *still* believing something and believing it *again*.” All his beliefs were beliefs *again*.

4.

Although Auden told Eliot in 1940 that he had come to something close to Eliot’s religious position, he soon realized that this was true only in the sense that they both attended Christian churches and practiced Anglican rituals. With the greatest possible courtesy, he went out of his way to point out “a discordant snobbish note” in Eliot’s writings on religion. Eliot was mistaken, Auden also wrote, to suggest that culture was transmitted by the higher social classes, when in fact it had been transmitted by the Church for most of the past two thousand years.

As for the religious allegory in Eliot’s late plays, Auden politely insisted he was “absolutely certain” Eliot never meant to suggest that the characters who were called to a religious vocation had been called because they were more intelligent and from a higher social class than those who were not called, “but that is exactly what the comedy convention he is using is bound to suggest.”¹¹

“Nothing can be essentially serious for man,” Auden wrote, “except that which is given to all men alike, and that which is commanded to all men alike.” (He elsewhere wrote: “One thing, and one thing only, is serious: loving one’s neighbor as one’s self.”¹²) What he did not quite say publicly about Eliot’s religion was that he regarded it as frivolous, not serious, because it was given and commanded to some people and not others.¹³

Auden saw in Eliot a tendency he was sharply conscious of in himself: the wish to believe in a god who was “an image of his image of himself” (the phrase is from his poem “Terce”). Auden’s favorite illustration of this flattering fantasy was the female impersonator Bert Savoy, who was projecting his own image when he remarked during a thunderstorm, “There’s Miss God at it again.” (The remark became famous because Savoy was struck dead by lightning a few moments later.) Among friends, Auden used “Miss God” to refer to his own fantasy of a deity with providential intentions for himself, as in: “Miss God has decided to keep me celibate this summer.” The joke made a serious point about everyone’s wish for a universe whose purposes were adjusted to their own.

Among the many effects of Auden’s conversion in 1940 was a change in his attitude toward his sexuality. In the 1930s his homosexuality had been inseparable from his sense of guilt; he seems to have thought of it as what he called “crooked,” or inherently criminal. This largely changed after he returned to the Church and became more confident that all serious moral questions concerned loving one’s neighbor as oneself, and that specific varieties of sexuality were irrelevant to such questions. He still had doubts about his homosexuality, and told a friend in 1947 that he had “come to the conclusion that it’s wrong to be queer, but that’s a long story.”

What he seems to have had in mind was something he specified in print many years later: “all ‘abnormal’ sex-acts are rites of symbolic magic” in which the partners do not value each other as themselves but as symbolic stand-ins for someone else, “Son-and/or-Mother” or “Wife-and/ or-Husband.” Surprisingly for someone as steeped as he was in Freud, Auden underestimated the degree to which heterosexual acts, too, are rites of symbolic magic, and the terms in which he was judging his sexuality were ones that could apply to any relation, not only to specific categories of relationships.

With nonreligious friends, he used to remark that homosexuality was a sin that he intended to persist in. But among theologically minded friends, who knew better than to imagine that Church doctrine was at the heart of a religion, he took a different approach. When he told a Russian Orthodox friend about his attempt in the late 1940s to have a relation with a woman (she was Rhoda Jaffee, the model for Rosetta in *The Age of Anxiety*), he said: “It was a sin.”¹⁴ For a homosexual, a heterosexual relation was sinful because it was inherently unequal; he could not love a woman with the same degree of bodily love that she could offer him. As he wrote in a poem, “If equal affection cannot be/Let the more loving one be me.”

Auden outgrew the severely inward-looking Protestantism that he had adopted in the early 1940s, which focused almost entirely on individual choices and individual commitments. By the end of the decade he was thinking about religion in its shared and collective aspects—in terms of the “sacred importance of the body,” of the social relations and public obligations of those who belong to a church—and he seems to have at least considered the possibility of converting either to Roman Catholicism or to Judaism. (He once wondered aloud why the only people he enjoyed talking to in New York were Jews.)

In the 1950s and 1960s his religious views began to coincide with those of the Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose letters from the Nazi prison where he was eventually murdered had expounded an adult, “religionless” Christianity that had left behind all childish fantasies of a protective, paternal God. Bonhoeffer’s God experienced human suffering: “It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.” Auden told friends that of all the doctrines that the early Church had condemned as heresies (such as the Gnostic and Manichaean heresies that regarded matter as inherently fallen or demonic), the only one in which he believed was patripassianism, the doctrine that the Father voluntarily suffered with the Son.

