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Union Seminary Quarterly Review
3041 Broadway
New York, NY 10027
Email: usqr@uts.columbia.edu
For submissions, please include article and 200 word abstract. Articles should use the most recent edition of the Chicago Manual of Style. Only electronic submissions sent by Email can be considered. USQR is no longer able to accept hard copy submissions.

Subscriptions: Institutions: $40.00 per year. Individuals: $21.00 per year. Canada and Mexico, $25.00 per year. Outside North America: Institutions: $65.00 per year. Individuals: $42.00 per year. Back issues are available for $10.00 per single or $18.00 per double issue. Foreign orders should be made payable in dollars by international money order or checks drawn on U.S. banks.

usqr.utsnyc.edu

Union Seminary Quarterly Review is editorially independent of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. Views expressed in this journal are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those held by the Editorial Board of USQR or its sponsors.

Editor: Jason Wyman
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Cover design by Peter C. Herman.

ISSN 0362-1545
Christopher Morse teaches his last class at Union Theological Seminary, ST 441: John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, May 2, 2013.
Editor’s Introduction

JASON WYMAN

It’s hard to overstate the importance the presence of Dr. Christopher Morse on Union Theological Seminary’s campus over the last several decades has had. The variety of articles in this special double issue of Union Seminary Quarterly Review suggest this immense importance in all the diverse ways it has been felt. Dr. Morse has served as a professor, a mentor, a preacher, and a pastor to many people who have come in and gone out Union’s doors.

The articles contained within are roughly divided into sections that reflect these different roles as well as the different key aspects of Dr. Morse’s work, both in the past and present. Anyone who has taken the foundational ST 104 class during his tenure at the seminary will recognize their own experience in that class and, hopefully, fondly remember their own experiences of working through doctrines, doing dogmatics as the work of “faithful disbelief,” and perhaps most of all, constructing an \textit{utrum} paper. The latter is represented within, both explicitly as well as implicitly in form: indeed, it’s an exercise and a way of thinking that is critical to develop in order to have a well reasoned stance on the important issues, historically and contemporarily, in the church and theology. Alongside articles done with ST 104 clearly in mind are ones that reflect Dr. Morse’s lifelong work on the importance of eschatology, including his recent excellent work on questions of heaven. How these themes affect the project theologians are called to do are raised in particular, with respect to ecclesiology, interreligious work, and liberation. Finally, many articles reflect the personal influence Dr. Morse has had on people in a way that can only be experienced in person: his quick wit and humor, easy but gentle dropping of bible quotes, and consistent passion for the work he does and the people it affects.

As a current Ph.D. student I still encounter Dr. Morse frequently on the sidewalk, on a walk or errand from the apartment he moved to from Union, which is nearby. His work certainly is not finished, and he often speaks of being as busy now as he was while teaching at Union. Each time I run into him it’s a fresh reminder of why the skills I learned in ST 104 are so important and why I’m excited to be a Teaching Fellow for ST 104’s current professor for the class this spring semester. For many it is a first encounter with the systematic engagement with the traditional doctrines of the Christian church. And this is definitely no easy task for a professor given the characteristic critical eye Union students consistently bring to their work in theology. Yet Dr. Morse has routinely won over new generations of students by offering a rigorous framework to understand the doctrines as they’ve been constructed as well as challenge and revise them.

The profound way in which he affects his students and prepares them for their theological careers is easily observed in the achievements of the contributors to this festschrift. Many are accomplished pastors in churches across the
country and world, while others are academics at various points in their careers: current Ph.D. students at schools all over, new professors, tenured professors who are making their own contributions to the education of future generations of theologians, academic administrators, and everywhere in between. The affection all of them feel for Dr. Morse is apparent in every single article, both in their moments of admiration of Dr. Morse’s ideas as well as their gentle critiques and reconstructions. The tone of their engagement with Dr. Morse’s work reveals their appreciation of his influence on their thought and careers; the appropriation of his ideas shows that he has constructed a project that will continue for generations through the work of his admirers; and finally, their commitment to participating in this volume, which has taken much work and patience on behalf of all parties, demonstrates how essential it is to all of them that Dr. Morse’s work be celebrated and appreciated widely.
Hearing the Music in the *Festschrift*: A “Listening Guide”

Heather Wise

In music, a listening guide points the listener toward the sounds that may be heard in a composition. In this introduction to the *festschrift* honoring Christopher Morse, I offer a “listening guide” to hearing the music of his theology as it resonates in theme and variation throughout this volume. Well-known to Union as a theological virtuoso who plays a doctrinal Stradivarius, Morse invites all people to rehear the Gospel as news, and has, himself, served as a guide to listening to hear its resonances. His reimagining of dogmatics as a radically critical discipline worthy of academic study, the “antidote to dogmatism” for church and society, and his pastoral presence as a teacher and mentor who deeply respects the God-given integrity of each person, mark the central themes of the music in this written celebration of his towering contribution to theology.

Trevor Eppehimer notes Morse’s one volume dogmatics *Not Every Spirit* contains a “treasure trove of insights and methodological ingenuities that wait patiently for other theologians to encounter and critically engage in print.” This *festschrift* is merely a start on that critical engagement in print of Morse’s work and gathers current and former students, esteemed colleagues and friends in ministry, each of whom sounds a harmonic to the note that is Christopher Morse. Part tribute, part reflection, part demonstration of influence and statement of gratitude, this compilation evokes Dr. Morse’s sense of humor and his seriousness about “testing the spirits” so that false prophets can be disbelieved and God’s will and way more clearly discerned. Each contributor takes up Morse’s work in uniquely personal ways, and yet one can listen to hear the music beyond the notes.

In “The Difference Christopher Morse Makes: A Dogmatics for the Practice of Ministry,” Thomas L. Brunkow describes his relationship with Morse, from their time as seminary roommates at Yale Divinity School and continuing through over fifty years of friendship as Brunkow served United Methodist parishes in the Baltimore-Washington area and Morse left parish ministry in Virginia to become a professor at Union Theological Seminary. Brunkow, who paints a vivid portrait of Morse as person, pastor, and theologian, cites Morse’s early work on Jürgen Moltmann and Karl Barth as a particular influence on his own perspective and Morse’s later dogmatics of disbelief and insight into “the difference heaven makes” as crucial for mentoring pastors.

Highlighting Morse’s profound influence on his life and approach to dogmatic theology, in “Testing the Spirits,” Trevor Eppehimer, Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Hood Theological Seminary in Salisbury, North Carolina, presents Morse’s vision of theological education and method to “test the spirits” in the 2014 Closing Convocation address to his students. He
his sermon in 1989 on the 44th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. More on scriptural apocalyptic framed as “promissory narration” would preach. He gave his sermon “The Coming Cloud” based on Morse’s section of the same name in his

Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics at Princeton Theological Seminary, revisits the Gospel, as Morse teaches.

should be saying and doing, according to what it has been called to say and do in

sues, and Walsh, in her work with children with disabilities, test what the church

demonstrate how to critically test theological thinking by engaging Morse’s utrum method of theological disputation, following Thomas Aquinas. Spencer and Walsh, a professor and peer counselor, respectively, pay tribute to Morse, and to their time as tutors for his ST 104 foundational theology course, each by testing his and her current work via this method. Spencer, in his work on ecological issues, and Walsh, in her work with children with disabilities, test what the church should be saying and doing, according to what it has been called to say and do in the Gospel, as Morse teaches.

James F. Kay, Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs and Joe R. Engle Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics at Princeton Theological Seminary, revisits his sermon “The Coming Cloud” based on Morse’s section of the same name in his chapter “The Life to Come” in Not Every Spirit. Kay wanted to see if Morse’s work on scriptural apocalyptic framed as “promissory narration” would preach. He gave his sermon in 1989 on the 44th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. More than twenty-five years later, while current events have changed, our dread of catastrophe remains, as does God’s promise that what will greet us in the coming cloud of Jesus Christ apocalypsed (Gk “revealed”) is not disaster or death, but the love of God and our ultimate redemption.

In “Jesus and the Divine Name,” R. Kendall Soulen, Professor of Systematic Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., provocatively argues that Jesus’ fulfillment of the law does not render obsolete the Jewish law of not speaking the divine name. Exegeting the New Testament, he finds avoidance of speaking the divine name. For instance, he shows how Jesus speaks, and does not speak, the divine name in a “now here” and “not yet” of the eschaton. Rather than purge Christian practice of this continuity with Jewish tradition, Soulen suggests we embrace it under the rubric lex orandi est lex credendi et agenda (Lt

“the rule of prayer is the rule of belief and action”), which would be for Morse the doctrinal test of “consistency with worship.”

Turning to Morse to locate the role of academic theology in a global capitalist society, in “Faithful Disbelief: Christopher Morse Between Foucault and Barth,” Marvin E. Wickwire, Jr., a Ph.D. student at Duke University, contends that between Michel Foucault’s critique of power and Karl Barth’s explication of the Word lies Morse’s method of faithfully disbelieving speech which is not of God. For Barth, God’s Word is an event, is speech in action, and using Foucault, there is no space into which false prophets, peddlers, or pastors can insert power grabs to manipulate the Word of God as an object rather than a happening. In Morse’s terms, the biblical Rachel’s refusal of consolation would refuse a word without action as misuse of God’s communication.

A doctoral candidate in Christian Thought and History at McGill University, who once did a 200-page summary of John Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion as an S.T.M. student with Morse, Richard Paul Cumming offers his paper on “The Problem of Universal Salvation in the Theology of Emil Brunner.” Following Morse as one to deeply interrogate a thinker, and on the topic of universal salvation, which has occupied Morse’s reflection, he investigates whether, and in what way, Brunner finds universal salvation possible. While Cumming commends Brunner’s attention to history and human response to God, he concludes that Calvin, with his providential God who cares for all, (despite humans being “double-predestined”), provides a better approach to the problem.

In “Apophasis and the Trinity: on the enduring significance of revelation for theology,” Gabriel Morgan, Ph.D. student at Lutheran Theological Seminary and former student of Dr. Morse, offers a historical dogmatics on the fact that revelation, or what God is doing in us and for us, remains the most salient method by which to do theology. Current constructive trends suggest because theology is apophatic (we can only say what God is not) it is only talk about ourselves. Morgan engages patristic to contemporary sources to counteract this claim and show we do not justifiably ourselves, but are justified by God. The graciousness of the economy of the Trinity is that God comes to us through Jesus Christ as person so that we might know God and be known.

God’s coming and its significance for theology and Christian ethics is taken-up by Nancy J. Duff, Stephen Colwell Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary in her 2013 convocation address, “The Strange Worlds of Apocalyptic, Christian Ethics, and Princeton Theological Seminary.” A take-off on Barth’s “The Strange New World Within the Bible,” Duff weaves her work on Pauline apocalyptic and Christian ethics with the theologically and politically diverse community that is PTS. Duff asserts that while God’s coming is experienced as new and sometimes strange, and there is no easy path to life together, God’s reconciliation calls us to “live within that new space created by God’s revelation in Christ and become living parables of divine action.”

In “Moving Heaven and Earth: A Womanist Dogmatics of Black Dance as Basileia,” Eboni Marshall Turman, Assistant Research Professor and Director of Black Church Studies at Duke Divinity School, dogmatically tests Morse’s The
Difference Heaven Makes with Womanist thought to determine what makes the difference for justice for black women in the black church (and beyond) today. Turman, a minister at Abyssinian Baptist Church and a former Alvin Ailey teaching artist, finds incarnational embodiment in Morse’s work, but holds his theological feet to the fire, so-to-speak, on whether being “on hand” for what is “at hand” is enough to counteract the legacy of racism and sexism in the church. She says black women cannot merely “rehear heaven” but must move heaven and earth through the liturgical dance of social action.

Seeking a faithful rendering of what it means for God to be “at hand, but not in hand,” Heather Wise’s “Beyond Consolation: The Significance of Failure for Faith,” first presented for an interdisciplinary seminar of non-theologians at Columbia University’s Teacher’s College, takes a theological, philosophical, and psychoanalytic look at faith and failure to discover resources to help the suffering and inconsolable. She asks, when even faith fails, what can people of faith do? With experience as a hospital chaplain in the foreground, Wise sees, following Morse and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that it is not our success that defines us in relation to faith, but God’s faithfulness to us. Wise uses Morse’s dogmatic theology to build a bridge between theology and religious studies.

In “Faith for Faithful Disbelievers: Christopher Morse as Systematic Theologian,” D. Seiple, philosopher and professor at City University of New York presses Morse on what exactly faithful disbelievers are called to believe, not just disbelieve. Framed in conversation with Williams James, he adjudicates Morse’s method to determine to what doing dogmatics ultimately amounts. Seiple sees a “reciprocal interrogation” with the Holy Spirit: one “tests the spirits” and is tested by God, as the Holy Spirit brings new “dogmatic formulations and their contexts of application.” Thus, the “real test is not of doctrine, but of the interrogator.” He concludes each person must make his or her own stand in faith and, like James, the final test for Morse is “consonance with experience.”

In “The Humanity of Divinity,” Philip G. Ziegler, Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology at the University of Aberdeen, brings together John Calvin and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, two primary figures Morse has taught for decades, to illumine how for them the study of divinity inseparably speaks to right understanding, and living, of humanity. Christology and theological anthropology take center stage, as for Calvin, Bonhoeffer, and Morse our humanity is only fully understood as we are made human, restored to our true humanity, through God become human in Jesus Christ. Ziegler shares with Morse the joy of the Gospel in knowing we are not left to random choice and self-identification, but deeply cared for and provided for by God who chooses and identifies with us.

Listening to the music in the essays of the festschrift, a melody line begins to emerge. God is for us, sings Morse in his life and work, and this volume is an “Ode to Joy” to God for Christopher Morse. For an encore, the music continues with two pieces of Morse’s that have never before been published. These two essays are quintessential Morse, and taken together, resonate the symphony of who he is and his vocation. The first is “Approaching Calvin Today in The Spirit of the Explorer,” an address delivered at the Stated Meeting of the Salem Presbytery, High Point, North Carolina, on the 500th anniversary of John Calvin’s birth, in 2009, and the second is an address in James Chapel to the Union seminary community on the eve of the start of the Iraq war, March 25, 2003.

For Morse, approaching theology means to engage the quality of provocation for our current situation. With clear eyes for what is objectionable in Calvin, Morse sees him as humanizing—God elects and loves us, which is how we know God and ourselves. Further, Morse’s timely use of Calvin on issues of sexuality and ordination, showing how God’s grace never violates but establishes us in our integrity, breaks ground for future generations to explore. On the eve of the Iraq war, Morse asks with Bonhoeffer, “What should the student of theology do today?” He says we are called to oppose credulity and cynicism and remember that the most crucial word comes through us, not from us, as “we have no power to raise the dead.” But with Rachel, and with Morse, we hear a word, “there is hope for your future,” and we stand “on trial for hope in the promise.”

To end this “listening guide” I share the lyrics of the song I wrote for Dr. Morse for his retirement chapel service on May 2, 2013. We sang his theology in four-part harmony and the room erupted in laughter and tears with the recognition of his teaching and ministry, which has deeply touched thousands of people. I invite you to listen for what you hear in the festschrift, and in the tremenous legacy of Christopher Morse. For Morse, if the music of the Gospel in any way resonates through his theology, he would attribute it to God, whose song we are.
Test the Spirits
By Heather Wise

Do not believe everything you hear
For many false prophets will appear
Don’t lose your way, it’ll be alright
Heaven’s at hand, drawing nigh

Beloved, test the spirits for which are from God
Do not believe every spirit
Beloved, test the spirits for which are from God
Not every spirit’s from God

By this you know the spirit of God
Every spirit which confesses Jesus Christ in the flesh
God comes to earth to reconcile the world
Through the spirit we are refreshed

Refrain
Is it crucial, comprehensive? Is it consequent, coherent?
Does it conform with your conscience?
Is it catholic—universal? Consonant with your experience?
Consistent with your praise of God?
Is it congruent with the Word? Does what you’ve heard continue
the Gospel witness?

Refrain
Do not believe everything you hear
For many false prophets will appear
Don’t lose your way, it’ll be alright
Heaven’s at hand
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The Difference Christopher Morse Makes: A Dogmatics for the Practice of Ministry

THOMAS L. BRUNKOW

“Furthermore, my deep appreciation is expressed to the local churches and pastors’ schools that have engaged with me on this topic...”
Christopher Morse, Preface to The Difference Heaven Makes

Friend and Colleague

My contribution to this festschrift will be a brief sketch of how the work of Christopher L. Morse is a great resource for the church and the practice of ministry. Particularly how his work in dogmatics has informed and influenced my own fifty-year ministry as a United Methodist pastor.

I have known Christopher Morse for a long time. We became friends at Yale Divinity School in 1961. As a Midwesterner from DePauw University, a small Methodist college in Indiana, I found the YDS community stimulating and daunting at the same time. In this land of intellectual giants I was happy to discover this older student who was not only one of these “giants”, but friendly, very funny...and a Methodist. His Virginia accent and southern warmth put me at ease. We became roommates in Beecher House during his final year and my second (1962-63). I consider our meeting in seminary as a providential act. Our friendship has deeply affected the shape of my thinking and the course of my career.

He graduated in 1963 and went off to an appointment at a small Methodist Church in southeastern Virginia. I married Katherine Ault in January 1965 and graduated in June. We went off to my first appointment at Rockville, Maryland. Christopher and I kept in touch as our careers progressed along different tracks—his in academia, mine in parish ministry.

After his five-year pastorate, he pursued graduate studies at Union and Columbia, first an MTS and then a PhD. He was hired by Union and began his long and distinguished career.

Over the next forty years I served six churches in the Baltimore-Washington Conference. Christopher visited or preached at most of them. He preached at the baptism of our first child, Benjamin, at the Rockville Church in 1966. He baptized our daughter Sarah in 1968 at Trinity Church in Frederick, Maryland. To our children he was always Uncle Kit. He tells the story of his visit to Georgetown when Sarah was young. When we entered a shop, little Sarah boldly declared to a stranger, “This is my Baptizer!”
I was always grateful that Christopher, who spent his life in the academy, never forgot his roots in Virginia Methodism and his parish experience. The reason, I suppose, that in all his serious dogmatics the “so what” question was never far from his mind.

**Early Influences: Interpreter of Barth**

As the years passed, Christopher sent me copies of each new book, journal article and lecture. I devoured them all with interest and care, because they made sense and because they were helpful to a young pastor, especially in preaching.

Two journal pieces in particular helped me get a clearer picture of what Karl Barth was all about. The first was “The Future of Karl Barth’s Theology”, Dialog, Winter, 1981.

Among other things, he introduced the idea of “testing the spirits”. “Faith in God, biblically understood, includes a call not to believe every spirit—a call for disbelief in the idols....In this regard faith is the willing commencement of disbelief, not its suspension (p.10).” “Testing the spirits” became a familiar theme and the title for his major work, Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief.(1994, first edition; 2009, second edition).

He discusses Barth in relationship to Ernst Troeltsch, who precedes him and liberation theologies which follow. I was encouraged to read that “Barth came to affirm...that something does happen when the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and signified as parable in the social conflicts of this present age.” (p.12). Morse’s summary of these three theological threads reappears in works to come: “God is made known in the world where all that seeks to overcome the will and way of Jesus Christ in this present time has been, is being, and shall be overcome. The overcoming of suffering and oppression can only be known in relation to specific suffering and oppression, but it is the overcoming which is the liberation, and it is Jesus Christ, not as religious symbol, not as ethical model, not as cultural construct, but as the narrated confession of the gospel whose identity identifies what is being overcome” (p.13).

Morse’s sentences may be long and do not lend themselves to homiletic cadence, but the thought structure frequently provided the substance for this preacher’s sermons.

The second article was “Grace in Karl Barth’s World and Ours”, Katallagete, Spring 1983. It was this article that helped resolve a problem over the extent of salvation that had been disturbing me for some time. As a Methodist, I was infused with Wesleyan notions of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace; and Methodist Arminian talk of “growing in grace” which involves a cooperation between God and humans. Grace, in such a view, is conditional—God’s favor is granted if only the human believes. Hence the tension. I had come to believe that grace was an unconditional gift. Wesley’s prevenient grace becomes a universal offer of forgiveness from God that awaits and depends upon a human decision. Who then is saved: only those who make a decision to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior? Or only those whom God elects? Is there a third option?

Barth states quite simply in the Church Dogmatics, according to Morse, that God is identified in Jesus Christ as one who is for us without condition. God’s grace, Barth describes, as overtaking us and embracing us from the opposite direction, even “seizing us from behind”....“We are not the seeker, God is. In and of ourselves we are disposed not to desire grace but to reject it. The Cross shows that when grace appears among us it is not what we expected, not what we think can meet our need....The message of the Resurrection is that God does not allow our opposition to grace to defeat it. All that overcame Jesus on the Cross has been, is being, and shall be overcome” (p.26).

