



Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*

A Review Essay

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Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearsing the Gospel as Good News* (London: Continuum, 2010). ISBN 978-0-567-02733-7. Pp. 148 +x.

Midway through the critical dissolution of the whole of Christian dogma into anthropology that is Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, attention turns to the doctrine of heaven. Heaven is surely a prime example of one of those "fixed ideas," which, as Feuerbach put it, stand "in flagrant contradiction with our fire and life assurance companies, our railroads and steam-carriages, our picture and sculpture galleries, our military and industrial schools, our theatres and scientific museums."¹ Yet, with characteristic insight, this dissenting son of the Lutheran manse also identifies the central importance of the doctrine as an index of faith as a whole. He writes, "As man conceives his heaven, so he conceives his God; the content of his idea of heaven is the content of his idea of God....Heaven is therefore the key to the deepest mysteries of religion."² Feuerbach himself makes

¹Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) xliv. See Karl Barth's commentary and critique of Feuerbach on this point in Barth's introductory essay included in *The Essence of Christianity*, xix.

²*Ibid.*, 175.

Feuerbach argued that "as man [sic] conceives his heaven, so he conceives his God; the content of his idea of heaven is the content of his idea of God." Christopher Morse's book makes a similar claim, but from a very different starting point. Heaven, it turns out, cannot be put on the shelf as quickly as some moderns might think.

no appearance in Christopher Morse's most recent book, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, yet the work as a whole is dedicated to demonstrating what careful attention to distinctively evangelical talk about heaven discloses about the nature of God and the basic dispositions of Christian faith, while also calling into question the commonplace that the biblical notion of heaven is simply an unbelievable contradiction of our contemporary world that must be abandoned if one hopes to provide a relevant and credible account of Christian belief in this day and age.

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Indeed, whereas many scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were in essential agreement with Feuerbach that the question for modern faith and theology was, “What is no longer believable or trustworthy in the Gospel talk of heaven, given the modern frame of reference?” Morse is convinced that today, “the reverse question calls for equal consideration: *What is no longer believable or trustworthy in the modern frame of reference, given the Gospel talk of heaven?*” (30).³ The reasons for such a reversal accumulate across the chapters as Morse works to clear away “the conventional underbrush” (50). The most important reasons are these: when heaven is heard as “the course of God’s forthcoming” that cuts across the “course of this world” (Eph 2:2), a fundamental challenge is raised to the assumption of the univocity of historical events and the uniformity of all “literal” discourse; in short, bound up with the eschatological reality of the reign of God, heaven cannot be conceived “in the same order of happenings” as the normal course of world-historical occurrence (36). Further, modern demythologized accounts of heaven fall foul of the tendency to abstract the “storyteller’s references to heavenly happenings into general principles of interpreting reality” that presuppose a way of being in the world that the very talk of heaven itself calls into question (40). Morse wants his readers to register that the effect of a fresh hearing of heaven is precisely to “counteract” the foreclosure of the modern mind-set about the “real world.” As he says, “with no other subject is the opposition to the foreclosure of what we take to be real more pronounced” (49).

The book thus draws us into a debate about “who is, and who is not, as the saying goes, ‘living in the real world’” (31). In its opening chapters, Morse identifies the markers of a distinctively Christian account of heaven that takes its cues from the particular meaning and use of the idea within the context of the New Testament witness to the gospel.⁴ The final chapters then explore the difference this

³The numbers in parentheses correspond to page numbers in Morse’s book.

⁴This concentration means that there is no extended discussion of the longer history of Christian theology of heaven, or comparative discussion of ideas of heaven in the history of ideas. For such discussion, see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), and J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

specifically evangelical understanding of heaven makes for Christian ethics and the substance of Christian hope in and for the world. This latter task is crucial to the case, because as Morse acknowledges often, if heaven is the sort of reality he contends it is, then “it alone can serve to author its own vindication and prove itself to be so.” The book is revisionist from beginning to end, in the sense that the author struggles to wrestle “heaven” from the hands of both its modern deniers and literalistic defenders, even as he looks to break “our enduring fascination with the afterlife”⁵ to make room for a new and better fascination with the militant promise of the heavenly kingdom which is “at hand.”