5.

Arthur Kirsch’s *Auden and Christianity* provides a precise and wide-ranging account of the content and development of Auden’s religion and the ways in which it shaped the style, form, and content of his poems. The book is all the more persuasive because it is written from a secular perspective by a scholar who recognizes the literary and moral issues in Auden’s work but who has no stake in any religious dispute and no wish to browbeat Auden into taking one position or rejecting another.

Unsurprisingly, a few readers who were pleased to count Auden among their coreligionists disapproved of his lapses from orthodox doctrines of the Trinity. The reviewer in *The Weekly Standard*, for example, was shocked by Auden’s approval of patripassianism, which “erodes the distinctness” of Father and Son—an echo of ancient anathemas on heresies that “confound the persons” of the Trinity. He partly excused the error as a sign of Auden’s emphasis on the value of the body, but failed to notice that Auden was affirming a heresy in which (as he wrote in “The Shield of Achilles”) “one could weep because another wept,” and that loving one’s neighbor matters more than any doctrine.¹⁵

Near the end of his life Auden began to focus his attention on religious ritual, not for the magical excitement it had given him in childhood, but because it evoked eternal and universal meanings, not local and contemporary ones: “The rite...is the link between the dead and the unborn. As such, it requires a timeless language which, in practice, means a dead language.”¹⁶ He wrote this in the context of the liturgical reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, to which he responded privately in a characteristic way. When the rector at his local church, Saint Mark’s in-the-Bowery, asked for his help on an experimental modernized liturgy, Auden spent hours discussing and revising it. Then, when Saint Mark’s actually began using a new liturgy, Auden quietly moved to a Russian Orthodox church nearby, where the liturgy was still in Old Church Slavonic. He chose to join a ritual that linked him to the dead and the unborn, but only after he had helped his neighbor.

Edward Mendelson

Edward Mendelson is Lionel Trilling Professor in the Humanities at Columbia. His complete edition of W. H. Auden's *Poems* will be published in the spring. (December 2021)

1. “Dostoevsky in Siberia,” *The Griffin*, November 1956, p. 13. ↵
2. “Introduction” to Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove* (Meridian, 1956), p. viii. ↵
3. “Epithalamium (for Peter Mudford and Rita Auden, May 15th, 1965).” This updates Psalm 147: “He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names.” The other power the poem attributes to this hypothetical deity is the ability to see relations invisible to human beings between disparate things: he is the “One for whom/all enantiomorphs are superposable” (enantiomorphs are mirror-image three-dimensional shapes, such as a pair of gloves, that can be made to coincide point for point, i.e., superposed, only in four-dimensional space). ↵
4. *Prose, Volume II, 1939–1948* (Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 250. ↵
5. From a 1971 lecture, “Phantasy and Reality in Poetry,” edited by Katherine Bucknell in *W.H. Auden: “In Solitude, for Company”*: *W.H. Auden After 1940*, edited by Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 193. ↵
6. This and the next few quotations are from Auden’s untitled contribution to *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, edited by James A. Pike (Morehouse-Gorham, 1956), pp. 31–43. ↵
7. Auden visited Williams to propose an *Oxford Book of Light Verse*; their meeting and the subsequent history of the project was told in “Light and Outrageous,” *The New York Review*, August 12, 2004. ↵
8. *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse, 1926–1938* (Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 439. ↵
9. *Prose, Volume II*, pp. 140–141. ↵

10. Contribution to *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, p. 41. ↵
11. “T.S. Eliot So Far,” *The Griffin*, March 1953, p. 5. ↵
12. *Prose, Volume II*, p. 302. ↵
13. Eliot was not the only nominally Christian poet whose theology Auden questioned. “What an unchristian book!” he wrote to a friend while rereading *Paradise Lost*. William Empson, in his ferocious *Milton’s God*, had attacked Christianity for all the faults of the God portrayed by Milton; in a verse tribute to Empson, Auden mildly teased him for his “conceit that Milton’s/God, obtrusive prolix baroque Olympian,/is our Christian one.” (“Our” suggests that Empson is as much a product of Christian culture as Auden was.) ↵
14. Privately reported by V.S. Yanovsky. Auden said the same thing to a trusted secular friend, Margaret Gardiner. See her *A Scatter of Memories* (Free Association, 1988), p. 153. ↵
15. *The Weekly Standard*, May 15, 2006. ↵
16. “Renderings,” *New Statesman*, February 2, 1973, p. 165. ↵