Those words, or something close to them, found their way into the conclusion of more than one of my sermons.

Morse continues by discussing Barth on grace and election. God’s righteousness does not allow our self-destruction, Morse wrote. “Thus the distinction the Gospel message draws is not between one group of humans who are elect and another who are rejected. The distinction is between those who recognize that they are loved without condition and those who yet do not”(p.27). He goes on to quote Barth—words that became decisive for me on the question of the extent of salvation: “Jesus Christ was born and died and rose again for all....To that extent, objectively, all are justified, sanctified, and called. But the hand of God has not touched all in such a way that they can see and hear, perceive and accept and receive all that God is for and therefore for them. To those who have not been touched in this way by the hand of God the axiom that Jesus Christ is the Victor is as such unknown. It is a Christian and not a general axiom; valid generally, but not generally observed and acknowledged...but the hand of God has touched and seized Christians in this way—which means the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit...This is without any merit or co-operation on their part, just as the reconciliation of the whole world in Jesus Christ is without merit or co-operation.” (CD, Vol. IV, Part I, Para.58, 1956, p. 148).

Scales fell from my eyes. Barth’s understanding has become a core conviction of my own. Christ died for all, period!

In addition to these articles on Barth, Christopher pointed out the utility of the Index Volume of the Church Dogmatics. Among other things it contains a biblical index citing all the references in the CD to Barth’s exegetical work. Barth has commented on virtually every text in the Old and New Testaments. The Index indicates which verses or pericopes have an extended comment and which receive a shorter treatment. In sermon preparation I almost always checked Barth’s discussion of the lections. More often than not he provided fresher and deeper insights than other commentators.

Christopher became my guide through the Barth corpus, particularly the Church Dogmatics. The detailed course outline from his Barth seminar provided a navigational chart for the 12 volumes. Once when I was facing a difficult funeral sermon for a twenty year old woman of my parish who had committed suicide, I was grateful that Christopher had earlier pointed me to Barth’s chapter on “The Determination of the Rejected” (CD, II,2, Para. 35:4). Here Barth deals with the
question: How does it stand between Jesus and Judas? It became the theological basis for my sermon “How Does It Stand Between Jesus and Mary Twelve?”

Some months later the young woman’s mother wrote a letter of gratitude: “And though we miss her, the aura of her bright light lingers, and nowhere more beautifully than in the sure and certain way you have come to understand and proclaim redemption: as that moment whenever and wherever Christ finds one of us needy, abandoned and in our own personal hell—he comes to claim us! For Christ truly never gives up on us—not you or me or Twelvie...certainly not in those final and for some, the most terrifying moments at the end.” And at the end of her letter, “On Holy Saturday I was actually complaining to [my husband] after reading Body and Soul how redemption happens in novels and I wished it could/ would happen in my life! And once again, for my own resurrection, I needed your keen and kind word for me to be able to recognize and acknowledge what God had already done in my life! Thank you.”

INTERPRETER OF MOLTmann

Earlier Christopher had in a similar way opened up to me the theology of Jurgen Moltmann. I was out of seminary before The Theology of Hope was published, but I bought it while at my first solo parish in Frederick, Maryland. I found it too much to digest in the midst of parish duties and wasn’t tempted to return until I had read Morse’s first book The Logic of Promise in Moltmann’s Theology in 1979.

By now I was pastor of Dumbarton Church in Georgetown where I preached an Advent sermon entitled “Adventus Dei”. I relied heavily on The Logic of Promise. Moltmann was now on my radar. Once again, Christopher was my interpreter. His essay “Jurgen Moltmann” in A Handbook of Christian Theologians, edited by Martin Marty and Dean Peerman, (1984) he locates Moltmann’s place among late 20th century theologians who lifted eschatology from the appendix of systematics to a central place as theology’s interpretive key. He lays out the essential arguments in Theology of Hope, The Crucified God, The Trinity & the Kingdom of God, The Church and the Power of the Holy Spirit. Morse lifts up a variety of themes and words in Moltmann’s eschatology that become central to Morse’s own views in later books: the Kingdom of God is at hand but not in hand, eschatologia crucis, God’s promise as presence, the crucified God, imminence, anticipation, promise, future.

Once again he helped me organize and connect a multitude of complex ideas from Moltmann into a coherent framework that was consistent with my understanding of Barth. I was well on my way toward organizing a theological system that made sense to me.

At the invitation of my friend and colleague Deryl Fleming, I developed a short term course on “The God of Hope” for the Ravensworth Baptist Church in Springfield, Virginia in 1986. I sought to lay out some of Moltmann’s basic views by looking at relevant biblical texts in four sessions:

1. Account for the Hope that Is Within You

2. Hope revealed in the God Who Comes

3. Hope Crucified and Raised

4. The Practice of Hope in the Community

I continued to use variations of this study in my own churches. I thought it a good way to introduce parishioners to my basic beliefs about God and the Christian life. As the years went by I gained confidence in these convictions that had been shaped mightly by my theological favorites: Barth, Moltmann and Morse.

Visitations from Professor Morse

Christopher was generous with his time and came to speak at my churches on several occasions. He came twice to Dumbarton Church in Georgetown in the late 70’s. At our annual June retreat he gave a two-part lecture on “Rachel’s Refusal”. Rachel “weeping for her children” in Matthew’s birth of Jesus narrative is a voice that needs to be heard along with angels and shepherds at the celebration as a reminder that grief and joy go together in the gospel accounts. There is a link between the Nativity and Good Friday. Rachel in her refusal of false comfort or easy explanation of suffering has an honored place in the Gospel. “In the darkness surrounding Rachel, just as much as in the light surrounding the natal star, the birthplace of Christ is revealed...In the godforsakenness of God’s own Son on the Cross...the promised hope for Rachel is embodied. By not believing any consolation short of God’s own descent into hell in Christ, the refusal becomes a faithful witness pointing to the Resurrection” (Not Every Spirit, 10-11).

As I remember, Rachel’s somber themes were not easy sell at that seaside event with children romping at the edges and sailboats beckoning the adult learners. But Morse’s thoughtfulness and warmth managed to hold their attention sufficiently. They returned for the second lecture. Early on Christopher was developing a theme that he wove throughout his writings and appeared in final version in Not Every Spirit, chapter one: “The Call to Faithful Disbelief”, as well as in other later chapters.

In the spring of 1983 Christopher lectured again at Dumbarton church on the Doctrine of the Trinity. This time in the church hall. It was an evening I’ve never forgotten. His explication of this ancient dogma was so clear and concise that I’ve referred to the manuscript many times for my own use and have shared it with students at Wesley Theological Seminary and candidates for ordination in the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

After a succinct account of the development of the doctrine with some classical explanations, he turns to the contemporary meaning of the Trinity where he is often at his best. First, he lays out the Social Trinity in understandable terms—that God’s being is relational, Tri-unity, co-existence. God is being one with another in the spirit of love and freedom. Therefore, if we are made in God’s image, true selfhood for us does not mean an ego in isolation from another but
A Sense of Humor

At this point, I want to comment on Christopher’s sense of humor. It was evident at the beginning of this lecture on the Trinity when he introduced his topic in a self-deprecating way, saying:

“About a year ago I was asked to speak on the same subject at Riverside Church in Manhattan for an adult group, and someone happened to have a tape recorder there. They sent a tape of my remarks to my mother in Virginia. The next time I was home we played it together. And she said, “Well it was a group of lay adult people like yourself.” And she said, “Now I honestly can’t see how that talk could have helped anybody.”

He went on to explain that a few months later he was asked to speak again on the Trinity at an Episcopal Church in Greenwich Village. At the beginning he told this story of about his mother’s reaction upon hearing the tape recording. When he finished the lecture he felt he’d done a better job. He thought, “I’ve probably succeeded in telling why the Trinity might possibly matter.” But when the moderator said, “Now, any questions?” A young man in the front row said, “Your mother was right.”

Christopher preached the Installation sermon when I was appointed to the University United Methodist Church in College Park, Maryland in 1987. The title “Out There On a Prayer” was taken from an interview in The Washington Post I had sent him with John Updike. In this interview Updike, who had written several novels about ministers, confessed to a certain “residual anger” toward them. “I mean,” he said, “ministers tend to be disappointing, by and large….You don’t have to turn water into wine, but you do ask that they profess what they’re being paid, after all, to profess….Ministers are interesting people in that they are sort of out there on a prayer, doing what they are being paid to do, they know not quite what. And nobody else does.” “Like writers,” he said, “but in some way perhaps more essential.”

Morse continued his sermon saying, “The occasion was the publication of Updike’s latest novel entitled Roger’s Version. It is about a Methodist minister who experiences “burn-out”, loses his faith, and becomes a seminary professor. (I find it a bit disconcerting that several of my former students phoned me immediately recommending that I especially read this book. I am still not sure why Tom thought I should have this clipping.)”

The Difference Morse Makes For the Church

In these years since my retirement from parish ministry in 2006 I have been teaching The Practice of Ministry and Mission at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. I also mentor provisional elders and deacons for the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Baltimore-Washington Conference. I see myself as a bridge person between church and academy. From this perspective, I see the great need for theologians, like Christopher Morse, who work in the academy but take seriously the mission of the church.

This need has become clear at several points in my current work. A frequent complaint I hear from Boards of Ordained Ministry is that too many candidates struggle mightily to give a coherent and compelling account of their own faith. And when asked to name major theologians who have influenced their personal theology, often they cannot name one.

I’m also alarmed by reports from new pastors about the content of preaching workshops offered as continuing education. Often it’s tips on how to improve your sermons. Use technology: power point your main points for easy following and project visuals to add punch to your messages. Or print a sermon quiz in the bulletin with fill-in-the-blank questions: “Jesus wants you to ________.” “The disciples were slow to realize that ______? We need to forget about exegesis and everything we’ve learned in seminary, because what people want to know is how to have a sizzling marriage, not how to make the Bible relevant to my life”.

All the more reason I am convinced of the need for good theologians who are excellent teachers. I am personally grateful for the influence of Christopher Morse in my theological development and career. When I think of all the other lives he has touched in his long teaching career, I am awed by the ever-widening impact he has had on the life of the church. I remember his words towards the end of that installation sermon “Out There On a Prayer” on the importance of the preaching ministry:

“Why is the Church’s ministry essential? Because it works? Because it succeeds? Because it knows what it’s all about? No. The ministry is essential because it has been prayed for. And that means you and me.

According to John’s Gospel it is Jesus who says to the Father in heaven:
Finally, I see Christopher’s impact on my current part-time teaching work. At Wesley Seminary I co-lead a colloquy for Student Pastors. They are part-time students serving as pastors of small, rural churches. They often feel swamped by the combination of parish duties and classroom assignments. They are learning ministry by the seat of their pants and are often overwhelmed by the emotional demands of their churches and by the intellectual demands of school. Our colloquy serves as a life-line. My co-leader, Kendall Soulen, is a member of the academic faculty, and together we remind them that they are not alone. We encourage them to help each other as colleagues and point them to resources for coping with each crisis they face.

One of our most important roles is to help them connect the dots between theory and practice. We try to help them develop biblical/theological lenses for viewing the world and all they face, both in the parish and the seminary. I am indebted to Christopher Morse for his role in my own theological formation which, in turn, has equipped me for this work with the next generation of church leaders. For this and for his abiding influence upon my long ministry of Word and Sacrament I am especially grateful.

Based on my experience with Christopher, it is staggering to consider the import of his entire career. Consider the many students he taught in his long career—probably numbering in the thousands—who themselves have become teachers, pastors, and church leaders. Then consider all the people they have influenced—exponentially, somewhere in the thousands. The impact he has had on the church in North America and beyond is indeed broad and deep. Christopher Morse has made a world of difference for the church and for me.

**Teacher of Teachers**

I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their [the disciples] word...that the world may know that thou hast loved them even as thou hast loved me’ (John 17:20,23b)

Today we are among those historically who have come to believe in Christ through the word and witness of those original disciples passed on to us through a long tradition. That means, for us and for our ministry Jesus himself has prayed.”

**Encourager of Pastors**

Morse’s abiding interest in keeping the academy connected to the church is evidenced by his commitment to keep his writing relevant to the practice of ministry and to keep on visiting churches. Even in my retirement years (from parish ministry) Christopher has been willing to speak to the clergy groups I lead in the Washington area. Since the publication of *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News*, he has come twice to talk about the book: first with my Pastor-Theologian group and more recently with my mentoring group of provisional elders in the Baltimore-Washington Conference. Each time he has impressed these pastors, veterans and rookies alike, with his utter respect for the preaching role and his great passion for the preaching task. “Something essential” about it, as Updike would say.

I expressed my thoughts about this encourager of pastors in my letter to him after his last visit:

Dear Christopher,

Thank you so much for coming to my mentoring group. I was pleased in every way. My concern about the ability of some to grasp the material and come up with good questions was unfounded. Starting with YuJung and going around the table they all came up with thoughtful questions. I was grateful for the respectful way you dealt with each question and questioner. You gave each one an opportunity to dialogue with you. I could tell by the feeling in the room they were engaged with careful listening, note-taking, laughing, speaking.

You’re in your element in these situations which I’ve had the privilege of witnessing several times now. A born teacher. But it’s not just teaching. It’s your investment in the work of teaching the gospel, expressed at times with great intensity and emotion as you recall holy moments with parishioners or students. What is especially moving to a group of new pastors is the way you convey the cruciality of their work. Everyone, including me, walked out of the church feeling gratitude for this difficult, sometimes under-appreciated vocation of ours. I could see it in their faces, esp. Braulio and YuJung. After all, they both wanted to take a selfie with you!

All the best, Tom
Testing the Spirits

Trevor Eppehimer

FOREWORD

Because I know that Christopher Morse is no fan of indulgent tributes or excessive sentimentality, I will keep these introductory remarks brief and restrained, except to say that learning from, working with, and befriending him have profoundly shaped me, both as a teacher of Christian theology and a person. At present my students at Hood Theological Seminary helpfully receive much of his wisdom and insights into the discipline of “dogmatic theology” through his influence on my thinking and approach to the same.

I first met Christopher Morse at Yale Divinity School while enrolled in an excellent course he offered there in spring 1997 on twentieth century Christian theology. Two years later I entered the doctoral program at Union Theological Seminary as his student in systematic theology, completing my dissertation under his helpful direction in 2006. He married my wife and me in 2003 and today my two children, Nicholas and Grace, refer to him affectionately as “Uncle Kit.”

I have read his excellent, one volume Christian dogmatics, Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief, well over twenty times, cover-to-cover. Although it is commonly recognized to be in the “canon” of recent introductions to Christian theology, there remains in that book a treasure trove of insights and methodological ingenuities that wait patiently for other theologians to encounter and critically engage in print. One of these is the vision of theological education Christopher puts forward in Not Every Spirit’s first three chapters. After being tasked to deliver the 2014 Closing Convocation address at Hood Theological Seminary, I decided to use the occasion to present that vision to the Seminary community the night before graduation exercises. What follows is the text of that address, given May 16, 2014.

1 John 4:1–4: Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ‘By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

“To love God, in the sense of placing trust and hope in the One identified in scriptural traditions and attested in the ongoing life of the church as the Lord, is at the same time to refuse to trust and hope in what the writers of scripture in their distinctive ways refer to as idols, false gods, false prophets, unclean spirits, or even as the Antichrist. Scripturally this refusal to give allegiance to that which is not of God is presented as a faithful act.”

TESTING THE SPIRITS

Congratulations. The day you’ve been waiting for is almost here. After a series of semesters spent studying for exams, writing papers, and preparing sermons, you are now some sixteen hours away from walking across that stage, shaking the president’s hand, and finally getting your hands on the diploma that at one time seemed very far out of reach.

In the weeks to come families and congregations will throw parties for you. If you come from a small town you may even get your name in the local newspaper. But at the very least you can always, in these days of electronic self-celebration, promote your Hood graduation yourself on your Facebook page.

But after the relatives from Georgia have driven away in their mini-vans, after the family parties and church receptions are over, and when that self-congratulatory Facebook post has become old news, what then? When the memory of this weekend begins to fade? When it’s just you and your diploma, hanging on the wall of your office, staring back at each another? When you begin to ask yourself, what was it all for—the time spent away from family studying ancient texts, pondering the ethical implications of the Gospel?

And what does it really mean to hold a theological degree anyway? What difference does having one make at the end of the day?

The best way to answer to these questions may be to ask, how have you changed as a result of the theological education you have received? Whether you realize it, you are different now than when you first stepped onto this campus some number of years ago. Something has been added to you that was not there before.

But what is it, exactly, that has been added? And, more importantly, to what end or for what purpose?

Let me start with what I think has not changed as a result of your having come to Hood.

First, I seriously doubt that acquiring a theological degree has brought you somehow “closer” to God. Augustine famously said that God is “closer to us than we are to ourselves.” Paul states in Acts that God is the one in whom we “live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). To be alive, in other words, is to be close to God. The moment we took our first breaths God was close and has been ever since, whether we knew it or not. The life changing moment for people of faith was not when God “came close” to them, but when they found themselves with the ability to recognize God’s steadfast presence in their lives and then decided to allow that presence to guide them from that point on. And you certainly didn’t need...
this army of PhDs assembled on this stage to tell you that. Any good preacher with a Bible could have done so.

Secondly, I don’t think it true that you now “know God” better than you did before, as a result, that is, of your theological studies. God, as the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber had to remind everyone at the beginning of the 20th century, is a subject, not an object. God, that is, is more like a person than a thing. Things, for instance, can be dispassionately studied, dissected, and scientifically examined—in a laboratory, under a microscope, or in a classroom. But to know a person—well, that requires personal encounter, one that takes place in the context of what Buber called an “I-Thou” relationship. Such a relationship is one for which a lecture, a textbook, a classroom discussion can never substitute. So, no, your theological education has not somehow granted you membership in an elite society whose members, by virtue of their education, “know God” better than everybody else. No matter how many letters come after your name, you are still going to have to wait for God to reveal God’s self to you if you are to know this One who is more like a person than a thing.

Third, I seriously doubt—in fact, I know—that the process of earning a theological degree has “saved” you. News flash: Graduate theological education has never “saved” anyone and never will. Tomorrow you will not acquire the powers to confer salvation upon yourself or anyone else. That is because salvation comes by way of grace, not education and no exception will be made in your case. And on judgment day, if Matthew 25 is to be believed, the question the Son of Man will ask you is not whether or where you went to Seminary, what grades you received while there, but whether you took care of the least of these in society as best you could.

So I’m confident you were (1) close to God, (2) in relationship with God, and (3) probably “saved” before you came to Seminary. But what you might not have been able to do before is what the writer of 1 John refers to as “testing the spirits.” Let’s hear from our text once more:

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

**Test the spirits to see whether they are from God.**

What “spirits” is the writer talking about exactly?

Well, what the writer does not have in mind is some kind of hyper-transcendent “spirit dimension” now taking place over our heads, outside the dimensions of time and space. Notice that the writer draws a connection between these “spirits” that require testing and the fact that, as he puts it, “many false prophets have gone out into the world.” This connection is what makes these spirits and their testing very much a time and space issue. Christopher Morse in his book *Not Every Spirit* has it right when he argues that we should understand these “spirits” to refer to human claims made about, and in the name of, God.

**Spirits as human claims made about and in the name of God.**

We live, of course, in an age where more people than ever are saying stuff about God and in the name of God. Fifty years ago, however, the “experts” were telling us that it was not going to be this way. Back in the 1960s sociologists of religion were predicting that secular worldviews were fast on their way to eclipsing theological ones and that progress in science and technology would hasten religion’s delayed departure from the world.

One of the great surprises of the 21st century, however, has been that great technological and scientific advances have been met not with religion’s diminishing but with its explosion, albeit in new forms and expressions. Accordingly, the challenge now before us may not be, as many would have us believe, the growth of unbelief, of atheism, but rather the growth of too much belief, too much religion, and too many people claiming the right to speak about and for God—not necessarily a good thing, given the kinds of crazy stuff people are believing and saying about God and in the name of God these days.

In a way we may now be closer than ever to the world from which our text this evening came, where the problem the writer had to deal with was not trying to get people to believe in God, but to get them to think in responsible ways about God and to be able to discern and name bad theology—bad talk about God—when it reared its head. For this reason—and I think the writer of 1 John would certainly agree—theologically trained persons, such as yourselves, have become more important—and more necessary—than perhaps ever before.

But before we get charged up to test the spirits, or the theological claims, made by those who do not identify with the Christian faith—“Nones,” New-Agers, Muslims, or whomever—we first need to read 1 John in its entirety. There you will see that the “false prophets” who have gone out into the world are not adherents to non-Christian belief systems. They are, instead, members of the very Christian community to which the writer belongs. Persons who also claim to be saved by way of Jesus Christ and his Spirit. Persons who regard the Gospel of John as highly as the writer does. And it is here the call to “test the spirits” gets interesting: How do you test the spirits, the theological claims, made by someone who might be a member of your own faith community, who reads the same Bible, recites the same creeds, and prays the same prayers that you do?