NOT HISTORY BUT NEWS

Morse sets the stage by recalling that the New Testament texts are purveyors first and foremost of *news*, a genre distinct from history. News speaks of something novel, something now occurring, and demands a present hearing: “As a news event, the gospel references to heaven are taken not as fragmented texts in isolation having no bearing upon one another, but as a coherent message that calls forth a current following” (8). And talk of heaven is ubiquitous across the broadsheets of the Bible. But whereas in the culture at large the notion of heaven has its fixed place in the contracting pairs “heaven and earth” and “heaven and hell,” only very few of the biblical uses of the term are in fact captured in these dichotomies. Instead, as Morse understatedly put it, “in the news called the gospel we encounter a less conventional usage.” The meaning of heaven remains polyvalent, but within the gospel the primary meaning of the word is bound up with “news of *life* that is said to be *now coming toward us*,” that is, news of the kingdom whose coming is at hand, a “state of affairs taking shape” and displacing the form of *this* world (1 Cor 7:31) (5). The contrast here is not so much with earth or with hell as with the state of affairs that is said to be passing away. As an element within the witness to the coming kingdom, heaven first names the whence of God’s activity; it is the locus of God’s action, the “place of God’s *doing*” and the “course of God’s forthcoming” in the outworking of salvation (10–11). Second, heaven is *created* (14); it is the invisible “unimpeded dominion of love and freedom” that superintends the earth. Third, heaven is a place of *community* (17), in the first instance of angelic society, but crucially thereafter also the commonwealth of the people of God (Phil 3:20); believers hold citizenship in this community even now, and it is their source of earthly freedom (Gal 4:26). Finally, and most decisively, heaven is intimately associated with that kingdom which is “at hand”; it is proximate but “*without approximation*” (21), not coming from this world, but coming to it. The heavenly kingdom is an event that “overtak[es] what is passing away on earth” (23). In sum, Morse contends that when heard with its specific evangelical difference, heaven “primarily refers to

⁵The phrase is the subtitle of a very readable study of contemporary religious ideas of heaven written by the religion editor of *Newsweek* magazine, Lisa Miller, *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010).

nothing less than what are proclaimed to be the current conditions under which our life is really being lived” and thus names “the most inescapable reality now facing us” (24).

HEAVEN IN RECENT THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

The second chapter surveys a variety of indicative modern strategies for “hearing of heaven,” discussing in turn literal, mythical, narrative, and promissory interpretations of the gospel talk of heaven by the likes of Hal Lindsay, Bultmann, Barth, and Moltmann, respectively. Morse’s own preferred ways of handling the concept of heaven keep close company in particular with Moltmann’s central themes: stressing the coming of God the Redeemer as the inauguration of unaccountably new possibility in reality, conceiving that the heavenly future as promised by God “proves true only with reference to what is currently happening on earth” and acknowledging that in its present encounter, the “promised *advent* proves to be a countervailing reality to its crucifying opposition” (47). Morse himself consistently emphasizes the *disjunctive* relationship between the kingdom of heaven and the present age. The Thomistic slogan that “grace perfects nature” is difficult to bed down within this decidedly apocalyptic account of the nature of heavenly grace. Heaven, as Morse tells us, is simply not univocal with earth—neither is the coming age with the present age—because grace is not an extension or application or purification of nature.⁶ That which comes from heaven is not latent in the present age; it is not the realization of the potential of the present. Moltmann was right to see that the heavenly promise is best understood as *adventus* rather than as *futurum*, since “an eschatological and apocalyptic sense of the future... is of an *advent* in which a new reality comes into the present that is not accounted for as an extrapolation from any available residue of what has gone before” (46). Thus, the promise of future does not arise from, but rather comes upon the present from ahead of it, as it were, even though it proves itself true “only with reference to what is currently happening on earth” (47). The upshot of such reflections is that Morse is driven to try to show that “the real-life importance [of heaven] cannot credibly be dismissed or simply ruled to be impossible at the present time” and that the pressing work of theology is, as Bultmann once wrote, “to make clear with what concept of reality, of being and events, we really operate in theology, and how this relates to the concepts in which... other people think and speak of reality” (50).