But wait. Doesn’t being a member of a church, a regular reader of the Bible, a teacher of Sunday School, a dedicated lay leader, somehow grant you immunity from bad theology?

Judging from your facial expressions, I’m guessing that many of you have been around long enough to know that this, unfortunately, is not the case. Like me, you too have heard too many bad, theologically irresponsible sermons. You too

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4 Morse, 8.

have stood by in disbelief as people project their own norms and values onto God and then demand that others worship that projection as God. You too have seen church people use Scripture as a weapon to protect and preserve their power rather than as a means of grace for the world. You too have seen the outwardly pious attempt to conceal their personal agendas by claiming the testimony of the Spirit to legitimate their cause and/or to demonize those who disagree with them.

The biggest threat to Christianity, the writer of 1 John tells us, may very well be an internal rather than an external one and I fear he is right.

Unfortunately, our ability to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God” has been made more difficult by a very modern approach to the Christian faith that has reduced it to a series of propositional truth statements to which a person must will him or herself to assent. Do you believe in the Virgin Birth? Check. In literal, bodily resurrection? Check. In the total inerrancy of the scriptures? Check. In substitution atonement theory? Check. In the miracles of Jesus? Check.

If the Christian faith were only that simple. If only it were as easy as agreeing to the truth of a set number of propositions on a piece of paper.

What I hope you have learned at Hood is that the Christian faith involves a great deal more than believing certain things about Jesus and about the Bible. As the writer of the book of James states, there is little to distinguish this kind of faith from that of the demons (Jas 2:19) who too can assent to a number of Christian propositional truth statements, written down on a piece of paper. No, what I hope you have learned at Hood is that faith is not a matter of believing certain things about Jesus, but of putting your whole trust in him, the one through whom God is working to heal, redeem, and transform the created order. And I hope you have also learned that the authority of Scripture resides not in its inerrancy, but in the fact that it contains the Gospel, or God’s word of promise to the creation—and thus to you as well, as an integral part of that creation.

A careful reader of the Bible will also notice that its writers are much more concerned with the problem of idolatry, or bad theology—the testing of the spirits—than they are with the problem of atheism, or the absence of belief altogether. When Jesus encounters Satan in the wilderness, for instance, Satan tries to deceive him by proof texting scripture (Luke 4:9–10): Paul’s opponents are not people who are trying to get those in church to stop believing; rather, they are, like Paul, fellow Jewish adherents to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Read his letters carefully: Paul’s struggle with these persons is not about modern questions such as “Does God exist?” His debates with them center, rather, on how best to interpret Scripture in light of the fact that God has raised Jesus from the dead. On how best to test the spirits.

And when the time comes for you to test the spirits, how will you discern, as Jesus did in the wilderness, the difference between a proof text and a responsible use of Scripture? When the time comes, how will you, like Paul in Galatia, stand up and demand that the Church conform itself to the Gospel, rather than the Gospel to the Church?

In 1933 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a short statement paper entitled, “What Should the Student of Theology Do Today?” Nowhere in this paper did Bonhoeffer say anything about building new fellowship halls, getting congregations to tithe more, tailoring sermons and liturgies to reach younger age demographics, or learning from corporate CEOs how to run an effective church. Instead, Bonhoeffer wrote “that the student [of theology] should prepare, through studies, to test the spirits in the church of Christ.”

In Bonhoeffer’s Germany, “testing the spirits” or the theological claims of other Christians, became not just an academic exercise but quite literally a matter of life and death. Many preachers, youth ministers, bishops, and lay leaders of the time were developing and proclaiming a theology that idolatrously merged German culture with Christian culture and Nazi political philosophy with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Too few pastors at the time were sufficiently trained, Bonhoeffer realized, to “test” these “spirits” in the churches. As a result, the one institution powerful enough at the time to have awakened the German people to the emergent evil among them, to the evil that was disguising itself as good, to the dangerous political ideology masquerading as faithful theology, fell asleep at its post and allowed the gates of hell to prevail.

An inability to test the spirits prevented many Christians in this country from recognizing that segregation and Jim Crow were contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thank God that the spirit testers of the Black Church kept the power and promise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ alive during this time. But what about those who failed to test, who could not tell the difference between the authentic Gospel and the “gospel” of white racism? If they had received theological training, how and why did it fail them? Why could they not draw from it and apply it when faithfulness in that particular time and place called for them to do so?

And more to the point: What will prevent you from falling down on the job and failing to bear witness to the Gospel when the situations that await you call for you to do so? What are the tests that await you in your churches, in your ministries once you leave this Seminary with your degree in hand? Will you be ready?

One of my favorite movies growing up was *The Karate Kid*. The best part of that film was Pat Morita’s memorable way of training Ralph Macchio karate. Remember how he made Macchio come to his house each day and do manual labor, using very deliberate, specific techniques and movements? Paint the fence! Sand the floor! Wax on, wax off! After a week of this, his muscles sore, his back tired, and his face sun-burned, Macchio is ready to quit, seeing no practical value in anything he has been doing. Finally, when he has had enough, he tells Pat Morita that he is quitting, that he is through doing what seems to him to have been pointless hours of manual labor.

In that film’s great epiphanic moment, Morita reveals to him that the work he has been putting Macchio through was not in vain. That what he thought was

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6 Morse, 52.


8 Morse, 37.
pointless labor was unknowingly training him, through muscle memory, in basic karate techniques.

It may not yet be entirely clear to you why Drs. Mbuwayesango and Trick were so hard on your exegesis papers. Why Dr. Turner was so insistent that you understand how people in the 19th century used the Bible to justify slavery. Why Dr. Mobley wanted you to see the often undetected social and cultural forces at work in human religion. Why Drs. Crumpton and Lattimore kept throwing pastoral care and counseling hypotheticals and case studies at you. Why Dr. Resner would bang his head against the wall when you allegorized your preaching text. Why Dr. Love wanted you to view Christian education from a learner’s, not a teacher’s, perspective. Why Dr. Young kept lecturing about this thing called “orthopraxis.” They did all of this to get you ready, perhaps unbeknownst to you, to test the spirits to see whether they are from God.

And it was for this reason, I believe, that God brought you to Seminary. Not to grow closer to God. Not to know God better. Not to get saved. But to prepare you to test the spirits—the things said about and in the name of God—in the churches. And it is for this purpose that those of us on this stage now send you out back again into the church tomorrow, degree in hand, to hold it accountable to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For many false prophets have gone out into the world.
Amen.
Tribute to Dr. Christopher L. Morse

Larry R. Hayward

March 5, 2014

A recent article in The Christian Century featured “stunt pastors” who “use unorthodox means to draw attention to [their] message.” Such pastors

… have challenged congregants to have sex (with their spouse) for 30 days straight or have dressed like homeless people or lived in a tiny box or on a roof to gin up attention, attendance or funds….

The writer explains:

The rise of the entertainment industry, combined with a focus on marketing techniques to preach the faith or build up a church, has sparked a penchant for ministry gimmicks that go well beyond the old dunk tank.1

Reading this article, I was reminded of novelist Marilynne Robinson’s lament over

…the rise in this country of a culture of Christianity that does not encourage thought. I intend this as a criticism [she said], not only of the so-called fundamentalists but, more particularly, of the mainline churches, which have fairly assiduously culled out all traces of the depth and learnedness that were for so long among their greatest contributions to American life.2

While there are many stones on which to step between “stunt pastors” and “a culture of Christianity that does not encourage thought,” pressure against thoughtfulness has deep roots in American culture, particularly American religion. In 1962, the historian Richard Hofstadter wrote that as American society expanded westward, religion became both voluntary and pragmatic. As a result,

…the work of the minister tended to be judged by his success in a single area—the saving of souls in measurable numbers. The local

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minister was judged either by his charismatic powers or by his abil-
ity to prepare the congregation for the preaching of some itinerant
ministerial charmer who would really awaken its members. The “star”
system prevailed in religion before it reached the theatre...The Puritan
ideal of the minister as an intellectual and educational leader was
steadily weakened in the face of the evangelical ideal of the minister
as a popular crusader and exhorter...In considerable measure the
churches withdrew from intellectual encounters with the secular world
[and] gave up the idea that religion is part of the whole life of intel-
lectual experience...By 1853 an outstanding clergyman complained
that there was “an impression, somewhat general, that an intellectual
clergyman is deficient in piety, and that an eminently pious minister is
deficient in intellect.”

To his credit and to the benefit of the Christian church, Christopher Morse
taught in such a way that his students who became pastors were inspired and
trained to offer an alternative to this deeply-rooted historical pressure.

I.

I grew up in a suburb of Memphis, Tennessee, in which life revolved around
school, sports, and the small Presbyterian Church my family and I attended. The
church provided a warm, nurturing, “family-like” atmosphere in which people
knew one another, attended church camp and youth fellowship together, and
genuinely cared for one another in times of need.

During that period—the 1960s—while my parents were kind, gentle, and
fair minded, many of their friends were fearful of, resistant to, and angry about the
Civil Rights Movement. Some were overt racists. I remembered the vestiges of
segregation, such as signs on public restrooms delineating “Colored” and “White”;
restaurant owners refusing to serve African-Americans; and notices posted in es-
tablishments announcing the owners’ right to refuse service to anyone the owners
[and] gave up the idea that religion is part of the whole life of intel-
lectual experience...By 1853 an outstanding clergyman complained
that there was “an impression, somewhat general, that an intellectual
clergyman is deficient in piety, and that an eminently pious minister is
deficient in intellect.”

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed in my hometown I was
thirteen years old. The minister of our church, which was all white, was a gentle,
non-confrontational man about my parents’ age. The Sunday after Dr. King was
assassinated he stood in the pulpit and said:

I had planned to join my fellow clergy for a march in support of striking
sanitation workers. But what was to be a protest march turned into

He then sat down. At that moment, the nascent yearning I had for “a bet-
ter way” began to recognize its source in the Presbyterian Church in which I had
worshipped all my brief life.

That event led me to a deep involvement with the church, primarily through
my local presbytery and the denomination of which we were part—the Presby-
trian Church in the United States. I became active on a mission committee and
youth council of the presbytery. I attended summer conferences at the denomina-
tional conference center in Montreat, North Carolina. I was exposed to African-
American Presbyterian youth as well as to nationally known African American
preachers, such as Reverend Joseph Roberts, who later succeeded Dr. Martin
Luther King, Sr., as Pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

While that which initially energized me were the more open and accepting
attitudes on race I encountered in the church, I was soon exposed to another as-
pect of my Presbyterian heritage—“the life of the mind.” In addition to perceiving
myself as “different” on the race issue, I also perceived myself as “different” from
most of my youthful peers in that the faith they espoused placed a strong empha-
sis on religious conversion, literal interpretation of scripture, and personal piety.
The same conferences that exposed me to racial acceptance exposed me as well to
preachers and teachers who affirmed the historical-critical method, who read scrip-
ture in conjunction with literature and current events, and who spoke as much to
my developing mind as to my heart. While it was courageous stands on race
and civil rights that caught my attention and invited me deeper into my religious
tradition, it was the appreciation of that tradition for learning—both religious and
secular—that kept me engaged as well.

I attended college at a nearby university. I majored in history. I wrote a
thesis on a local episode of the Fundamentalist Modernist controversy. I im-
mersed myself in American intellectual history and took courses in philosophy,
Shakespeare, Chaucer, the classics, Greek, Greek and Roman mythology, the
Bible, and American literature. All the while I was active in a local Presbyterian
Church whose pastor exposed me to Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer.

The pull of ministry became great. In the summer prior to my senior year I
decided to answer what I believed was a call to the ministry. While I was aware
that mainline churches were both in turmoil and shrinking, and that theology
and biblical studies seemed to be both declining from their former heights within
the cultural conversation and in internal disarray, I also believed that there could
be life in the tradition that had produced the theologians I was reading. Even as
a college senior, I felt I would likely serve as a pastor in the south. In order to
bring perspective to such service, and to find the richest theological life I could, I
decided to “head east” for seminary. I looked at Harvard, Yale, and Union in New

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3 Richard Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life (New York: Random House,
1962), 86–87. The quote comes from Bela Bates Edwards, “Influence of Eminent Piety on the Intel-
Christopher aligned each of these with scriptural references. He stressed that the name “Jesus Christ” refers to these as a whole and that when we say, “I believe in Jesus Christ,” we are saying that we believe in the totality of who Christ was, is, and shall be in his life and destiny.

Over the years, that schema helped me become clearer about my own understanding of Christian faith, specifically of the identity and purpose of Jesus Christ. I used variations of it in teaching adults, confirmands, new members, and church officers. What I came to emphasize were two related ideas:

• Each of us has an initial attraction to Jesus Christ based on one or two of these entry points, and

• Our challenge is to expand from our entry point to encompass within our faith as many of the aspects of “Jesus Christ” as we can hold in our hearts and minds and embody in our lives.

Thus, I taught if a person is initially attracted to Jesus Christ because of a strong spiritual or sacramental experience, the challenge is to relate the reality of that experience to Jesus’ earthly life. If a person is initially attracted to Jesus Christ because of his teaching or deeds, the challenge is to relate what Jesus did in time to his origins with God before time. This schema served as a useful way of helping individuals who were members of the church or considering membership—some even considering baptism and profession of faith—to move from one aspect of Christ’s life—for example, his obvious and deep concern for the poor and oppressed—to other aspects of his life—such as his eschatological promises. This schema helped members of churches I have served to relate to one another across theological divisions they sometimes had, especially once they connected the priorities within their own faith to the aspects of “Jesus Christ” behind their priorities and were able to see similar connections within others. This schema was particularly helpful in encouraging—through preaching and teaching—members of my churches to be less dismissive of—and even become more open to—the apocalyptic literature of the New Testament—most notably the Book of Revelation—so often ignored by mainline Protestants and left to more evangelical and

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4 Only recently in a conversation with Christopher did I learn that his schema originated with Reginald Fuller, something Christopher perhaps told us during its presentation, but something that eluded the handwritten notes I took during the lecture and used for over two decades.
fundamentalist churches. All these benefits flowed directly from the teaching of Christopher Morse.

III.

A second course I took from Christopher that has had a continuing influence on me was a seminar he offered on the early writings of Karl Barth. What most helped me in this course was to connect the passion, existentialism, and sheer liveliness of Barth’s writing—especially in the correspondence with Eduard Thurneysen and in The Commentary on Romans—to similar intensity and passion I had experienced in reading Kierkegaard the summer before my first semester in seminary.

Reading Barth is never a completed task. For those who are able to stick with it, his ideas and images often have immediate impact (like poetry) and long term effect (like philosophy). Handwritten notes I made on the pages of the with it, his ideas and images often have immediate impact (like poetry) and long term effect (like philosophy). Handwritten notes I made on the pages of the Commentary to Romans 12:9–15. The introduction is titled “Positive Possibilities.” It reads:

The phrase ‘Positive Ethics’ means that volition and action which constitute a negation of the form of this world (xii. 2), a behaviour which contradicts its erotic course, and protest against its great error. Properly speaking, ‘Positive Ethics’ belong only to the volition and action of God. Absolute, positive, ethical, human volition and action which genuinely protest against it, lie beyond our knowledge. We do, however, know a relative positive human behaviour which, although it belongs to the human possibilities of this world, and although it is marked—as, indeed, all human possibilities are marked—by the form of this world, nevertheless possesses, even in its present form, by virtue of the imperishable and primary constitution of the universe, a parabolic capacity, a tendency towards protest, an inclination to enmity against EROS. We must, however, be careful how we express this. We may find it easier to regard some kinds of human behaviour as being more pregnant with parabolic significance than others. We may, for example, choose love rather than hatred. Certain particular human possibilities may appear to be more closely related to the divine disturbance and transformation than others are. It may seem to us more probable that we should attain to that ‘sacrifice’, that demonstration to the honour of god within the framework of a particular series of concrete actions: more probable, that is to say, that we should be able to fulfill the four commandments written on the first ‘Table’, if we do so having first fulfilled the commandments written on the second ‘Table’. But when we say ‘easier’, ‘more closely’, ‘more probable’, we mean that the ethical necessity even of these particular kinds of human conduct does not lie in their ‘matter’—for materially they belong to this world—but in their ‘form’, that is to say, in their Primal Origin, the Oneness of the subject of the action. The possibility that from time to time God may be honoured in concrete human behaviour which contradicts the commandments of the second Table must therefore be left open.6

When Barth writes that positive ethics “belong only to the volition and action of God,” his affirmation is consistent with my Calvinist sense that any understanding we have of good and evil, right and wrong, indeed of God, is limited. I resonate with Barth’s statement that “absolute, positive, ethical, human volition and action…lie beyond our knowledge.” As a pastor, I stand with members of my church who struggle with the same joys and sorrows, successes and failures in personal and family life with which I struggle and who face enormously complex working lives in the worlds of business, law, social work, teaching, military service, diplomacy, and national politics. In my opinion, the instances in which any of us is able to find “absolute, positive, ethical human volition and action” are limited at best.

Barth goes on to say:

We do, however, know a relative positive human behaviour which, although it belongs to the human possibilities of this world, and although it is marked—as, indeed, all human possibilities are marked—by the form of this world, nevertheless possesses, even in its present form, by virtue of the imperishable and primary constitution of the universe, a parabolic capacity, a tendency towards protest, an inclination to enmity against EROS.

Barth acknowledges that despite the limits of “absolute, positive, ethical, human…action,” we are able to take positive action that is “relative” and “parabolic.” He then immediately says, as I believe he should: “We must, however, be careful how we express this.” Barth then becomes even more daring:

We may find it easier to regard some kinds of human behaviour as being more pregnant with parabolic significance than others. It may seem to us more probable that we should…honour…god within the framework of a particular series of concrete actions: more probable, that is to say, that we should be able to fulfill the four commandments.

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5 Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, translated from the Sixth Edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933)

6 Barth, Romans. Italics are Barth’s.
written on the first ‘Table’, if we do so having first fulfilled the commandments written on the second ‘Table’.

Barth is saying that it is more likely that we will assume that we are closer to following the will of God when following the final six of the Ten Commandments—dealing with our life in the world—as the way we honor God and thus meet the demands of the first four commandments. But, Barth says, at the conclusion of his statement:

The possibility that from time to time God may be honoured in concrete human behaviour which contradicts the commandments of the second Table must therefore be left open.7

This final sentence, and the paragraph that leads to it, have been eye-opening to me on several fronts as an individual Christian and as a parish minister. Certainly, people in the parish, myself included, find relief in the idea that some of our “behaviours” might be more “parabolically” close to the will of God than others. As a pastor in a denomination in which understandings of sexual orientation, attitudes about marriage and divorce, and norms about sexual behavior and its relationship to marriage have been changing during my lifetime, the idea that one could be “honoring” God even if one violates or accepts violation of one of the commandments of the “Second Table” is thought-provoking. In addition, as a pastor who has served a congregation in which many people work in the arenas of military service, defense, national security, and diplomacy, this possibility is hopeful and challenging. It opens the door to ethical decision-making that may initially contradict moral and religious absolutes yet ultimately prove to be responsible. This is life-giving to many, given the complex moral choices they face in specific situations with restraints concerning time and options.

Barth links the validity of such “violations” to “their source in the Primal Origin”:

…the ethical necessity even of these particular kinds of human conduct does not lie in their ‘matter’—for materially they belong to this world—but in their ‘form’, that is to say, in their Primal Origin, the Oneness of the subject of the action.

Even while Barth cautions, “We must, however, be careful how we express this,” the freedom he gives people to seek to honor God by making the most positive ethical decisions they are able to make from a limited set of options in a limited amount of time can lead them to rely on their faith, their prayers, their relationships with others in their Christian community, the theological preaching and teaching within their heritage, and their consciences in ways that are deep and profound.

Like many teachers, Christopher Morse may never have known the power he was unleashing by exposing his students to this and other such passages. He may, in fact, have never discussed this passage in any class over the years. He may never even have noticed it himself, just as I did not notice it until twenty years or so after I first read it. But such is the power of the kind of teacher he was and is: thorough, patient, pastoral with his students, sowing seeds that bear fruit beyond his wildest imagination, serving as a counter to “a culture of Christianity that does not encourage thought.” For his being my teacher and friend, I am grateful to God.

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7 Ibid.
Sed Contra, Ergo, Responsio: Honoring the Legacy of Christopher Morse as a Teacher of Christian Theology

Daniel Spencer and Mary Beth Walsh

Written for the USQR Festschrift for Christopher Morse March 31, 2014

In the fall of 1991, with two years of course work toward our doctoral studies completed, we began two years of work as UTS Tutors for Professors Christopher Morse and James Cone in the introductory theology sequence of ST103 and ST104. To say this experience was formative would be an understatement. A central component of Christopher’s ST104 course, Foundations of Christian Theology, was gaining skills in theological argumentation in order to demonstrate how Christian doctrines can be applied to contemporary issues. Generations of Union students developed this skill through writing Utrum essays. In this exercise Christopher adapted the steps of “theological dialectic” set forth by Thomas Aquinas in the Summa Theologiae. We were lucky to be working with Christopher as he was completing his seminal work, Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief, and enjoyed applying the Utrum form to the foundational theological claims. In Not Every Spirit Christopher states, “The purpose of this exercise is to develop the complementary skills in addition to doing scriptural exegesis and historical exposition required for what is called “dialectic,” meaning here the pros and cons of argument involved in adjudicating disputed issues, a task of dogmatic theology as a “testing of the spirits.”” Reading dozens of Utrum essays and watching Christopher demonstrate this skill in many classes over two semesters of tutoring ST104 shaped our own theological method profoundly. Learning to examine contemporary theological and ethical issues through the Utrum format remains one of the most important intellectual and academic skills we gained in our doctoral programs at Union.

When we were approached individually to contribute to a volume honoring Christopher and his career we responded enthusiastically “Yes!” Given our joint work together as tutors with Christopher we thought it appropriate to coauthor an essay for this festschrift by choosing two contemporary issues central to our own current work and using the Utrum format to examine them and develop our own positions. That is what follows in the two sections below.


Mary Beth (M.B.) Walsh wrote her doctoral dissertation under Christopher’s mentorship reclaiming the ecclesiological image of body of Christ from a feminist liberationist perspective. Since her younger son Ben’s diagnosis of Autism at age two, M.B. has devoted considerable time to addressing theological issues related to autism, and particularly the participation of persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders [ASDs] in the church. She believes to this day that she would never have completed her doctoral work without Christopher’s support. In the midst of her doctoral program, after the dissertation proposal was approved, but before she began writing, she gave birth to her older son. Very little work on the dissertation took place that first year of sleepless nights and infant care. Returning to Union to register for the semester, and needing her advisor, Christopher’s signature on her registration card, she sheepishly confessed to Christopher that she had made virtually no progress on writing her dissertation. Christopher said to her, “Oh, M.B., don’t worry about that! The work you are doing now is so much more important. And when you return to writing theology, the theology will be better on account of the work you do now.” Her essay below is a modest attempt to bear witness to the truth of Christopher’s advice.

Dan Spencer wrote his M.Div. thesis under Christopher’s supervision on the hermeneutics of John Howard Yoder, with particular reference to Yoder’s book, The Politics of Jesus. His doctoral work in ethics drew on feminist, gay and lesbian, and Latin American liberation theologies to develop a Christian ecological ethic of sustainability and justice. More recently he has been examining issues of climate change and social inequality in the context of globalization. His essay below addresses arguments from some Christians that we do not need to address climate change because we can trust in God’s providence to maintain and sustain the earth and human wellbeing.

Utrum #1: Christian Liturgy and Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

[Utrum] Whether it is the case that Christian liturgical celebrations should welcome individuals with behavior disorders, such as Autism Spectrum Disorders [ASDs], regardless of whether their behaviors may disrupt the celebration or prove distracting to others in the congregation.

[Videtur] It seems to be the case that churches (Christian communities) have an obligation to assure that worship services proceed with reverence, decorum, and minimal distractions so that those who are called out to gather together and offer thanksgiving to God are able to do so. Scripture testifies that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”(Prov. 9:10) and this affirmation, repeated in the Psalms, grounds the orientation of Christian worship. Approaching the Holy One with due reverence and respect is the embodiment of this affirmation that recognition be given to the vast difference between creature and Creator. The Psalmist is more explicit
Scripture testifies that Jesus told his friends, “That when two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Mt. 18:20) When Christians gather to give thanks to God through sharing the word and Eucharist, they form, though not through their own power or volition, the body of Christ. We know, as Paul writes, that “in the one Spirit we were all baptized into the one body” (1Cor. 12:13) and it is not possible to exclude any members and still claim to be the body of Christ, for as Paul says, “the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you”. (1Cor. 12:21) The corporate character of the faith community that claims to be the body of Christ necessitates inclusion of all the baptized.

The creedal mark of the church as “one” can only be satisfied with the inclusion of all who approach the table. Through the Eucharist, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, the church has historically claimed to be one despite the evident lack of unity in polity and parish. This faith claim, which Christians cling to despite ample evidence to the contrary, is given some measure of objective validity when the community gathering includes all who come. Chastened though we must be by the many ways Christians betray this claim, including those with ASDs and other neurological and behavior disorders allows our congregations a small measure of affirmation of our claim that the church is one. Including and welcoming those with behaviors that may be disruptive breathes life into the profession of the oneness of the church in Christ.

Some individuals with ASDs may find it challenging to sit quietly during a typical Sunday service. Some individuals with ASDs will feel the need to move around, or will make vocalizations, or may engage in stereotypical movements such as flapping their hands or tapping feet. An empathetic response to these behaviors must be grounded in the recognition that it is no simple matter to assign intention to any of these behaviors. Indeed, the very designation of ASDs as “behavior disorders” suggest as much. When the behaviors are the result of the disability then how responsible is the person engaging in the behavior for them? Generally we refrain from blaming people who use wheelchairs for not being able to get up the stairs. Most would be horrified if their church said to someone who uses a wheel chair, “well, too bad you use that chair and can’t get up the stairs, find a way to make sure that worship is attentive to the needs of the community as a whole. This sort of attention to the greater good is clearly seen in church architecture when sanctuaries include “crying rooms” available to parents of infants prone to noisy and unpredictable outbursts. Beyond that, many congregations make their expectations known to individuals who make noise, including babies, through stares or angry glances. These of course, are not the most charitable ways to respond and while they should never be condoned, nonetheless speak to the needs of the congregation as a whole for an ordered and decorous service.

[Sed contra] On the other hand, churches have an obligation to welcome those with behavior disorders like ASD, or other intellectual and developmental disabilities, who may not be able to sit quietly or keep all their limbs still during services because Christian worship is incomplete unless open to all who are baptized and called out by faith to gather and give thanks to God.

The tradition of Christian worship is long and varied by both denomination and location. Yet all recognize the importance of hearing the Word of God and the value of moments of reverential silence. Periods of silence are commonly observed during the Penitential Rites, following the sermon or homily, and after communion. A quiet and decorous congregation is better able to apprehend the Word of God in both scripture and preaching in its full force and meaning for today. The General Instructions on the Roman Missal of the Roman Catholic Church admonish that “all must listen with reverence to the readings from God’s word, for they make up an element of greatest importance in the Liturgy.” (GIRM, 29:2011) The behaviors of some individuals with ASDs may make it very difficult for worship services to conform to these historically valued norms. Few, but some, individuals with behavior disorders such as ASD may find it impossible to remain still during services. Others may not be able to fully suppress their vocalizations during required periods of silence in worship. Stereotypic movements that are typical of ASDs such as repetitive movement of the hands or arms, or more challenging, self-injurious behaviors like hitting oneself in the head with a hand, are notoriously hard to eliminate from the behavioral repertoires of some individuals with autism. When these behaviors result in the production of sounds and noise, it may sadly not be possible to include such individuals in worship celebrations that require periods of silence.

In addition to the dictates of scripture and tradition, the needs of the whole worship community must be taken into account. We are called out for worship as church communally; one cannot “be church” in isolation. Because we come together by virtue of our identification as followers of Jesus, communities need to
otherwise we’d love for you to join us.” And yet, how is it different when we say to individuals with autism, “if only you could stay in your pew and sit quietly and still, then we’d be happy to welcome you.” While people with physical disabilities no longer face blame for their disabilities, the same cannot be said for those with neurologically based intellectual and developmental disabilities [I/DD], such as ASD. Churches have an obligation to educate themselves about developmental disorders and to refrain from blaming or punishing by exclusion those who cannot stop themselves from making noise, or moving around during services.

Given the prevalence of ASDs, which are now estimated by the Centers for Disease Control to affect as many as 1 in 68 children, 2 Christian faith communities cannot afford to exclude their families and supporters. As our church communities continue to struggle for relevance in an increasingly secular society, it would be foolish indeed to overlook the evangelical dimensions of including even those whom it may be challenging to include. A national study on living with autism found that fewer than 20% of families of children with autism felt that they had strong ties to their religious communities, while almost 40% of parents of typically developing kids reported strong ties. 3 Including individuals with ASDs and their families must be understood as both a means of meeting the needs of people longing for community and also bearing witness to the Gospel as revealed in Jesus Christ. Inclusive communities reflect the inclusive mission and ministry of Jesus that always extended welcome to those on the margins and admonished all to, “let the little children come to me.” (Mt. 19:14)

[Responsio] I respond that churches must work to welcome and include individuals with developmental, neurological, and behavior disorders in their communities and worship.

[Ergo] Hence, churches have an obligation to work at becoming inclusive communities where all are truly welcomed and valued.

A pastor friend once told me with excitement that a family with a young adolescent with autism had recently joined their congregation. The pastor was so proud of her congregation because when the teen with autism got out of his seat, and stood next to the pastor as she read the Gospel from the pulpit, the congregation was okay with that. They welcomed this family, and this young person, regardless of his behaviors and how those behaviors might have disrupted their planned worship. I’ve struggled with this story since first hearing it. While I do genuinely appreciate the inclusivity of the congregation, as the parent of a teenager with autism I feel a responsibility to look at the situation from the perspective of the individual with autism and ask, does this sort of inclusion best serve his needs? Will he be able to appreciate his gifts if they feel they must always make exceptions for his behavior? Will he be happier, in the long run, wandering around the sanctuary alone during services, or sitting with others as a member of the congregation? And most critically, is he capable of learning to sit when others sit and stand when others stand?

Parenting is hard work, and parenting a child with autism is to typical parenting precisely what extreme sports are to sports in general. If extreme sports are seen to involve a high level of difficulty and risk, spectacular stunts, and excitement, then I hold that it is fair to call parenting a child with autism, extreme parenting. Parenting a child with autism is extreme parenting because of the very nature of autism. Autism makes learning hard, and learning is in essence the acquisition of new behaviors. So, I have learned to observe my son’s behaviors and ask not just is this okay here and now, but how will this behavior look in 5 years? In 20? Behaviors that others are willing to overlook in a child or young adolescent can be perceived as dangerous in adults. Pushing others out of the way to rush to the front of the line may be cute in a three year old, annoying in a 13 year-old, and a downright danger to others at 23 years old. Parents of individuals with ASDs need to figure out ways to teach our children to be members of communities, how best to live in the world, how to make sure they will go on being included after we are no longer with them to facilitate their inclusion.

The challenge of the “anything goes” sort of welcome is that it overlooks the ability of individuals with ASDs to learn. The reason I use the phrase “individuals with autism” or people with autism here is to underscore that they are not “autistics” before they are people. Highlighting the humanity of individuals with autism is intended to point out that as human beings, people with autism are capable of learning. The challenges of autism largely adhere to the fact that it is so little understood. With no blood tests or brain scans that can form the basis for diagnosis, medicine bases diagnoses solely on observed behaviors, our crudest tool for identifying a condition. Additionally, the criteria for the observed behaviors and the language that medicine uses to describe and diagnose autism spectrum disorder(s) changes with frequency, often several times within a generation. 4

Lack of understanding of what autism is results in parents and caregivers being faced with a wide variety of options for intervention and treatment. Truly effective intervention and teaching is expensive and hard to access. In the absence of effective intervention some families will adopt any method that works for them to support and include their loved one with autism. This can result in difficulties for congregations5 but true inclusivity is never simply the function of a community on behalf of individuals who might be challenging to include; inclusion only occurs when communities and individuals work together toward common goals. It is simple.

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4 The American Psychiatric Association publishes the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which contains the standard definitional criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) used in the United States. The definition of autism has changed and been significantly expanded over the past 30 years through various revisions of the DSM. What may have been labeled “learning disabilities” 30 years ago, was diagnosed as “Asperger Syndrome” twenty years ago, and would simply be called “autism spectrum disorder” today.

5 In 2008 a church in Minnesota sought a restraining order against a 13 year-old with ASD.
ply a false dichotomy to separate out the needs of the individual versus the needs of the community. There is no community without the individuals who show up at the table of the Lord.

Individuals with autism are best served when welcomed and included, and respected as people able to learn, to acquire new behaviors, and to contribute. It is entirely possible to teach someone how to attend church. Shaping of behaviors so that over time the behaviors become less disruptive will be in almost all cases quite possible. Families of individuals with disruptive behaviors need to reach out to parish staff and communicate how important it is to them that their loved ones be included. And church workers need to commit to working with the families toward that goal. Just as each individual with autism brings to the community unique gifts and challenges, so the work of inclusion will vary according to need. This work of inclusion may not be easy but it will always be worthwhile. While my pastor friend’s congregation did indeed behave admirably in accepting the teen with autism who stood by the pulpit during the gospel, I hope that they also sought out the family and offered support and help in teaching, perhaps over a very long time, the teen with autism to sit with friends and family in worship and beyond.

There are common elements of Christian worship that are likely to naturally facilitate the inclusion and contributions of individuals with ASDs. Many individuals with autism appreciate repetition and are especially good at recognizing patterns. Even the most liturgically experimental congregations will have elements of worship that remain the same week after week providing a point of connection for some with ASDs. At a minimum, most churches gather in the same place each week, at the same time, and with many of the same people present. There is almost always a donation to put in the collection basket, a bulletin to pick up or hand out after the service, and a pastor to greet with a handshake. Predictability is often valued by individuals with ASDs, and the predictable elements when we gather as church can be the means for not only facilitating inclusion but moving beyond it to empower individuals with ASDs to become contributing and valued members of the community. The people with autism in your congregation are the ones who will be there each and every week, even when the weather is bad, even when the church leadership is squabbling, even when Sunday school takes a break for the summer. Routines are valued by most individuals with autism; the most “disabled” member of my family is the one who makes sure I am in church every Sunday.

Helping individuals with ASDs to become valued and contributing members of the faith community, even if the process takes years, provides a place to belong for many who will struggle to belong anywhere. For individuals with autism like my son, who will not live on his own, or marry, or drive, or read, who will need help even with simple functions of daily living for all of his adult life, there will come a time when almost all of his interactions with people will be with paid support staff. It’s entirely possible that his faith community will be the only place that he is around people who are not paid to be with him. Yet, I can claim with certainty that his faith community will be richer for including him on account of the gifts he will bring and not just because he offers an opportunity for others to be kind to him. Including those who may initially be hard to include gives witness to our most fundamental faith claims about church.

Scripture speaks of reverence before God, derived from our recognition of ourselves as God’s creation. But the very same insight recognizes also the vastness, beauty, and complexity of all creation, and with that the need to gather before God in our brokenness and noise. Reverence will take many forms. The Spirit will be present, this Jesus promised us. And including even those who may challenge us to include, will be our best opportunity to reflect the ministry of Jesus who never turned away from the outsider or the marginalized.

While moments of sacred silence are correctly valued during Christian worship, they are not ends in themselves. Elements of worship practice can never be viewed as more important than the members of the body who gather at the table. Even those who may occasionally break our silences are to be included, and valued, and taught and loved.

The expectations and practices of any one congregation will change and vary over time. Communities that love children will learn to tolerate some noise and distraction. Pastoral leadership is critical to help communities value all and learn to see themselves as a reflection of the expansive love of God that was reflected in the inclusive ministry of Jesus. Valuing the needs of the community can never justifiably exclude the challenging.

**Uttrum #2: Climate Change and God’s Providence**

[Uttrum] Whether it is the case, that trust in God’s Providence requires Christians to respond actively to current evidence of threats from climate change.

[Videtur] It seems to be the case that Christians should trust in the power of God as Creator and Sustainer of creation, and in the promise of God’s ongoing Providence of creation alone to protect and sustain life, both human and other-kind, from any alleged effects of climate change.

Scripture testifies that God is the creator of all things (Gen. 1) and is sovereign over all creation: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” (Psalm 24:1). Moreover, in the promise and covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3; 15:1–16), God promises to provide for the needs of his people and his creation, as testified by Abraham on Mt. Moriah and the rest of scripture, “The Lord will provide” (Gen. 22:1). Hence, “the earth, and with it all the cosmos, reveals its Creator’s wisdom and is sustained and governed by His power and lovingkindness.”

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7 Much of the theological position developed in the Videtur comes from documents of The Cornwall Alliance, particularly, “The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship,” and “An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming.” Available at www.cornwallalliance.org.
Humankind is created in the image of God, and is given the vocation of exercising dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26–28) through caring stewardship that “affirms that human well being and the integrity of creation are not only compatible but also dynamically interdependent realities.” Given a privileged place in God’s creation, human persons are moral agents “for whom freedom is an essential condition of responsible action.” Though humans fell into sin by disobeying God’s Law, bringing God’s condemnation through a curse on the earth (Gen. 3), “God in His mercy has not abandoned sinful people or the created order but has acted throughout history to restore men and women to fellowship with Him and through their stewardship to enhance the beauty and fertility of the earth.”

A critical component of the human vocation of stewardship is attention to the well-being of the poor (Deut. 15:10–11; Luke 4:18–19); hence concern for the earth and concern for the poor are complementary rather than competing obligations for people of faith.

Current proposals to address the alleged threats of climate change focus on governmental mandates to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, particularly CO₂. These actions are unjustified theologically for several reasons. Most importantly, such actions will have a disproportionate impact on the poor; “abundant, affordable energy is indispensable to human flourishing, particularly to societies which are rising out of abject poverty… With present technologies, fossil and nuclear fuels are indispensable if energy is to be abundant and affordable.” Such policies are essentially a regressive tax that contradicts the biblical requirement to protect the poor from harm and oppression.

Second, mandated emissions reductions are premised on the belief that human actions are driving the alleged effects of climate change, for which there is no scientific consensus. Christians trust in God’s Providence to sustain creation and “deny that Earth and its ecosystems are the fragile and unstable products of chance, and particularly that Earth’s climate system is vulnerable to dangerous alteration because of miniscule changes in atmospheric chemistry.”

Third, government-mandated reductions in use of fossil fuels are an unwarranted restriction of individual human freedoms that increases government control over individual human persons while harming the poor. Scripture warns against the “principalities and powers” (Eph. 6:12) concentrated in government that is “given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation” (Rev. 13:7); international treaties such the Kyoto Protocol and others currently being proposed “affirms that human well being and the integrity of creation are not only compatible but also dynamically interdependent realities.”

These views deny humankind’s biblical vocation as producers and stewards, that,”as bearers of God’s image, [can] add to the earth’s abundance.” “A clean environment is a costly good; consequently, growing affluence, technological innovation, and the application of human and material capital are integral to environmental improvement”—particularly to meet the needs of the poor. Opposing human dominion over the earth often results in defying nature itself, confusing the creation with its Creator, which Christians recognize as idolatry.

Hence, faithful Christians should not view governmental mandates for reduction in greenhouse gas emissions as expressions of stewardship within God’s Providence. It is God alone who is responsible for creating, maintaining and sustaining creation. Rather, political leaders should focus on policies that protect human liberty, keep energy affordable, and stimulate economic growth to help the poor to rise out of poverty.

[Set Contra] On the other hand, it would seem that a faithful understanding of God’s Providence and concern for the poor requires Christians to act in response to current threats of global warming. The witness of scripture is consistent throughout that God’s promise of creation’s continuance does not contradict human responsibility to act with God to protect the integrity of creation while prioritizing the needs of the poor.

As noted in the Evangelical Climate Initiative’s “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action,” “Because all religious/moral claims about climate change are relevant only if climate change is real and is mainly human-induced, everything hinges on the scientific data.” And here the evidence is clear and stark. According to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), “Ninety-seven percent of climate scientists agree that climate-warming trends over the past century are very likely due to human activities, and most of the leading scientific organizations worldwide have issued public statements endorsing this position.” The most recent findings of the United Nations International Panel on Climate Change conclude that warming of the atmosphere and ocean system is unequivocal, that there is a clear human influence on the climate, and that it is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of observed warming since 1950.

Hence faithful Christian response requires joining with others to mitigate the causes of climate change, particularly greenhouse gas emissions generated by affluent lifestyles well above the meeting of basic human needs, while attending to

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8 The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship, www.cornwallalliance.org
9 Ibid.
10 An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming, www.cornwallalliance.org
12 An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming, www.cornwallalliance.org
13 The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship, www.cornwallalliance.org,
14 An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming, www.cornwallalliance.org,
16 http://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus
the legitimate social and economic needs of poor peoples and nations. As stated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Action to mitigate global climate change must be built upon a foundation of social and economic justice that does not put the poor at greater risk or place disproportionate and unfair burdens on developing nations.”