THE REALITY OF HEAVEN

But just what then can be said about the *reality* of heaven and its relation to the business of our everyday lives? Tackling this question is the task of the third chapter. Morse finds an important clue in the gospel parables. Jesus’ parables relate

⁶Morse gives no reason to put much stock in any view of heaven that is won simply by multiplying our experience of earth. See, for example, Marylinne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), as discussed in Miller, *Our Enduring Fascination*, xxii.

directly to ordinary reality, but do so in ways that make plain that the kingdom of which they tell, while imminent, is not immanent; while “at hand,” is not “in hand.” In a parable, “the earthly picture has a heavenly meaning” that arises from the juxtaposition of everyday life with “matters unfamiliar and incapable of prior approximation that are associated with a coming from heaven” (57). The coming of the kingdom sets normal reality into another, more determinative frame of reference than the one normally supposed—Morse discusses the curious incident of the “lesson of the fig tree” (Mark 13:28–29 and parallels) to provide a case in point here. Parabolic witness to the kingdom confounds expectations precisely because it gestures at the novelty of grace. The univocity of natural language is shattered when heavenly reality comes upon it. Every witness to this coming will thus confess, “I am one / Who feels the doggerel of Heaven / purge earth of poetry; God’s foolishness / laugh through the web man’s ripening wisdom spun; /the world’s whole culture riven /by Moody excavations love shall bless.”⁷

where we really are, is in a world subject to God’s liberating invasion, and now is the time when the new age has come upon the old, that stretch of time in which heaven is dawning

Recourse to poetry at this juncture is fitting as Morse identifies the two things required to hear of heaven parabolically: “divinatory imagination” and “faithful disbelief.” These terms, taken over from Karl Barth, describe human activities that arise in response to and acknowledge the great “demythologization” of our everyday sense of reality that the gospel achieves. They are, one might say, epistemological and volitional correlates to the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. And what the Spirit attests is that “the ‘real world’ is the eventuation of heaven in the midst of earth” (60); or in Barth’s analytical restatement, “history is a predicate of revelation” and not the other way around.⁸ Where we *really* are, is in a world subject to God’s liberating invasion (so J. L. Martyn), and now is the time when the new age has come upon the old, that stretch of time in which heaven is dawning (63). Stood here, we assume a posture that “requires an active disbelief of noncompliance and refusal of allegiance toward what the Gospel exposes as the countervailing opposition to heaven’s coming; that is, the enmity biblically characterized as evil and demonic” (62). After an excursus into recent secular philosophical readings of Paul that have ears to hear something of the disruptive and dislocating effects of grace,⁹ the chapter concludes by reminding us that the theological tradition—perhaps John Calvin most notably—has used the terms *virtus* and “virtual”

⁷Jack Clemo, “The Excavator,” *Selected Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1951) 23.

⁸Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956) 58, see 56–58.