The Christian moral tradition provides several virtues and principles to guide this response. Central to the Catholic Bishops position is the virtue of prudence, taking steps now to mitigate probable negative effects in the future:

- The virtue of prudence is paramount in addressing climate change. This virtue is not only a necessary one for individuals in leading morally good lives, but is also vital to the moral health of the larger community. Prudence is intelligence applied to our actions. It allows us to discern what constitutes the common good in a given situation. Prudence requires a deliberate and reflective process that aids in the shaping of the community’s conscience. Prudence not only helps us identify the principles at stake in a given issue, but also moves us to adopt courses of action to protect the common good. Prudence is not, as popularly thought, simply a cautious and safe approach to decisions. Rather, it is a thoughtful, deliberate, and reasoned basis for taking or avoiding action to achieve a moral good.

- Acting prudently also requires prioritizing the needs of the poor and socially vulnerable. The effects of climate change have disproportionately higher effects on the poor who bear little responsibility for causing climate change but have the least ability to respond and adapt. The longer we delay addressing the causes of climate change, the worse off the poor will be in the future.

- Coupled with concern for the poor is commitment to the wellbeing of future generations, both human and otherkind. The search for endless economic growth in our global economy that generates excessive levels of greenhouse gasses also undermines the ecological wellbeing and sustainability of the planet itself, while increasing social and economic inequity both within and between nations. All of this undermines the very conditions needed for future life to survive, let alone to flourish. Christian scripture and tradition consistently bear witness that our

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19 Ibid.

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21 http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/lite-e.html
change is real, increasing, and is largely human induced. If it is largely human induced, then we have a moral responsibility to address it.

Second, there is a particular responsibility for affluent Christians in affluent nations to address climate change, and particularly how our affluent lifestyles generate much of it. Studies of per capita consumption of energy resources that generate greenhouse gasses demonstrate that affluent nations and individuals generate a disproportionate amount of the emissions responsible for causing global warming. Negative impacts fall disproportionately on the poor (and other species; many of the mechanisms causing climate change are also generating a global crisis in biodiversity). It is deeply troubling to see concern for the poor used as a reason for continued economic growth based on fossil fuels and cheap energy as justification for the wealthy not to have to examine and change our lifestyles. The appropriate response for affluent Christians is confession and repentance: acknowledging and confessing how our overly affluent lifestyles harm the poor and the earth, both now and well into the future, and then to begin the hard work of metanoia: repenting and turning from our sinful ways.

Third, the role of government is critical in this response. While Christians must always be vigilant that government not overstep its bounds and restrict or prohibit individual freedom and exercising of moral agency, the global scale of climate change requires responses at all levels of our lives, including government. Here the traditional ethical principle of subsidiarity, “that human affairs are best served as handled at the lowest possible level, closest to the affected persons” is critical: it serves as an important check on government overstepping its bounds on human affairs, but it also recognizes that problems must be addressed at the scale appropriate to the problem. The complex and global dimensions of climate change whose effects pay no attention to political boundaries require actions at all levels, including and especially at the international level. In addition to cautioning against the potential tyranny of the “principalities and powers” (Rev. 13), scripture and tradition also affirm the importance and appropriate roles of government in maintaining social order and protecting the common good (Rom. 13).

Fourth, it is critical that we distinguish between kinds of economic growth and the energy use it requires. Economic growth and social development to meet the needs of the poor continue to be critical moral obligations for people of faith. In the short term such growth will continue to generate greenhouse gasses; here people of faith must distinguish between “survival emissions” and “luxury emissions”: energy produced to meet basic survival needs versus energy produced to increase the affluence of the already affluent. Both scripture and tradition are clear that luxury and affluence that come at the expense of the wellbeing of the poor and the earth contradict God’s command for faithful stewardship; the moral maxim to “live simply so that the poor may simply live” reflects faithful Christian commitment.

I believe the theological position articulated in the Videtur and based on documents of the Cornwall Alliance is a distortion of Christian views of God’s Creation, Sovereignty and Providence. In Christopher Morse’s perceptive use of Leo Tolstoy’s important insight, doctrine that is true may yet harbor a lie in how it is used: “I have no doubt that there is truth in the doctrine; but there can be no doubt that it harbors a lie; and I must find the truth and the lie so that I can tell them apart.” To affirm trust in God’s providential care for the wellbeing of creation is central to Christian faith; to interpret God’s Providence as providing justification to avoid taking responsibility for our actions that contribute to climate change, thus imperiling the wellbeing of both the poor and the planet, is truth harboring a lie.

Christopher’s chapter on Creation in Not Every Spirit provides helpful guidance in further discernment of the theological contours of Christian dogmatics in response to climate change. Here he outlines four traditional roadblocks or complaints about creation doctrine; the second is directly relevant to this paper: It would seem that Christian doctrine is fatalistic. The short response to this claim is clear: “To such teaching the objection is that human apathy and social irresponsibility in the face of injustice are the intolerable moral outcome.”

Christopher derives this position in part from what he terms “Rachel’s Refusal.” Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus draws on Jeremiah to link the coming of the Messiah to King Herod’s slaughter of the children of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16): “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they are no more (Matt 2:18). The promise and joy of the gospel can never be used to ignore, diminish or dismiss the reality of loss and suffering in this world, particularly suffering caused by human hands. With respect to destruction of creation, Christopher observes, “God alone can manifest in keeping covenant with Rachel’s refusal of consolation in the face of all within nature and history that currently seeks to oppose and destroy the creature’s good.”

Fatalism in the face of climate change is not an option for Christian faith.

Key to understanding faithful response to climate change is the traditional category in Christian doctrines of providence known as concursus: “the ‘conjoining’ of divine and creaturely actions.” That is, God maintains and conserves creation’s good by using creaturely means. Yet this is never done in a way that violates freedom: “At the heart of this faith is the refusal to believe that God’s ways of upholding and governing creation ever violate the freedom and integrity of the creature who is being upheld and governed. Perhaps no disbelief of Christian faith continues to be less recognized by critics of the doctrine of providence than

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24 http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/what_you_need_to_know?id=84
27 Ibid, 201.
29 Ibid, 217.
this one. God’s providing is always custom made to fit the creaturely recipient so that the creature’s own freedom is never abrogated but activated.”

Here is the Christian answer to both apathy and fear of loss of freedom in responding to climate change through confession and repentance: it is precisely God’s grace that frees us to recognize our sinful behavior in contributing to climate change and the destruction it wreaks, as well as frees us to join with God’s maintaining and conserving the goodness of creation in our response. As Christopher notes, “The point deserves underlining. This emphasis upon the conforming of God’s grace to the created integrity of its recipients is one of the most consistent themes present through Christian doctrine.” Or as the Second Helvetic Confession states, “We disapprove of the rash statements of those who say that if all things are managed by the providence of God, then our efforts and endeavors are in vain… and we will not have to… do anything.”

Christopher’s conclusion to his chapter on creation is perhaps a fitting place to draw this essay to a close: “If the ‘dominion’ given the human creature is one of serving God’s own conservation of creation’s good, a very different picture arises from that of the profiteer or exploiter, whose power to ‘subdue’ in the sense of subjugate is seen as a sign of divine endorsement. Theologically considered, responsibility toward creation centers not in any human dominance over the environment, but in God’s providential concursus in which human agency is conjoined with God’s purpose of making a home for righteousness.”

As valuable as our formal theological education was, we are equally grateful for Christopher’s mentorship, especially as that mentorship has undergone a metamorphosis from student/teacher to colleague/friend. Christopher models the importance of theology informing all aspects of our lives not only through his brilliant insights and analysis, but also through the integrity of his life and his generosity of time and spirit with both colleagues and students, which continues long after our time as students. We are especially grateful for the opportunity to honor this wise and gentle man publicly, and to thank him for the many ways he has enriched our lives and the lives of many at Union, in church and throughout society. In the spirit of Christopher, we need to make clear that he did not bribe us to write these words; they are ours alone. May the ongoing work of each of us continue to bear witness to the integrity and legacy of our mentor and friend, Christopher Morse.

Conclusion

We conclude this essay with two additional notes of affection and appreciation for what Christopher has meant to us, personally and professionally. First is our appreciation for the well rounded and in depth theological education we gained under Christopher’s wise counsel. In the quarter century since we worked formally with Christopher our interests and issues have ranged widely, but the theological methods and knowledge imparted by Christopher have equipped us with sharply attuned analytical skills, informed by the witness of scripture and tradition, and attentive to both insights from and consequences for the poor and marginalized.
The Coming Cloud
James F. Kay

As the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Professor in Theology and Ethics, Christopher Morse became known and beloved as one of the great teachers at Union Theological Seminary. With humor, humility, and humanity, he conveyed to his students that systematic theology is both an utterly human enterprise and an indispensable academic discipline. Despite its putative pretensions, and sometimes its pretentious practitioners, systematic theology can serve the church and the world by enabling Christians to give an account of the hope that is in them, usually with reference to prevailing “plausibility structures,” while also prompting them to engage the received Christian message with both respectful reflection and critical testing. Thus, the point is not to pass along intact an unchanging “deposit of faith.” Rather, by critically learning and engaging the traditions of faith, the followers of Jesus Christ become better equipped to be “on hand” for the God who is ever “at hand” in all the events of life and death.

Nowhere is the challenge of interpretation more demanding than in the sermonic and catechetical appropriate of the scriptural tradition’s apocalyptic texts, a challenge that Morse repeatedly takes up in his work. For example, in his reflections on the “Life to Come” concluding Not Every Spirit, Morse attends to the sayings of the New Testament regarding the coming of the “Son of Man,” derived from Daniel 7 and featured in Luke 21:25–28 with its synoptic parallels. In his section on “The Coming Cloud,” Morse interprets the redemptive coming of the Son of Man amid nations in distress and a destabilized natural order not as “a prediction of the inevitability of destruction, but a promise, as only God can make and keep, that even when the worst things come upon us that can possibly happen, they will not be able to prevent Christ’s coming to us and to all the world in redemption, an ultimate reclaiming from all harm.”

In the years leading up to the publication of Not Every Spirit, I was privileged to read preliminary drafts of this book, including the section on “The Coming Cloud.” I was also thereby prompted to try to think through the implications of apocalyptic for homiletics, understood primarily as theological reflection on the practice of preaching. But side by side with this “second order” work, I felt compelled to see if apocalyptic, when reframed as Morse’s “promissory narration,” would actually preach.

One result of this latter attempt was to take Morse’s formulation of “The Coming Cloud,” as the focal metaphor for a sermon from Luke 21. Although typically an Advent lectionary text, I selected it for pulpIT use on August 6, 1989.

in the chapel of Princeton University on the occasion of the 44th anniversary of the detonating of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima. Twenty-five years later, as the distress within and among the nations continues and as the ecological crisis continues to spin out of control, I offer this word in thanksgiving for all I learned from Christopher Morse about the call to faithful disbelief and about the God of the Bible who makes us prisoners of hope.

**TEXT:** And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. (Lk. 21:27)

Think for a moment of a cloudless sky—not just for a week, or even a month, but for a whole year—or two—or three! How we would pray and, yes, even dance for a rain cloud!

So in the days of Elijah, during the great national apostasy under King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, “there was no rain in the land” (I Kings 17:7). Only when a bone-dry nation finally fell on its face before the Lord God did the longed-for cloud come.

The First Book of Kings tells how that cloud took shape off Israel’s Mediterranean coast. At first, just a wisp as small as a human hand appeared in the sky. Then more clouds began to gather. The day turned dark. The wind rose up and sheets of rain fell on the parched, cracked earth.

So in the days of Elijah, a cloud came in the shape of a hand, and stretched out its blessings from an open heaven.

But as you know, coming clouds do not always bring such blessings. Only fifty years ago this summer, the clouds were gathering—war clouds. Adolf Hitler was demanding the annexation of Danzig and the Polish Corridor into his Third Reich. Meanwhile, on these shores, some 350 American women gathered at the New York World’s Fair. There amid the marvels of “The World of Tomorrow”—these women declared to the world of that day their unanimous opposition to sending American boys to fight another European War. These women were all mothers, Gold Star Mothers. They had already sacrificed their children to the First World War.

But nothing these mothers said and nothing the diplomats did could avert what Winston Churchill later called, The Gathering Storm. And so the war came. And the war did not end until the coming of another cloud at 8:15 a.m. on August 6, 1945.

An eyewitness recalls:

“The sky was serene, the air was flooded with glittering morning light. . . . The sirens and also the radio had just given the all-clear signal. . . . A blinding
flash cut sharply across the sky. . . . [My] skin . . . felt a burning heat . . . [A]
violet rush of air pressed down my entire body. . . . I raised my head, facing the
center of Hiroshima. . . . [There I saw] an enormous mass of clouds . . . [they]
spread and climbed rapidly . . . into the sky. Then its summit broke open and hung
over horizontally: It took the shape of . . . a monstrous mushroom.” 8

A physicist blinded by that same cloud later wrote, “… everything seemed
dark, dark all over. . . . Then I thought, ‘The world is ending.’” 9

A novelist later remembered thinking she was witnessing “the collapse of the
earth which I had read about as a child.” 10

Amid the rubble, the housekeeper at the Jesuit Mission cried out over and
over again, “Shu Jesus, awaremi tamai! Our Lord Jesus, have pity on us!” 11
And since that brilliant August 6, the poison mushroom cloud threatens to
come again at almost any time.

The coming cloud:
Will it be a cloud like the one for which Elijah prayed—a cloud which
blessed the earth and her people like an outreached hand? Or, will it be a cloud
that smothers the world with death? Which will it be? Can we forecast the future?
There are those who claim we can. There are those who say we can know the
shape of our future and even control our future by spotting present trends.

Recently, that distinguished scientific journal, Life magazine (which you
probably hide under your Smithsonian!), devoted some thirty pages to what the
21st century holds for a “typical” American family:

“By the year 2000 half of the new homes will be substantially computer-
ized. . . . While you’re out, your house continues to perform programmed tasks:
Start the dishwasher and water the garden . . . open gates to a certain delivery
truck, activate household noises to deter burglars. Commands can be changed
via telephone—if you’re ahead of schedule, call home to adjust temperature and
humidity levels, turn on the sauna, feed the cat.” Video screens, we are told, will
“provide security (the computer can distinguish you, regular guests, and pets from
intruders), though kids might object to the electronic eyes that will allow parents
to monitor Junior doing homework. When its time for bed, go right upstairs. The
house will let the cat in and turn off the lights.” 12

In the 21st century, of course, food as we know it will be a thing of the past.
Meat, for example, “will be 90 percent fat free, reconstituted to look like London
broil or sirloin. In fact, it will be something like sawdust glued together with algi-
nate of kelp.” If you find this less than appetizing, Life’s editors quickly add, “Fear
not—we tried it, and it was fantastic.” 13

Yes, we have tasted the future, and it’s “fantastic”!
We can now forecast what is coming: The bright, silver clouds of the future
will open up the blessings of technology.
Or will they?
Well, what do you make of trends like these: ozone vanishing over the polar
ice caps; the greatest mass extermination in 66 million years of the earth’s flora
and fauna carried out by a fairly new species called Homo sapiens; tropical rain
forests disappearing at 100 acres per minute; 7500 dead dolphins washing up on
our Atlantic coast two summers ago, and medical wastes still closing our beaches
this summer.

Facts like these are bandied about almost daily on the airwaves and news-
print. Never has St. Paul’s description of a creation groaning for redemption
seemed so apt (Rom. 8:22).

Life magazine may regale us with the computerized house of the future, but
other forecasters question whether our future will even be fit for habitation.

So present trends are ambiguous. Some point to paradise. Others lead to
the gates of Hell. And even now clouds are gathering on the horizon of the future.
Can the Bible give us a forecast? Can we know about the coming cloud? Will
it bring nourishing blessing, or will it be a pillar of fire that rains unimaginable
destruction? Which will it be?

Some parts of the Bible seem to give a fairly direct answer: Repent and all
will be well. That’s what happened in Elijah’s day. Israel turned away from God.
So God shut up the heavens. And the drought came. Then the famine came.
When Israel turned back to God, back to the morality and religion of Moses, God
opened the heavens and showered the land with blessing. Isn’t this the old time
religion we hear on radio and TV? If America will only repent and return to the
Christian faith, God will bring us showers of blessing. But if we forsake God, God
will forsake us. We will be overwhelmed by disaster.

But even the Bible recognizes that things are not quite that simple. The rain,
Jesus tells us, falls on both the just and the unjust (Mt. 5:45). And the Bible, too,
recognizes that terrible things often cloud the careers of good and upright people.
Good King Josiah, who recovered and honored the Torah, is cut down by Pha-
raho’s army (II Kings 23:29). The Book of Daniel remembers the many righteous
martyred for their faith (Dan. 11:33–34). And outside the gates of Jerusalem, a
young rabbì, in whom no fault was found, screams from his Roman cross, “My
God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mk. 15:34).

If the gospel is good news, it is not because it predicts a bright, shiny future
based on our morality or piety. The gospel is neither a cocoon that insulates us
from the sufferings of this present age, nor a pair of earplugs that shuts out the
groaning of creation. And the gospel is not a tranquilizer to quell the cries of God
Star Mothers, and all other modern Rachels, who weep for their children because
they are no more.

The gospel is good news, not because it predicts a future based on our good
behavior or other present trends; but, the gospel is good news because it promises a
future based on God’s faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

pp. 18–19.
6 Ibid., p. 22.
7 Ibid., pp. 22–23, quoting Yoko Ota, Shikabane no Machi (Town of Corpses) (Tokyo:
10 Ibid., p. 58.
This same Jesus, who cried in agony from his cross of suffering, this same Jesus is coming toward us on the horizon of the future, “coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

And because the future belongs to Jesus Christ, because Jesus Christ has a future, we who belong to him, whose lives are entwined with his baptism and faith, we will have a future with him. That is why we can never give up—on ourselves, on our friends, on our enemies, or on our world! If the future were not Jesus Christ, but the sum total of present trends, what despair would overwhelm us! But because Jesus Christ is our ultimate future, we have a hope and a peace that the world can neither give nor take away.

We do not deny that on earth nations are in agony. We do not deny that ecological collapse appears imminent. We do not deny that scores of men and women are choked with fear. But amid all this, Jesus says, “Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Lk. 21:28).

We are not to cower in fear of the future.
We are not to crouch, like a boxer, in doctrinaire defensiveness.
We are not to flee from solidarity in suffering into privatized spirituality.
We are to stand erect, confident, hopeful, knowing that whatever cloud comes to meet us, faith will see the face of Jesus Christ.

And so this morning, I leave you not with a prediction, but with a promise. I cannot forecast the future. Whether the coming cloud brings us the bounty of heaven itself, or whether it brings instead “tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword,” who can say? As a minister of the gospel, I can only proclaim to you its promise that no future, however beclouded, “can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:35, 39).

Therefore, “look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Lk. 21:28).
Jesus and the Divine Name

R. Kendall Soulen

Whoever has the word of Jesus for a true possession can also hear his silence.

—Ignatius of Antioch 15:2

In his estimable work Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief, Christopher Morse wisely observes that in the biblical context God’s name is understood to be communicated by God. God’s name “is revealed as a proper and not a generic name or an appellation chosen by human preference.” He goes on to elaborate:

According to ancient tradition in Genesis the names of creatures are chosen by human selection: “whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Gen. 2:19). Not so with the name of God. So sacred is this name in Hebraic tradition that it is not spoken. Another word, “LORD” (Adonai), is substituted in its place wherever the original appears.”

In this essay, I want to explore the scriptural dynamics of God’s self-communicated name with special attention to what is no doubt a simple but nevertheless important and often overlooked fact. The practice of honoring the divine name by avoiding its use is not only a Jewish tradition, as Morse rightly observes, but a Christian one as well. I offer these reflections in token of my great esteem for Christopher Morse as a theologian of the church and in gratitude for his unfailing friendship and generosity.

By way of introduction, let me call to mind a bit of theological tradition and ask a question about it. The tradition is this. Christians have commonly interpreted the Mosaic law in its ritual dimension according to a pattern of inner (Christological) fulfillment and outer (ecclesial) obsolescence. That is, Christ inwardly fulfills the law, while rendering its continued observance obsolete and, indeed (according to theologians such as Augustine and Thomas) mortally sinful. The pattern of inner fulfillment and outer obsolescence originated, perhaps, as a way of understanding Christ’s reconciling death in relation to temple sacrifice (cf. Hebrews 9). Over time, though, Christians extended the interpretive pattern to

1 Christopher Morse, Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief, 2nd ed (T&T Clark, 2009), p. 132.
encompass the Jewish law as a whole (the so-called “moral law” excepted). According to Thomas Aquinas, for example, Christ’s death fulfills and renders obsolete—not merely temple sacrifice—but every aspect of the ritual law, including, for example, dietary law and circumcision (cf. Summa theologiae I–II, q. 103, a. 4; cf. q. 104, a. 3). An upshot of this teaching in its generalized form is that insofar as Jews receive the gospel, they must cease entirely to live as Jews, while insofar as they do not receive the gospel, their continued practice of the Mosaic law renders them odious to God. Or, as the Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod has observed, the teaching suggests that God wanted Jesus—or at any rate, Peter—to be the last Jew.

Now, my question is this. Suppose it should turn out that for all these years Christians had continued to cultivate the outer letter of Jewish religious practice, more or less unawares and behind their own backs as it were. What if, moreover, they had done so to the greatest extent precisely in their corporate worship, in their reading of scripture, offering of prayers, and celebration of the sacraments? What, in that case, should they do? Should they seek to uproot the practice from worship as quickly and thoroughly as possible, on the grounds that all such practices were inherently obsolete and indeed sinful? Or, should they take their cue instead from the liturgical rule of thumb lex orandi est lex credendi et agendi, and conclude that since they themselves had been practicing it, Christ’s fulfillment of the law must not have rendered it comprehensively obsolete after all?

I will return to this question at the end of my essay. Now, as one might guess, I want to suggest that something like this hypothetical scenario is in fact the case. The bit of religious practice that I have in mind is that of honoring God by avoiding the pronunciation of God’s personal name, the Tetragrammaton revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:15). For, knowingly or not, Christians have indeed hewed rather consistently to this ancient bit of Jewish oral law, for a simple reason: they have worshipped God in the language of Christ and the apostles, who themselves observed this practice with unwavering scrupulousness.  

The Divine Name in Second Temple Judaism

The Christian movement originated at a time when concern for the sanctity of the divine name was widespread among Jews of every description, who expressed this concern in a variety of fascinating ways. For our purposes, however, it is enough to concentrate on two features of Second Temple Judaism, to set the stage for considering the early Christian movement’s posture toward the divine name.

A first such feature is the one we have already noted, namely, the practice of honoring the sanctity of the Tetragrammaton by avoiding its pronunciation. The origins of the practice are notoriously hard to pin down, but most historians believe that it was already a couple centuries old by the beginning of the common era.4 The deepest roots of the practice, however, are older still, and reflect the fierce zeal with which the LORD guards the holiness of his own name. In the third commandment, the LORD declares that he will not acquit anyone who misuses his name, while in Lev. 24:11, cursing the name (or cursing with the name) is declared a capital offense. In the latter passage, all those who were within earshot of the blasphemy are instructed to first lay their hands upon the perpetrator’s head before stoning him, as though to cleanse themselves of having heard blasphemy and return the contagion to its source. Texts such as these indicate that misuse of God’s name is not only sinful but defiling and dangerous, for individual and community. Avoidance of the divine name, it seems, arose gradually in response to this generally felt circumstance. To use the terminology of later Jewish tradition, name avoidance reflects a form of building a fence around the third commandment. The misuse of the divine name is avoided by avoiding the pronunciation of the divine name altogether. By the beginning of the common era, the practice was universally normative among Jews of every description, including members of the early Christian movement.5

Still, the presumption against pronouncing the divine name was not absolute, and this brings me to the second feature of Second Temple practice I want to note. Even as the spoken name ceased to circulate widely, it remained in currency in one place above all: the Temple in Jerusalem. Indeed, it is quite possible that...
the reservation of the divine name to the temple, and its prohibition elsewhere, are simply two sides of the same phenomenon, two expressions of the same conviction that Israel should invoke the divine name only when and where the propriety of doing so was beyond dispute. If this is the case, however, it is remarkable that even within the temple itself, the divine name appears to have been employed with great reserve. According to later rabbinic sources, only the high priest himself pronounced the divine name, and then only in the performance of his priestly duties on the Day of Atonement. Israel’s sinfulness, which made the ordinary use of God’s name impossible, also made its extraordinary use necessary, in order to pronounce the LORD’s forgiveness of the people’s sin.

Turning from the Second Temple period generally to the NT in particular, what do we discover?

**JESUS’ AVOIDANCE OF THE DIVINE NAME**

Well, a first thing we discover is that, according to his Gospel portraits, Jesus of Nazareth shared the zeal for the divine name that was characteristic of his age. “Hallowed be thy name!” is the first petition of the prayer that he gave to his disciples, while according to the Gospel of John, “Glorify your name!” (John 12:28) is the first and only petition of Jesus’ own prayer upon entering Jerusalem on the eve of his crucifixion.

We can sharpen this initial impression by connecting Jesus’ posture toward the divine name with the two features of Second Temple Judaism that we just described, namely, reservation toward the name and pronunciation of it. What we will discover, I believe, is that the Gospels portray Jesus as an intensification—indeed, I think we can say, a fulfillment—of both trends of Second Temple Judaism.

Along one axis, then, Jesus routinely speaks of God in ways that consciously avoid the use of God’s name, just as indeed everyone portrayed in the Gospels does. And yet this way of putting things is too weak, allowing the surmise that Jesus may merely acquiesce in prevailing custom. In fact, Jesus’ practice reflects a heightening and intensification of reserve toward the divine name that goes beyond the standards of his day.

We see this, for example in Jesus’ teaching on oaths. By Jesus’ day, the idea had apparently arisen that oaths became less binding in proportion to how indirectly they invoked God’s name and person: the less direct the invocation, the less binding the oath. This view treats circumlocutions for the divine name as a kind of buffer that conveniently distances the speaker from the holiness of God, like the insulation of an electric wire. The more oblique the circumlocution, the less the majesty of God and God’s name is implicated. Jesus angrily rejects this view.

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.’ How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it. (Mt. 23:16–22)

Note that the target of Jesus’ condemnation is not the use of “buffers” in place of God’s name. As Gustav Dalman observed about this passage over a century ago, “Even [Jesus] appears to approve the non-mention of the name of God.” Rather, Jesus’ scorn is directed at the premise that circumlocutions replace the divine name rather than to refer to it and its bearer. In Dalman’s words, “Swearing by heaven is looked upon by Jesus as equivalent to swearing by God’s name because a real name of God was being intentionally avoided.” Jesus calls his disciples to a higher righteousness, which of course is not the explicit use of God’s name (as would be the case if he regarded name-avoidance as a mistake or a perishable custom), but adherence to a yet more rigorous form of name avoidance: the eschewing of oaths altogether (5:24).

Dalman suggests that Jesus’ teaching on oaths is perhaps connected to another feature of his speech, namely, his habit of emphasizing his teaching with the word “Amen.” This use of “Amen,” (usually translated “truly”) is as utterly unattested in ancient literature outside the Gospels, as it is ubiquitous within them, where it appears dozens of times in accounts of Jesus’ speech.

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6 Yoma 3:8: 4:2. Of these passages, McDonough writes, “[I]n Yoma it is explicitly stated that the high priest uttered the tetragrammaton itself. In the latter portion of 3:8, during the prayer of confession given between the porch and the altar, he quotes Lev. 16:50: ‘For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you; from all yours sins shall you be clean before the Lord.’ The people respond by saying ‘Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom for ever and ever!’ Similarly, when the lots are cast for the two goats, he declares that one is a ‘son offering to the Lord,” and the people again respond, ‘Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom for ever and ever!” (4:2). That is, this is a response to the uttering of the tetragrammaton itself becomes apparent in 6:2, where it is emphasized (after a repetition of the quotation from Lev. 16:30 in the confession over the scapegoat) that this is the ‘Expressed name.’ The response of the priests and the people in the temple court reaches a crescendo at this point, and it is said that on hearing the name “they used to kneel and bow themselves and fall down on their faces and say ‘Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom forever and ever!’” It seems unlikely that such a crucial part of such a major festival would be fabricated by the rabbis out of whole cloth even generations after the temple was destroyed.” (McDonough, YHWH at Patmos, 100–101).


“Amen I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” (Mar 10:15 NRS)

“Be made clean!” (Mt. 8:3)

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (28:18).

And so on.

The “divine passive” is so typical of Jesus that a full survey basically amounts to a recapitulation of his public teaching. Still, it is worth noting one more example: the first petition of the Lord’s prayer, “Hallowed be your name!” From a purely grammatical point of view, the petition is ambiguous, since the subject of the verb “to hallow” is unspecified, a fact that has given rise to a host of proposals regarding who it is that is supposed to hallow God’s name: the church, creation, and so on. Once Jesus’ customary use of the divine passive is taken into account, however, the ambiguity disappears. Jesus is calling upon God to sanctify his name, to cleanse it of every besmirching obscurity and make it shine forth throughout creation with the radiance of a single truth only: “I am the LORD!”

The first petition helps us get at the theological significance of Jesus’ practice of name-avoidance. Name avoidance points away from the one who offers the petition to the one who alone can fulfill it. Name avoidance expresses final impatience with every human use of God’s name and eschatological longing for its vindication by God. It acknowledges our human inability to say God’s name in a way that corresponds to the eternal uniqueness of its bearer. It renders a verdict on human God-talk and bids our vacuous and self-serving invocations to cease. It represents an un-saying and a non-saying, an apophaticism, if one likes, of the divine name. It divests itself of the divine name in hopeful longing that God will cause it to be remembered throughout heaven and earth, as only God can do. In sum, Jesus’ non-pronunciation of the divine name is an outer figure, a humble token of his inward longing for the eschatological vindication of God’s name.

JESUS’ DECLARATION OF THE DIVINE NAME

The Gospels, however, portray a second side to Jesus’ relation to the divine name, one that stands in dramatic contrast to what we have described thus far. Just as the high priest casts aside all ordinary reserve and declares the divine name openly on the Day of Atonement, so too Jesus Christ—according to the Gospel of John—openly declares the divine name, climatically on the very eve of his passion and death. In his prayer in the Garden of Gethsamene (John 17), Jesus refers four times to God’s name, indicating that he has been given “your [i.e. God’s] name” in order to make it known.

I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. (17:6a)

Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (17:11b)
While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. (17:12a).

I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. (17:26)

Jesus, then, is the new High Priest, and his own impending crucifixion the new temple. And yet it is really not enough to equate Jesus’s declaration of the divine name to that of the High Priest in the temple. The high priest declares God’s name as something that belongs exclusively to God and not at all to himself. But Jesus Christ declares God’s name in a qualitatively different way: he declares it as his own name as well, as “your name that you have given me.”

To appreciate this claim, we should connect Jesus’ language in the High Priestly Prayer (e.g. “your name that you have given me” vs. 11b, 12a”) with Jesus’ extraordinary words “I am.” Seven times over the course of the narrative, Jesus declares “I am” in an absolute fashion, without any elucidating predicate. The seven absolute “I am” sayings are these:

Jesus said to her, “I am, the one who is speaking to you.” (4:25–26 mg., Gk.)

He said to them, “I am; do not be afraid.” (6:20 mg., Gk.)

“You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am.” (8:24 mg., Gk.)

Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am.” (8:28 mg., Gk.)

Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.” (8:58)

“I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am.” (13:19)

The seventh and climactic occasion occurs just before Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, where the words “I am” appear three times in quick succession.

Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus replied, “I am.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, “I am,” they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus answered, “I told you that I am.” (18:4–8 mg., Gk.)

According to Mishnah (Yoma 6.2), when the high priest declared the divine name in the sanctuary on Yom Kipur, those within earshot “used to kneel and bow themselves and fall down on their faces” (Yoma 6.2). Similarly, when Jesus declares “I am,” the party [from the temple] who has come to arrest him falls to the ground. And yet, as I have already noted, it is really not enough to equate Jesus’ declaration of the divine name to that of the High Priest in the temple. The high priest declares God’s name as something that belongs exclusively to God. But Jesus Christ declares God’s name as his own as well, as “your name that you have given me.” When the arresting party falls to the ground, the analogy is not merely to the temple liturgy, but to the LORD’s own words as expressed in Isaiah:

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.” (Isa 45:22–23 NRS)

Falling to the ground, the temple police and Roman soldiers represent Israel and the nations bending the knee before God’s own name-declaration in Christ. Jesus Christ is the name-declaration of the One God, personified.

**Name Avoidance as the Outer Form of Jesus’ Name Declaration**

But now notice something. Even as the Gospel of John portrays Jesus Christ declaring the divine name—indeed, even as it portrays him as the embodiment of God’s own name-declaration—it portrays Christ employing not the divine name itself, but rather an interpretive surrogate in its place. For of course, “I am” is not itself the divine name, the sacred Tetragrammaton, but simply another among many surrogates employed to in its place elsewhere in the NT, such as “Lord,” “the Power,” “the Blessed,” “name above every name,” and so on. Thus even as Jesus Christ declares the divine name, he continues to observe the same reserve toward it that characterizes his speech generally, that is, he avoids its direct use.

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10 I have altered the NRSV translation where necessary for accuracy, e.g., by changing “I am he” to the more literal “I am.”

11 C.C. Charles Gieschen, “The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology” *Vigiliae Christianae* 57 (2003) 115–158, 141. Gieschen writes, “Although the EGO EIMI formula in John should not be understood as the Divine Name that Jesus is said to have been given (17:6), nevertheless these absolute
That “I am” is best understood as a reverential allusion to the Divine Name depends upon the close association of these sacred terms in Scripture. Far from being limited to Exodus 3:14–15, such passages are quite common in the Septuagint, thanks to God’s ubiquitous declaration “I am the Lord!” (egō eimi kyrios), and are especially characteristic of Ezekiel and Isaiah 40–55, where the saying evokes the Lord’s incomparable uniqueness and proven character as Creator, Redeemer, and Consummator of all things. Significantly, Isaiah several times reports God’s self-declaration “I am the Lord” in the abbreviated form “I am!” (LXX: 41:4; 46:4; etc.). In such cases, the short form is materially identical with the longer one: “I am” = “I am the Lord.” On three occasions, the Septuagint renders God’s self-declaration with the extraordinary phrase, “I am I am!” (LXX: egō eimi egō eimi; Heb. anoki anoki ba). So, for example, Isaiah 43:25 reads:

I, I am He [Gk. egō eimi egō eimi, lit., “I am I am”]

who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.

In this and similar passages, the author of Second Isaiah creates a virtual synonymy between the phrase “I am” and God’s personal proper name, which is implied rather than explicitly stated. Though Second Isaiah wrote before the practice of avoiding God’s name became customary, the synonymy he created has obvious relevance for understanding the Gospel of John, written during the Second Temple period, when the custom was universally normative among Jews. Distinct from God’s personal name yet closely linked to it, the words “I am” permit one to evoke God’s name while leaving the name itself unspoken.

Now, I confess that I find the coinherence of name-avoidance and name declaration in Jesus’ speech a very suggestive state of affairs. Let me briefly suggest three lines of potential significance.

1. For one thing, it seems to me laden with Trinitarian significance. Jesus Christ, the incarnate word of God, comes into the world to manifest not his own name, but the name of the one who sent him. Christ is indeed the great “I am,” the bearer of the divine name, but he is this as one receives the divine name—as indeed, he receives everything that he is—from the One to whom he prays, who saysings are very closely related to it and function as a way of indicating that Jesus is the possessor of the Divine Name” (Giesen: 141). Rudolph Bultmann also articulates this view as a possible interpretation of the I-am statements, only to reject it. See R. Bultmann, The Gospel of John: A Commentary (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 327–8. Bultmann’s rejection prompted the literary critic Harold Bloom to remark that New Testament scholarship “manifests a very impoverished notion as to just what literary allusion is or can be”; see Harold Bloom, The Gospels (New Haven, CT: Chelsea House, 1987), 295.

2. Again, it seems to me eschatologically significant that even as Christ declares the divine name, he does so in a manner that continues to avoid its direct use. What we have here, to my mind at least, is a strangely powerful expression of the already-and-not-yet character of the gospel. Insofar as Christ reveals “your name that you have given me,” he is the real presence of the unsurpassable future, the fulfillment of God’s greatest promise: “You shall know that I am the LORD!” Yet insofar as Christ cloaks his revelation of the divine name in the form of reverential indirection, fulfillment remains imbued with eschatological longing, and directs us in hope toward future encounter with “He who is and who was and who is coming” (Rev. 1:8).

We can also formulate what is at stake here in negative terms. What is lost when Christians attempt to vocalize the divine name in worship and study, say as Jehovah or Yahweh? In such cases, I would suggest, they in effect attempt to strip the name from its Christological context, which is precisely Jesus’ zeal for God’s own eschatological glorification of the name. In effect, we de-christologize and de-eschatologize the divine name at the same time. We lose its essential character as a token of our fellowship with Christ in his longing for God’s coming kingdom, and make it theologically and liturgically inert.

3. Finally, it seems to me there is a further, ecclesiological line of significance. That Christ’s declaration of the divine name is indirect also means this, that this aspect of traditional Jewish practice entered without diminishment or es-
sential modification directly into the bloodstream of Christian worship, thanks to
the example of Christ, the apostles, and writers of the New Testament, whose prece-
dent on this point was determinative for the shaping of ecumenical Christianity,
even for those long periods of time when Christians lost all awareness that there
was such a thing as the Tetragrammaton at all, let alone indirect ways of alluding
to it. Thus even as the conviction hardened among Christians that Christ’s com-
ing rendered every living expression of Jewish ceremonial practice dead and deadly,
such practice lived on—thanks to Christ’s influence among Christians themselves.

Now, once we become aware of this circumstance, it seems to me that there
are basically two directions we can go, as I suggested at the beginning of my
paper. We can continue to insist that Christ’s fulfillment of the Old Law necessar-
ily entails its comprehensive obsolescence, and seek to achieve greater conformity
with this principal by reintroducing the pronunciation of the divine name into
Christian worship. This is indeed the crystallized theological conviction of the
Jehovah’s Witnesses, who maintain that the suppression of the divine name in
Christian worship represents a catastrophic surrender to Jewish superstition that
adulterated the church almost from its inception beginning. In a less crystalized
form, this is also the conviction of the early modern Jehovah piety that bequeathed
to the church so many hymns still sung by Christians today—and yes, I love many
of those hymns, too.

Yet there is of course another direction we can go. We can take our orienta-
tion from the actual practice of name-avoidance in Christian worship, which is so
much deeper and more extensive than the occasional Jehovah hymn, and we can
conclude that we have been wrong to assume that Christ’s fulfillment of the old
law necessarily entails its obsolescence. On the contrary, we can conclude that,
in this instance at least, Christ’s inward fulfillment of Jewish practice is tied—not
to its obsolescence—but to its reaffirmation and reanimation. And, if in this
instance, then perhaps in others as well.

13 In sermon on Proverbs 18:10, a younger Karl Barth wrote, “Therefore it was a fine custom
among the old Jews (and I am not one of those who takes part when this gets poked fun at!) that they
abstained from taking the revealed name of God “I am who I will be” upon their lips, rather, respect-
ing the fact that they have no right to pronounce it, replaced it each time with the human name
for God ‘the Lord’ in order to recall by means of this restraint that God himself was and is the one
who communicates to his people the unique, differentiating One that he is” (Karl Barth, Predigten
1921–35, ed. Holger Finz (Zürich: TVZ, 1998), 24–38. What Barth manages to overlook is that this
“fine custom along the old Jews” is one that Christians themselves continue to practice in worship and
liturgy, precisely insofar as these hew to their New Testament model.
“And what do you do?” As a graduate student studying Christian theology in a country that increasingly expects education institutions to focus primarily on the production of tech-savvy laborers, it is quite an awkward question. What role do academic theologians play in this kind of educational system? What is the task of theology in this context? In pursuing answers to these questions, I return to one of the first works on theology I studied, written by one of my first theology professors: Christopher Morse’s *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*.

In *Not Every Spirit*, Morse examines the task of theology (in particular, dogmatics, that field of theology concerned with the faithfulness of claims regarding God), and rehearses the theological work he prescribes. As I will be focusing on the task of theology in this paper, I will engage with the corresponding section of Morse’s book here. *Not Every Spirit* begins with Morse’s claim that “to believe in God is not to believe in everything.” In other words, while the emphasis in some churches may be on what ideas about God or authorities on God are to be believed, such belief necessarily implies a disbelief of other ideas and authorities. Christian faith is, then, a matter of “faithful disbelief.”

Morse clarifies this notion of faithful disbelief by comparing it to doubt and skepticism. Doubt refers to the “distrust of God that remains present even within our struggles to be faithful.” Skepticism is centered on the claim that one should not believe something without having been presented sufficient evidence. Faithful disbelief, by contrast, is a matter of discerning what one is called, by faith, to disbelieve. It is not about the distrust of God, but the distrust of what is not of God. It is not about the justification of belief in God, but about what that belief rejects as unjustifiable. So, while doubt and skepticism are each of value to an academic theologian and likely to any Christian, Morse rejects them as orientations that are definitive of theology, in favor of faithful disbelief.

This provisional rejection is grounded in Morse’s reading of the Bible, rather than in a philosophical opposition to doubt or skepticism. This notion of a call to faithful disbelief, as well as the title of Morse’s book, is drawn from 1 John: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are

1 See, for example, current President Barack Obama’s website, which emphasizes the role of education in training people for jobs and aiding in the international competitiveness of the US economy. http://l.barackobama.com/issues/education/
3 Ibid., 5–7.
from God.” It is this kind of faithful disbelief that characterizes Paul’s claim that love “is faithful in all things” in 1 Corinthians 13:7. This faithful love is shown to practice a “testing of spirits” in Philippians 1:9–10 and 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, in which Paul closely associates love for God and God’s Spirit with the discernment, in love, of what is good and of God from what is evil.