⁹See especially Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

to name the effective reality-shaping power of the divine promise of heaven. Summarizing the case, Morse writes:

What overarches this earth, if the *basileia* of heaven at hand is taken for real, is a dominion where the right of love and freedom is unimpeded, a dominion focused not upon the all blue yonder of the sky, but directed toward countering every impediment to the right of love and freedom with its justice now on this earth....[W]hat is being referred to in the biblical testimony of the coming of heaven at hand is not so much the end of “the real world” as its beginning, not the source of indifference and irresponsibility toward the present, but the source of an ability-to-respond to what the present calls for beyond all human powers of control that are, so to speak, “in hand.” (72)

THE QUESTION OF ETHICS

In view of all this, the question of ethics becomes the subject of the penultimate chapter. The question of Christian ethics is just this: What does our willing and doing have to do with that “heavenly doing, or the *virtus* of a heavenly *politeia*” (76)? And the task of ethical reflection is, correspondingly, to envisage this present and pressing divine activity and to engage or participate in accordance with what is happening. Morse takes two texts—Jesus healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–6) and the parable of the sheep and goats (Matt 25:31–46)—as instances where the call to discern, interpret, or determine (*dokimazein*) the direction of heavenly activity is crucially displayed as the primary ethical act. Such a view of ethics turns the modern theological common sense of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on its head, reversing what Johannes Weiss admitted was a “thoroughly unbiblical” view of ethics that repudiated the relevance of New Testament eschatology for ethical reflection.¹⁰ Kantian ethics replaced the incalculable *virtus* of the kingdom of heaven with the immanent purity of the categorical imperative and optimism that “ought implies can.” And Kant’s God does not “come,” but remains unmoving for all time in the place where practical reason posits him, namely, as the underpinning that shores up the rationality of ethical life.¹¹ Ethics in this mode, Morse says, involved “de-activating claims of divine agency in order to activate human agency” (96). Morse looks to Bonhoeffer’s ethics as a retort to this. For here we find developed, albeit in a finally fragmentary way, a theological ethic in which the central notion of “responsibility” and the relativization of “religion” are both functions of reality understood christologically in terms of divine agency. It is Christ’s present presence, his heavenly action towards the world, that affords the possibility of human moral action and determines that the field of this action should extend to the

¹⁰Johannes Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, ed. and trans. R. H. Hiers and D. L. Holland (London: SCM, 1971) 135: “Its ethical side is thoroughly unbiblical and un-Jewish, inasmuch as the notion of an ‘actualization of the Rule of God’ by human ethical activity is completely contrary to the transcendentalism of Jesus’ idea.”

¹¹On Kant’s theology and its function in ethics, see Gordon E. Michalson, *Kant and the Problem of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), especially the chapter entitled “Heaven Comes to Earth: The Ethical Commonwealth,” 100–122.

whole world, and not only to some putative “religious sphere.” In short compass, Morse makes plain how Bonhoeffer’s conviction that the word of God has “formative agency” in the here and now—or in another idiom, that the Christ is “taking form” among us here and now—makes *the* crucial moral question “*What is God doing in the present situation?*” by whose power I may conform my own willing and doing (88–89). To conceive reality itself as seized by the divine promise of the at-hand-ness of heaven is to become subject to a curious set of ethical imperatives, having been charged to “watch,” “wait upon,” and “seek first” the kingdom, as those who “struggle” against the powers of this age in “love for one another” (97–98). Human moral action is, on this view, activated and oriented by divine action, that is, by the heavenly course of God’s forthcoming.

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HEAVEN AND HOPE

The final chapter asks what sort of hope can arise from and be sustained by the kind of understanding of heaven being recommended here. Morse does not shy away from confronting the skeptical question: “Is not theological talk about ‘heaven at hand’ as *life that is coming to us* but a pretentious denial” of the actual worlds of deprivation, loss, and fear in which so many live (104)? He answers this question negatively, observing that the case he has built, with its stress upon the at-hand-ness of heaven even now “parabolically signified and apocalyptically realized” elicits a specific kind of eschatological imagination that focuses its attention “not on the sky or on the afterlife but on heaven’s inbreaking in current affairs” (107). In these closing reflections, Morse stresses time and time again that the reality of heaven of which the gospel testifies is incommensurate with the passing form of this world, which is to say that there is a profound and deeply salutary imbalance between our experience of the world of loss—whether of personal freedom, of physical strength, of security, or of life itself (all examples that Morse canvasses)—and the promise-laden news of the gospel of the kingdom. This is beautifully unfolded in an extended exegesis of the death and raising of Lazarus (112–118), in which the key proves to be the realization that the time of the Lord’s coming—the arrival in the person of Christ of “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25)—is overwhelmingly different and more decisive than the time of death with which it is juxtaposed. As Morse concludes, “The ‘real world’ is proclaimed to be one in which there is life currently arriving on the scene, in whatever situation we are facing, that is stronger than any undeniable loss threatening us, including death” (117). Further, as the story of Lazarus teaches, “the actual arrival on the scene of the life that proves stronger than death is never too late” (118).