Morse further explains faithful disbelief in contrast to what could be called unfaithful belief, which is marked by allegiance to those things that are not from God. As an example of such unfaithful belief, Morse focuses on false hope, particularly as it is rejected by Rachel, who was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin (the ancestors of three of the twelve tribes of Israel), according to Genesis. Rachel, who died giving birth to Benjamin and may have been buried near Bethlehem, is mentioned in Matthew’s gospel, in a quote from Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” Morse focuses on the image of Rachel’s refusal to be consoled in the light of what had just been narrated in Matthew, the mass execution of the children of Bethlehem by King Herod’s order. Any explanation that would offer comfort in such suffering through reference to God is rejected by Rachel. In Matthew, it is only in the coming of God into human flesh that there seems to be a hopeful response to Rachel’s lament. Only what comes from God is to be faithfully accepted; all other hopes are false and acceptance of God is to be faithfully accepted; all other hopes are false and acceptance of their consolation is unfaithful.

Through the notion of faithful disbelief, Morse addresses the question of what defines the task of Christian theology. In his view, Christian theology is the critical study of Christian disbeliefs, performed in the interest of discerning what, among Christian doctrines, is not of God. This view of theology will serve as my starting point in questioning the particular task of academic theology in the context I described above, in which education is primarily positioned as a strategic investment supporting national economic competitiveness. In order to think along with Morse as I consider this question, I will turn to two thinkers whose works together illuminate elements of Morse’s work that are particularly relevant to my question. Specifically, I will discuss the work of Swiss theologian Karl Barth as it intersects with the insights of French thinker Michel Foucault in order to investigate the ways in which power influences Christian understandings of the Word of God.

Of Barth’s many works, Church Dogmatics I.1 stands out as particularly, though not uniquely, relevant to an attempt to look into what Morse means when he discusses the “spirits” Christian theologians are to test, and how those spirits come to make claims upon Christians. When Morse discusses spirits, those claims which are to be faithfully believed or disbelieved, he writes in much the same terms as Barth does when discussing church proclamation. According to Barth, human speech that presents itself as proclamation claims to be human speech in and by which God Himself speaks like a king through the mouth of his herald, and which is meant to be heard and accepted as speech in and by which God Himself speaks, and therefore heard and accepted in faith as divine decision concerning life and death, as divine judgment and pardon, eternal Law and eternal Gospel both together.

This is very similar to Morse’s notion of spirits, which are ideas passed on in human language by people who claim divine origin for these ideas. Barth is somewhat more specific regarding the types of speech that can claim to be proclamation, restricting this field to two types of speech: preaching (which can be either written or spoken) and sacrament. Barth takes preaching and sacrament to be the specific types of speech to which Jesus commissioned the church. Theology, the particular concern of this paper, is a separate task from proclamation but cannot be understood apart from it as dogmatic theology takes proclamation as its object of study.

In order to understand how Barth relates dogmatic theology to church proclamation, and through that understanding to gain some perspective on the role of academic theology today, it is necessary to look closely at two of Barth’s lengthy discussions of the Word of God, the word to which proclamation claims to witness. In paragraphs four and five of Church Dogmatics, Barth discusses what the Word of God is (its nature) and how the Word of God comes to humanity (its forms). It is important to note that in presenting these two subjects, I will be reversing Barth’s order of discussion. While I will discuss what Barth takes the word of God to be before explicating how it comes to humans, Barth significantly takes the reverse approach, for a reason that should become clear shortly.

Barth discusses the nature of the Word of God under three interrelated headings: the Word as speech of God, the Word as act of God, and the Word as mystery of God. By speech, Barth means “the form in which reason communicates with reason and person with person.” I take Barth to be using the term reason here to refer more or less to a capacity to make meaning of things in relation to each other and, by extension, to all things in the world. Such definitions are provisional, at best, when used in reference to Barth’s work, for the same reason that his presentation of the Word of God reverses mine. With that in mind,

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4 1 John 4:1a (RSV)
5 Christopher Morse, Not Every Spirit, 3–4.
6 Ibid., 7–8.
7 Matthew 2:18, quoting Jeremiah 31:15.
8 Christopher Morse, Not Every Spirit, 7–11.
9 Ibid., 31.
11 Christopher Morse, Not Every Spirit, 3–5.
12 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Volume I.1, 53–55.
13 Ibid., 48.
though, Barth seems to say that speech is rational in the sense that both speaker and listener will make sense of what is said in relation to their understanding of the world. This speech is remarkable, if not seemingly impossible, in that it is between divine reason, founded in perfect understanding of the world, and human reason, built upon an understanding of the world that is distorted insofar as it differs from the divine understanding.

Equally important, the Word of God is personal speech. God’s speech is personal insofar as that speech, the Word of God, is God’s own person. As with human persons, God’s Word is irreducible to a system of ideas bound in human language. As such personal speech, God’s Word is unknowable apart from its coming to us as the person of God, specifically in the person of Jesus Christ. It is this personal nature of God’s Word that explains both Barth’s choice to present the “how” of God’s Word before its “what” and the unsuitability of seeking neat definitions for Barth’s chosen terminology. Barth structured his treatment of God’s Word as he did because the nature of God’s Word, in his view, cannot be understood apart from how it comes to us. Barth’s terminology eludes precise definition because Barth rejects the idea that he could capture the object of those terms, God’s Word, in neatly systematized theology.

Accordingly, we can know this personal speech of God only as speech that is directed toward us and not as a thing in itself. From the character of this speech as directed toward us, three points of immediate interest follow. First, the Word of God is not spoken by humans to humans. It comes to us from outside that which we perceive as our world as something new each time we hear it. Second, the Word of God, as it is spoken by the one who defines our reality, “smites our existence.” It challenges our perception of reality neither by answering our questions nor by questioning our answers. Instead, it challenges our perception of reality by coming to us as the person of God, specifically in the person of Jesus Christ. It is this personal nature of God’s Word that explains both Barth’s choice to present the “how” of God’s Word before its “what” and the unsuitability of seeking neat definitions for Barth’s chosen terminology. Barth structured his treatment of God’s Word as he did because the nature of God’s Word, in his view, cannot be understood apart from how it comes to us. Barth’s terminology eludes precise definition because Barth rejects the idea that he could capture the object of those terms, God’s Word, in neatly systematized theology.

Accordingly, we can know this personal speech of God only as speech that is directed toward us and not as a thing in itself. From the character of this speech as directed toward us, three points of immediate interest follow. First, the Word of God is not spoken by humans to humans. It comes to us from outside that which we perceive as our world as something new each time we hear it. Second, the Word of God, as it is spoken by the one who defines our reality, “smites our existence.” It challenges our perception of reality neither by answering our questions nor by questioning our answers. Instead, it challenges our perception of reality by coming to us as the ground of reality, a ground for which we have no explanation and, likely, no conceptual room. Third, the Word of God, as directed to us, shows us as the ground of reality, a ground for which we have no explanation, and what we claim to master God’s Word, capturing it perfectly within human words. The Word of God, as God’s speech and God’s act, is always God’s mystery, eluding our firm grasp. Beyond its personal nature, which resists any capture by human words, the Word of God itself determines whether or not we really speak of it at all when we claim to do so. We cannot construct for ourselves an accurate idea of the Word of God over against which we can judge whether or not supposed proclamation has witnessed to the Word.

That is not to say that the Word’s form is wholly foreign to us. Rather, the Word of God is mysterious precisely in its thoroughly worldly form. When God speaks through humans, God really speaks through humans, using human modes of address. Preaching is not only proclamation; it is human address. The Word of God is not mysterious solely in the foreignness of its content, but also in the delivery of that foreign content in surprisingly familiar form. This meeting of holy and secular in the Word of God can perhaps be best understood in light of Barth’s identification of the Word of God with Jesus Christ, in whom God took on human flesh. As in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God is not hidden behind human form, for us to cleverly detect, but takes up that humanity as its own form. In its secular form, the Word claims humanity for God just as God offers us life through the content of the Word.

In examining its form, we turn from a discussion of the nature of the Word of God (as God’s speech, act, and mystery) toward an enumeration of the forms in which it comes to humanity, making a transition that requires a clarification. Up until now, I have written of the form taken by the Word of God. Barth, however, actually lays out three forms in which the Word of God comes to us. The distinc-

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14 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I.1, 132.
15 Ibid., 134–137.
16 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I.1, 137–139.
17 Ibid., 140–142.
19 Ibid., 160–161.
20 Ibid., 162–166.
21 Ibid., 172–176.
tion of these three forms from one another structures Barth’s discussion of the how of the Word of God, in contrast to its what.

The form of God’s Word discussed first by Barth is the form most explicitly relevant to an inquiry into theology along Morse’s lines: proclamation, or “the Word of God preached.” Proclamation stands in relation to the Word of God in four ways that are related to each other in such a way that Barth compares them to “four concentric circles.” First, the Word of God stands as the commission upon which proclamation is to be justified. True proclamation is not justified by the search for answers to human problems; it is founded upon a divine command that transcends the human motivations into which the Word of God insinuates itself. This relation of commission is the “outermost circle” among these relations, as each subsequent relation of Word of God and proclamation assumes this first relation.

Second, the Word of God is the theme of real proclamation. Speech necessarily has a theme, and the various academic disciplines and forms of literature take the assorted objects of human perception as their themes. Objects as varied as subatomic particles, ecological systems, human emotions, international politics, and existential questions are each discussed by various ways of speaking. The theme of proclamation, however, is not primarily an object of human perception. Insofar as it is truly proclaimed, the Word of God is not directly perceived and reported by its proclaimer. Instead, it asserts itself as the theme of proclamation. Third, as was discussed above, the Word of God is the judgment and criterion of its own proclamation. While proclamation can be judged by human standards as far as its rhetorical elegance or clarity are concerned, there is no human test for its status as true proclamation. As the theme of proclamation challenges human perception, human judgment falls short as the criterion of proclamation. Finally, in the innermost circle of these relations, “the Word of God is the event itself by which proclamation becomes real proclamation.” Proclamation does not only find its commission, theme, and criterion in the Word of God. In the event of real proclamation, God takes on the form of human words and acts in our world making proclamation what it claims to be.

According to Barth, the church engages in proclamation “in recollection of past revelation and in expectation of future revelation,” relating to two modes of revelation which, as each refers to the Word of God, are identical to one another. This recollection is directed toward something that comes from outside the church and is not the recollection of a knowledge that is inherent in humanity. Insofar as Christians undertake such recollection, Barth argues, we turn to the Bible, the second form of the Word of God.25 As the written Word of God, the Bible is the means by which we recollect past revelation, but it is a record of and witness to that revelation and not the revelation itself.26

The Bible is not, then, some kind of timeless deposit of revelation, bearing witness to the essence of the Church. As the means of the recollection of past revelation, the Bible stands in relation to the ongoing proclamation of the Church as something both similar to and different from it. It is similar to proclamation in that it is temporally bounded, being a record only of past proclamation. In reporting past proclamation, the Bible also witnesses to the Word of God and stands in a continuity of such witness with ongoing proclamation, with “Jeremiah and Paul at the beginning and the modern preacher of the Gospel at the end of one and the same series.”

However, all terms of this series are not equal. The modern preacher stands as the successor to and subordinate of Jeremiah and Paul, among others. She or he is in the presence of an authoritative teacher when reading from the Bible and proclaiming in light of its witness. Further, the Bible is not changed by the situation of the Church (translation would seem, for Barth, to be open-ended and practically necessary exegetical commentary on the Bible rather than alteration of it), as ongoing proclamation necessarily is. Instead, the Bible is determinative of proclamation. Scripture “confronts” the Church in its proclamation as the Word of God which is the basis of such proclamation. Ultimately, like proclamation, Scripture is the Word of God only insofar as God speaks through it and claims its hearers in faith.27

Both proclamation and the Bible witness to, but are not themselves, the third form of the Word of God: Jesus Christ, the Word of God revealed. The definitive revelation of God, by God, to humanity is the Incarnation. In Jesus, the full reality and glory of God took on human flesh, revealing once-for-all that God, wholly different from us, is with us. The person of Jesus Christ is identical to the Word of God revealed. It to this person, then, that proclamation and Scripture witness, though none of these forms of the Word of God is known to us apart from the others:

The revealed Word of God we know only from the Scripture adopted by Church proclamation or the proclamation of the Church based on Scripture. The written Word of God we know only through the revelation which fulfills proclamation or through the proclamation fulfilled by revelation. The preached Word of God we know only through the revelation attested in Scripture or the Scripture which attests revelation.28

The three forms of the Word of God are unknown apart from each other, but they are not identical and they relate to one another through what could be thought of as a chain of witnessing, in which Scripture is subordinate to revelation and proclamation is subordinate to Scripture. That is, in the person of Jesus Christ, God spoke through God’s own lips. Scripture refers away from itself to the reality of God revealed in Jesus and is the Word of God insofar as God speaks through that witness to revelation. Proclamation is bound by its commission in the

24 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Volume I.1, 85–90.
25 Ibid., 96–98.
26 Ibid., 108.
27 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Volume I.1, 98–107.
28 Ibid., 113–118.
Bible and thus witnesses to the reality revealed in Jesus only as guided by Scripture. To summarize, revelation is mediated to us by Scripture, which is mediated to us by proclamation, while proclamation is authorized by Scripture, which is authorized by revelation.

It is now, finally, possible to meaningfully discuss how Barth relates dogmatic theology to proclamation, the Word of God preached, and therefore to gain a better understanding of Morse’s notion of testing the spirits and the task of academic theology today. For Barth, theology is by no means a capturing or cataloguing of God and God’s attributes within systems of human language. Rather, it is a critical study of proclamation. It is not the source of proclamation, but instead seeks to test the coherence of proclamation to the Word of God as it has been received in other times and places. Theology is by no means a foolproof corrective to false proclamation and its success is not marked by a renewed understanding of the Word of God, but instead by a sense of uneasiness about the potential for proclamation to go astray from its commission to witness faithfully to the Word of God. It is, therefore, an open-ended task that is itself subject to continual testing, as Morse also recognizes. How, though, can we think of these false spirits or false proclamation that Barth and Morse would have theology challenge?

It is in further exploring this critical function of theology that Foucault will be particularly helpful. The central task of dogmatic theology seems to be an investigation of a gap or discontinuity between the Word of God and at least some of the words that claim to bear God’s Word. Such discontinuities between human words and the things to which they seem to refer are prevalent objects of study in Foucault’s work. In order to focus the disparate sites of Foucault’s investigation on this theme of discontinuity, I will organize my discussion of Foucault through reference to Gilles Deleuze’s *Foucault*, which includes a trio of essays on precisely this theme under the heading “Topology: ‘Thinking Otherwise’.” As Deleuze offers a fairly abstract distillation of works that were tied to studies of particular situations, I will punctuate my explication of Deleuze’s reading of Foucault with Foucault’s own writings on those situations as such connections seem helpful.

In *Foucault*, Deleuze suggests that Foucault’s investigations into history were to a great extent inquiries into ways of seeing and ways of saying in particular times (particularly in Europe). Deleuze refers to these ways of seeing as “visibilities” and to ways of saying as “statements.” Before discussing the discontinuity between these visibilities and their corresponding statements, between ways of seeing and speaking about what seem to be the same objects, it will be helpful to more clearly explain what statements and visibilities are and what they are not.

As ways of saying, statements are not reducible to “words, phrases, or propositions.” Rather, these elements of language constitute the material that is shaped by statements. Statements are not the products of speaking subjects. Instead, statements arise from a “great murmur,” in which individual speaking subjects cannot be identified. The internet can serve as a helpful, if imperfect, analogy for this great murmur. Vast amounts of information circulate from person to person on the internet, but much of it can hardly be traced back to an individual originating source. We can repeat information we have read on the internet and, sometimes, might not remember that we had read it at all; it may seem self-evident. In a sense, it is as though the information we have read, but for which we have no clear source, speaks through us and spreads optimistic economic forecasts or suspicions about certain foods. Out of the great murmur, a mixture of analog and digital communication, arise ways of speaking that seem to naturally suit various situations in which and objects about which we can speak.

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault (looking at the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries rather than our information age) discusses a shift in the uses of language that illustrates the rising of statements from out of the great murmur. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, according to Foucault, language was assumed to be the medium through which all things were known. Knowledge was thought to be a process of speaking with increasing precision about a world in which words could correspond to things on a one-to-one basis. In the nineteenth century, as European linguists transformed language itself into an object of study, Foucault notes the rise of distinct ways of using language. Scientific symbolic logic uses language, much as in the preceding centuries, to construct representations of observed phenomena. Literature, however, develops certain ways of playing with language that reject the use of language to represent or investigate observed objects, including language itself. Most novelists, poets, and songwriters put words together in ways that would have little meaning in a scientific journal and most scientists put words together in ways that would be not be very meaningful in a poetry anthology. They can use the same words, even the same sentences, drawn from the same murmur of language, but they are not saying the same things. Given their vocations, they do not have access to the same statements, and Foucault works to delineate and track these different ways of speaking.

Visibilities can be thought of in much the same way as statements. Irreducible to visible objects or scenes, visibilities are the ways in which those objects and scenes are visible. In Deleuze’s reading, Foucault rejects the notion that seeing is an unmediated activity. People cannot look at an object or scene and see it as absolutely anything; we see what we think can be seen. For light, reflecting from an object, to be seen as a ball or, reflecting from a scene, to be seen as a riot, balls and riots must be thinkable. Most people do not see aliens when they look into the same night sky as those who report UFO sightings. Much as statements seem to

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30 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I.1, 136–137.
31 Ibid., 48.
32 Ibid., 73.
33 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 34.
35 Ibid., 52–56.
precede our speaking them and do not originate from us as seeing subjects, visibilities shape how we see. 37 I take this notion of sight to be theoretically inclusive of other forms of sensory perception, though Foucault himself focused on the visual. It would seem, though, that we similarly hear or taste as, such that these insights would not apply only to seeing people.

To a great extent, statements and visibilities together compose human knowledge. We know, on some level, that which we sense or speak about. Most importantly, for this paper, common sense (or perhaps simply the mechanics of the English language, though French was Foucault’s native tongue) would suggest that if I see a light in the sky and say to a child, “Look, a star,” I intend my words though, Foucault denies that the object of one’s senses and the object of one’s output of the same information in different forms. By Deleuze’s estimation, and spoken about the same thing. Knowledge seems to involve the smooth input and output of the same information in different forms. By Deleuze’s estimation, though French was Foucault’s native tongue) would suggest that if I see a light in the sky and say to a child, “Look, a star,” that I have seen and spoken about the same thing. Knowledge seems to involve the smooth input and output of the same information in different forms. By Deleuze’s estimation, though, Foucault denies that the object of one’s senses and the object of one’s words are one and the same. 38 If I say to a child, “Look, a star,” I intend my words to direct the child’s attention to the object I see. My words, however, in fact refer to an idea of a star and not the object that I see. My words, in a sense, have attempted to reach out and capture that shining object as a “star,” rather than as a flying saucer or an angel.

Foucault illuminates this gap between seeing and speaking early in his career, in Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason. Examining the development of the understanding and diagnosis of melancholia and mania in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Foucault argues:

The essential thing is that the enterprise did not proceed from observation to the construction of explanatory images; that on the contrary, the images assured the initial role of synthesis, that their organizing force made possible a structure of perception, in which at last the symptoms could attain their significant value and be organized as the visible presence of the truth. 39

Ideas structured by words played the definitive part in understanding and diagnosing the psychiatric conditions of melancholia and mania, such that visual observations were interpreted in accordance with these ideas, and were not the origin of these ideas. Melancholia, as an idea, came into the seventeenth century in association with coldness, darkness, and heaviness. Over these centuries, melancholia was variously explained by an overabundance of cold, dark, and thick black bile in the body, the failure of overly thick, heavy blood to circulate to the brain, and the sluggish vibration of excessively damp nerve fibers. Melancholia’s behavioral symptoms ranged from inattention to cold and erratic physical gestures. 40 The psychiatrists studied by Foucault were guided in understanding their observations by the ideas of melancholia and mania. From out of the many observations that could have been made about these people, the psychiatrists saw as coherent illnesses those behaviors and characteristics that were compatible with these organizing ideas. Perception was shaped by articulable concepts, but not in abstraction from those in whom madness seemed to manifest. Rather, “the madman’s body was regarded as the visible and solid presence of his disease.” 41

Madness and those with whom it is associated are different objects: madness is an articulable idea, while people are, on the level of visual observation, material objects. However, these different objects, come together, such that a person can come to be seen as not just a person, but as a mad person. Statements and visibilities, our ways of speaking and seeing, come together, despite lacking common objects. When we speak, we are restricted by the objects we perceive and seek to speak about. However, our very perception of those objects is shaped by the speech of others. 42 Words, before we have the chance to speak them, reach out to capture the objects we see. How does this happen, though, in such a way that we come to believe that we rightly see a crazy person?