The German theologian Gerhard Sauter has described the basic situation of the Christian in this way:

To exist theologically is to be a person under the promise and in the expectation of new life. Under this promise one is called, one is inserted into the situation before God that is opened up by God's condemning and saving judgement. One is inserted into the hidden history of Jesus Christ in the world. That is the living space in which our human being is "located" and "takes place." "For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). That is a categorical indicative, the content of the judgement of God upon our existence and at the same time the communication of new life.¹²

The book Christopher Morse has written provides a complex series variation on this singular theological theme, played out in the peculiar eschatological idiom of talk of the at-hand-ness and coming of the kingdom of heaven. By stressing how such evangelical talk of heaven describes the real world in which faith discerns itself to be, Morse is fundamentally concerned to indicate where we are—or better, where we find ourselves placed by virtue of what the God of the gospel has done and is doing to redeem and to save. The coming of the kingdom of heaven provides a powerful shorthand for the entire outworking of the salutary judgement of God unto new life.

THE POP STAR AND THE PROFESSOR

John Lennon once wrote an anthem in which he famously invited us to imagine there were no heaven; lecturing some years before that, Rudolf Bultmann demanded that we acknowledge that "there is no longer any heaven in the old sense of the word" (1–2). Both were pleas to concentrate upon the "here and now" as the place and time where the stakes of human life are really being played for. Lennon hoped dispensing with the idea of heaven would rid us of a dangerous and inhuman notion for which people were willing to kill and die on earth. Bultmann saw the danger of heaven differently, worrying that the ancient and incredible idea of heaven as the topmost story of the cosmos deafened moderns to the truth of the gospel *kerygma*. For Bultmann, the problem with heaven was that it draws attention back into a past in which we can no longer live; for Lennon, the problem with heaven was that it projects a future that inappropriately commands our attention and transforms the present into a world whose violence makes it unfit to inhabit. In both cases, to attend to heaven is to turn away from the reality of the present world; and in the view of both, allegiance to our time and place demands that we abandon heaven.

The burden of Morse's argument is that both the pop star and the professor are mistaken. They are mistaken because to attend to heaven in the sense of the evangelical witness is to discern the reality of God's own turning towards and com-

¹²Gerhard Sauter, *Eschatological Rationality: Theological Issues in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 197–198.

ing upon the present. Christian talk of heaven is, of course, talk of the future that comes down to us from a distant past. But heard with discernment and imagination, it comes to us as news of the whence and the way in which God is even now moving upon the earth for the sake of its salvation, seeing off the passing form of this age by virtue of its gift of immeasurable life. There is something different to hear about heaven, Morse argues, and when it is heard it makes all the difference in the world for the here and now. As Bonhoeffer once remarked, it is “precisely because our minds are set upon things above, we are that much more stubborn and purposeful in protesting here on earth.”¹³ Should we find Morse’s case compelling—or rather, should Morse’s witness expose us afresh to the self-authenticating truth of heaven—then we will find that we can once again pray as the earliest Christians did (“May grace come and this world pass away”¹⁴) knowing that such prayer is at once a deeply faithful and deeply humanistic act. ⊕

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¹³From a sermon on Col 3:1–4, see *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* 11 (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1994) 446, cited in Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (London: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2010) 111.

¹⁴*Didache* 10:6.