Visibilities and statements, the elements of knowledge, do not come always together haphazardly. Instead, knowledge is molded in institutions and is shaped by power. 43 Before applying Foucault’s insights to the theological thoughts of Barth and Morse, I will briefly discuss Foucault’s notion of power and its relation to knowledge-shaping institutions. As Foucault lays it out in a well-known passage in The History of Sexuality, Volume 1, power is marked by several qualities that differ from the ways in which power is often spoken of. In the context of his book’s examination of the ways in which sexuality has been regulated socially, Foucault argues that power is not held by individuals or groups, but is a matter of relations between them. It is not external to relationships, but is the effect of inequalities in relationships and produces inequalities. Power is not impressed upon smaller units, such as businesses or schools, by larger units. Instead, the relations of inequality that thrive in businesses or schools sustain the larger-scale dynamics of inequality in entire societies. Finally, power relations are “both intentional and nonsubjective.” The actions that result from and sustain these inequalities in relationships work toward the end of sustaining these inequalities. This is not to say, however, that there is a mastermind or sinister cabal directing all the relationships that constitute power. Instead, like statements, power arises from a great murmur, guiding

37 Gilles Deleuze, Foucault, 52–57.
38 Gilles Deleuze, Foucault, 61–63.
40 Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization, 117–131.
41 Ibid., 159.
42 Gilles Deleuze, Foucault, 65–68.
43 Gilles Deleuze, Foucault, 75–77.
the actions of those who stand in positions of privilege in various relationships without clearly originating from any.

In this last sense, in particular, one can see that the mechanics of power could mesh with the gears of statements and visibilities. Power relations become entrenched in society through the shaping of knowledge in institutions. Through institutions, such as the state, power relations are brought in line with each other, such that there comes to be a pattern that links power relations across society: as an example, men have advantages over women in US workplaces partly because institutions in this country (e.g., family, schools) promote locally performed ways of seeing and speaking about women as less suited to success in workplaces (as less assertive or career oriented, for example), and these ways of seeing and speaking shape individual relations between workers, managers, and employers. Deleuze clarifies the nature and role of institutions:

There is no immediate global integration [of power relations]. There is, rather, a multiplicity of local and partial integrations, each one entertaining an affinity with certain relations or particular points. The integrating factors or agents of stratification make up institutions: not just the State, but also the Family, Religion, Production, the Marketplace, Art itself, Morality, and so on. The institutions are not sources or essences, and have neither essence nor interiority. They are practices or operating mechanisms which do not explain power, since they presuppose its relations and are content to ‘fix’ them, as part of a function that is not productive but reproductive. There is no State, only state control, and the same holds for all other cases.

Institutions (e.g., the family) change over time as the practices of knowledge that constitute them (e.g., parenting) change. Such institutions reproduce the power relations which shape them through the ways of seeing and speaking that provide them with a sense of coherence. It is in considering proclamation as the knowledge shaping practice that defines the institution of the church that the insights of Foucault can be applied to the theological work of Barth and, in turn, Morse.

Foucault, particularly as read by Deleuze, demonstrates that through the gap between their objects, ways of speaking shape ways of seeing and, in doing so, en-trench relations of inequality. Proclamation can be thought of in this way. When a preacher speaks, either in the context of preaching or the administration of sacraments, his or her words can shape the perceptions of his or her congregation. Particular humans, groups, or even the earth itself can be made to appear righteous or sinful, capable or needy, trustworthy or deceitful, important or unworthy of consideration, desirable or revolting. Preachers can do this shaping explicitly, by naming their objects as sinful or turning certain people away from the communion table. This shaping can be done implicitly, as well, when a preacher simply does not speak on a certain issue or regularly links certain biblical characters who are perceived as capable, righteous, etc. to certain people or groups in the world.

These shaped ways of seeing then affect the actions of the congregation. Congregants who are healthcare providers may act differently to the apparently sinful than to the apparently righteous. In their interactions with social services, congregants may advocate effectively for themselves or fail to do so depending on whether or not they view their needs (e.g., living in a situation of intimate violence) as resulting from their own sinful behavior or that of others. Congregants who are teachers may act differently to the apparently capable and the apparently needy. As a congregation or even as a denomination, entire ministries may be shaped by these ways of seeing. These ministerial decisions include who can be married, who can be ordained as a minister, where and among whom church buildings should be placed, and what stance churches should take regarding mass incarceration or immigration law. Foucault opens up this way of seeing the power relations that are tied to preaching.

With this understanding of preaching in view, Barth can be read as suggesting that dogmatic theology is the task of criticizing this shaping of perception by preachers and as pointing to the criterion by which such criticism should make its judgments. The criterion of proclamation, for Barth, is the Word of God. The Word of God, as both the speech and act of God, is “not merely, or even primarily, the object of human perception.” Reading Barth through Foucault, then, preaching is to be judged by the extent to which it is speech shaped by the Word of God rather than speech seeking to capture the Word of God as an object of perception. The task of a theologian is, then, to ask, “Is this the Word of God that I hear or read being preached?” From this guiding question, three more narrowly focused questions seem particularly useful for the critical work of theology, in Barth’s sense.

First, in speech that claims to be proclamation, is God’s Word being witnessed to as the speech and act of God or is an attempt being made to capture God’s Word through human words? According to Barth, the Word of God is simultaneously God’s speech and God’s act, while human words are separated from our acts. Like Foucault, Barth recognizes that the objects of human words do not match up with the objects perceived by humans. We can intend our words to direct others to our acts, but such direction is an attempted shaping of the perception of our acts by those others. As God’s speech is God’s act, however, there is no such gap into which power can insinuate itself. Insofar as there is a gap between speech and act in the supposed Word of God to which proclamation points, God is not speaking through this proclamation as when, for example, God’s healing and saving action is preached as dependent upon the actions of a human figure of authority, upon the acceptance of certain beliefs by a preacher’s audience, or upon their monetary donations.


45 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, 75.

46 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume 1.1, 88.
Second, in speech that claims to be proclamation, whose speech is shaping the perceptions of the audience? For both Foucault and Barth, words can have the power to shape those who hear them. Deleuze uses the term visibilities to encapsulate Foucault’s thoughts about the ways of perceiving that are shaped. Barth writes in terms of old and new humans: those whose perceptions of the world are shaped by human words and the Word of God, respectively, not that any of us live fully as new humans. In criticizing proclamation, then, theologians can ask whether the words of the preacher reflect ways of speaking that are reproduced by the institutions that have shaped the preacher, and that he or she now reproduces, or new ways of speaking that may reflect the Word of God, ways of speaking that are productive of something new and not simply reproductive of the old.

Third, in speech that claims to be proclamation, what kinds of institutionalized power relations are being supported, reproduced, or produced, and which are being challenged? Foucault writes of power relations in terms of inequality and of institutions that take these inequalities and propagate them, promoting widespread patterns of exploitation in which some humans are placed above others. Insofar as we can understand the Word of God as shaping power relations between humans, it would not be in terms of these human inequalities. The only inequality implied in the coming of the Word of God to humanity is the inequality between a God who can heal and humans who need to be healed. Theologians can ask, then, whether a preacher promotes institutions and associated power relations that place some humans above others, or institutions and power relations that would place all humans in relations of healing with God.

For now, then, I argue that asking such questions is what academic theologians do, particularly in the context of an educational system that seeks to capture all things within the ways of speaking and seeing reproduced by an exploitative global market. In each of these three questions, what is required of theologians is both a looking toward the Word of God as witnessed to in various times and places, and an analysis of the interactions of power and knowledge in the act of proclamation. Each of these investigative tasks, as well as their synthesis, would necessarily be open-ended, given that theologians are not, by any means, those who most clearly hear the Word of God, but are so often those who most easily succeed in the very academic, economic, and ecclesial institutions that would seek to capture the Word of God and those who would hear it.

Lest I lose sight of what guided me to this way of thinking about the task of theology, I conclude by expressing my hope that this kind of critical theological inquiry embodies that testing of spirits that is characterized by Christopher Morse’s faithful disbelief. The call to challenge the separation of God’s speech from God’s act is an extension of Morse’s rejection of false comfort of the sort that was offered to Rachel. Just as Rachel refused to believe that God’s healing would come in the form of empty consolation in the midst of evil, theologians can deny those words that would squelch lament and seek any consolation short of the healing power displayed in the Resurrection. The call to challenge the shaping of human perspectives by institutions that coordinate exploitative power relations rather than by a healing God, is inspired by Morse’s insistence that theologians test the origin of the spirits that come to them in Christian doctrine. The call to challenge preaching that would promote or reproduce these exploitation-propagating institutions follows from Morse’s denial of those things that are not from God, but that would claim our allegiance. Finally, in turning to my teacher for guidance I hope that I have demonstrated, if not explicitly theorized, the importance of the communal nature of this theological task of faithful disbelief.
The Problem of Universal Salvation in the Theology of Emil Brunner

Richard Paul Cumming

This article examines the approach of the twentieth-century dialectical theologian, Emil Brunner (1889–1966), to the perennial theological problem of the possibility of universal salvation, a topic which has occupied the reflections of Christopher Morse, whose scholarship we honor in the present volume. Emil Brunner was Professor of Systematic and Practical Theology at the University of Zürich and an eminent and prolific theologian in his own right. However, although Brunner exerted considerably greater influence than Barth upon the contemporaneous North American theological scene, he is known today primarily for his dispute with Barth over the question of natural theology. In light of the fact that Brunner’s thought has been largely neglected since the 1930s, whereas the study of Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics still represents a rite of passage in the context of theological formation, one often finds that where Brunner is mentioned at all, it is habitually in the context of Barth’s theology, and consequently Brunner’s own theology has generally been interpreted in the shadow of Barth’s titanic enterprise. Indeed, at certain points, Brunner himself lends credibility to this hermeneutical approach to his work. In the present article, however, I shall attempt to exposit Brunner’s position for itself, and not primarily in terms of its engagement with Barth.

In this article, I shall first sketch the principal aspects of Augustine’s approach to the problem of universal salvation in order to provide a basic context for Brunner’s approach to the topic. I shall then outline Brunner’s approach to the problem, following which I shall remark both upon the ways in which Brunner’s approach to the problem of universal salvation in his S.T.M. thesis on this topic. See Stephen Andrew Hayes, Emil Brunner’s Criticism of Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Election, S.T.M. Thesis, McGill University, Montreal, 1970 (unpublished manuscript in McLennan Library, McGill University, Montreal).


3 See Emil Brunner, The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics Vol. I., trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), 135 where he writes that “it is very cheering to note that Karl Barth...has come to the same conclusion.”


7 Fulgentius, Selected Works, 88.

8 Fulgentius, Selected Works, 101.

9 Fulgentius, Selected Works, 104. Emphasis mine.

10 Fulgentius, Selected Works, 104. Emphasis mine.

11 Eno in Fulgentius, Selected Works, 59.

Him, as belonging to this spiritual Jerusalem.”13 Another example, the Sibyl of Erythrae, “speaks out against such [pagan] gods and their worshippers so forcefully that she is, it seems, to be included among those who belong to the City of God.”14 According to Augustine, this affirmation of the possibility of salvation outside the historical community of faith can be understood to be consonant with the solo Christo of the Christian faith, since “it is not to be believed...that this was granted to anyone unless he had received a divine revelation of ‘the one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.’”15 This possibility, moreover, is limited to this life, since after death one’s destiny is fixed: if one has remained “impenitent” to the point of death, one is to be counted “as one of the devil’s faction.”16

We have seen that Augustine affirms the possibility of salvation outside the visible body of Israel. His position on the possibility of universal salvation, however, is uncompromisingly negative. In Book XXI of his City of God, Augustine indicates some degree of familiarity with the proposition that all human beings, wicked as well as good, will be saved by virtue of the divine mercy, noting that there are some Christians who harbor hope for this outcome. While Augustine views these Christians as well-meaning but deluded, referring to them as “merciful brethren of ours,”17 he nevertheless accuses them of being misled and inconsistent. According to Augustine, the universalists are misled because they inadvertently offend God by depriving him of his capacity to judge and condemn the wicked.18 Furthermore, they are inconsistent because, whereas their argument that God will be merciful on all the wicked relies upon the proposition that “this opinion [universal human salvation] is good and true because it is merciful,” they do not take this proposition to its logical conclusion: the salvation of the fallen angels. As Augustine writes: “Why...does this stream of mercy flow far enough to encompass the whole human race and then dry up as soon as it reaches the angels! Yet those whose belief we are here discussing do not venture to extend their mercy beyond human beings, so as to provide even for the redemption of the devil himself,” a possibility which Augustine declares to be quite inconceivable, since it represents “a distortion of the righteous words of God.”19 Augustine is convinced that the impossibility of both universal human salvation and the salvation of the fallen angels is enshrined in Scripture; and that to propose the possibility of universal human salvation would entail that “the sentence of God pronounced on all the wicked, angels as well as men, [must] be true in the case of angels but false in that of men,” meaning that “the conjectures of men will be worth more than the word of God.”20 This does not entail, however, that all the wicked are necessarily condemned, for there are certain sins “which impede us in the attainment of the kingdom of God but which can nonetheless find pardon,” not through our own conversion, but “through the merits of holy friends.”21

We have seen that Augustine affirms the possibility and actuality of salvation outside the historical community of faith, but denies emphatically the possibility of universal salvation. One of the anticipable objections to Augustine’s position, which, as we shall see, is of especial relevance to Brunner’s approach, is that the concept of divine judgment attributes mutable states to God. Augustine addresses this objection in Book XV, where he argues that “God’s anger is not a disturbance in the mind” and does not reflect mutability in God.22 According to Augustine, God’s action of saving or condemning a particular human being, insofar as it is linked with her own decision in history, either to love God or to love herself,23 does not entail any modification of God’s will or disposition towards her: “this is only the application of His immutable plan to mutable things,”24 his immutable plan being to create good and to “bring forth [good] from...evil.”25 Accordingly, Augustine explains in Book IX that biblical texts which speak of God’s anger are not to be interpreted as indicating a change in God himself: “according to the Scriptures, God Himself is angered; yet He is not disturbed by any passion. For this word is used to indicate the effect of His vengeance, rather than any disturbance to which He is subject.”26 In Book I, Augustine explains how this is possible, using the example of a fire to articulate how it is possible for singular divine providence to give rise to various effects: he writes, “in the same fire, gold glows but chaff smokes, and under the same flail straw is crushed and grain purified...by the same token, when one and the same force falls upon the good and the wicked, the former are purged and purified but the latter damned, ruined and destroyed.”27

**Brunner’s approach to the problem of universal salvation (I): Brunner’s doctrine of the historicity of faith and the possibility of universal salvation**

We have seen how Augustine affirms the possibility of salvation outside the visible Church while denying the possibility of universal salvation. One of the interesting aspects of Brunner’s approach to the topic is the fact that his position represents a complete inversion of Augustine’s position: according to Brunner, the act of justifying faith eventuates only within the historical community of faith, but this does not preclude the possibility of universal salvation.

According to Brunner, Jesus Christ is the event of the in-breaking of eternity into history, an in-breaking which constitutes the activating principle of faith:

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13 Augustine, *City of God*, 893.
14 Augustine, *City of God*, 851.
15 Augustine, *City of God*, 894.
16 Augustine, *City of God*, 1086.
17 Augustine, *City of God*, 1076.
19 Augustine, *City of God*, 1077.
20 Augustine, *City of God*, 1084.
27 Augustine, *City of God*, 12.
Christians believe in Jesus Christ because Jesus really is the Christ, the one who brings humanity into “contact with reality,” which, for Brunner, is the very essence of faith. As he writes: “Faith in Jesus Christ is living contact with reality, pure and simple; but it is certainly contact with reality of a special kind, and therefore it is also a way of coming into contact with reality which is itself of a peculiar character.” For Brunner, the distinguishing characteristic of this mode of contact with reality consists in the fact that the type of understanding manifested in the act of faith is a function not of the active understanding but of the receptive understanding: faith is an act of understanding by which the believer is grasped by the reality of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the essence of this faith is not a series of propositional affirmations. Rather, it is encounter with Jesus Christ: “faith is not primarily the acceptance of a dogma, but an ‘existential’ personal happening…. It is the self-surrender of our own person and its claim, its selfish will, to the God who encounters it in Christ. Faith is the most personal act conceivable, the surrender of self to the Redeemer who surrenders Himself. Faith in Jesus Christ is a total transformation of existence.”

Brunner claims, following Augustine, that it is only in the “encounter with Jesus Christ” that the human being can recognize her own fallen state and be converted: outside the sphere of this encounter with Jesus Christ, humanity “uses religion or morals to protect himself against the judgment of God.” Unlike Augustine, however, Brunner asserts that this faith-generating encounter can only take place within the context of the historical community of faith, the Ekklesia, which is the instrument of God’s self-communication: “the Lord uses its Word of witness to continue His work of self-communication.” Brunner argues that, because humanity is an historical being, the generation of human faith can only take place in history, “for apart from real history…there is no reality that in the strict sense transforms existence.” For this reason, Jesus Christ does not encounter the individual human being in an ahistorical fashion, but only by means of historical mediation. According to Brunner, this historical mediation is the apostolic witness of the Ekklesia, the “brotherhood resulting from faith in Christ.” It is only through the apostolic witness of the Ekklesia that the act of faith, the encounter in which one is grasped by the reality of Jesus Christ, takes place. As he states, “We can hear this message only through the witnessing Word of the witnesses. Thus the Word which creates faith is at the same time God’s Word and man’s word, Word of the Spirit, and paradosis, tradition. The Word about Christ is at the same time spiritual and historical. This character refers back to the Incarnation of the Word.”

The apostles encountered and received Christ directly, but “He does not make Himself known to us in the same way [as the apostles]. He makes Himself known to us through the collective witness of the Apostles.” Therefore, there is no room for a theology of a faith abstracted from the historical community, since “this Word can awaken true only when it is proclaimed by the Ekklesia, the brotherhood, in which alone it is vitally present.” “True faith is indivisibly both invisible and visible,” “invisible faith in Christ and [visible] existence in Christ.”

Outside the sphere of faith, which is the sphere of the historical community of faith, the fraternal Ekklesia, there is no salvation: faith is the condition of salvation. The offer of salvation in Jesus Christ applies only to those who believe, and who are thereby brought into the Ekklesia: “faith, precisely in its fully developed form as justifying faith, is always at once both individual faith and the faith which creates the Ekklesia as a brotherhood in Christ.” As for those outside the visible Ekklesia, “just as we ought to know that God alone in Jesus Christ is the God of Grace, and outside of Jesus Christ the God of Wrath, so ought we to know that He is only gracious to him who believes, but that He is not so to him who is outside the sphere of faith.”

In this regard, Brunner concedes that many who profess non-Christian belief systems may often show a certain reverence for God, but he argues that their rejection of the Christian faith proclaimed by the Ekklesia demonstrates that they have not surrendered themselves completely to the loving dominion of God, desiring instead to pursue a relationship with God on their own terms. They do not acknowledge their total dependence upon God but instead affirm their own autonomy insofar as they use their religion as an instrument to affirm their self-contrived standing before God.

At first sight, this is a far less inclusive soteriological model than Augustine’s, since it does not allow for the possibility of salvation outside the context of the historical encounter of the human being with Jesus Christ through the witness of his Ekklesia. Brunner’s adoption of this position, however, does not entail the impossibility of universal salvation. In fact, for Brunner, the point of the reality of exclusion and punishment for those who do not believe is to bring the human being to the event of decision, where she is required to decide for or against God. Without the threat of exclusion and punishment, the human being’s decision for or against God has no real impact upon her destiny, and the human being is thus dehumanized by being deprived of her responsibility for her own ontological orientation, be it for or against God. Because the human being is a free and respon-

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32 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 150–151.
33 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 137–138.
34 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 143.
35 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 128.
36 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 174–175.
37 Brunner, Dogmatics II, 371.
40 Cf. Brunner, Dogmatics I, 319.
41 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 319.
43 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 353.
44 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 147–148.
45 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 334–351.
sible creature, God respects the decision of the human being, either to accept or to reject him: “whoever excludes himself, is excluded; he who does not allow himself to be included, is not included. But he who allows himself to be included, he who believes, is elect.”46

Does this mean that there are actually people who do decide definitively against God, rejecting the offer of grace, and thereby excluding themselves from the salvific grace of God? Brunner’s response to this question is: not necessarily. He states that, when we speak of the fate of unbelievers, we should always qualify them as unbelievers “as yet,” since “everyone who believes has passed from unbelief to belief” and therefore it is possible that the one who is now an unbeliever may become a believer.47 According to Brunner, therefore, the state of unbelief has a certain fluidity and those who are at present “vessels of wrath” may become “the ‘saved’ at the end of the ages.”48 Brunner acknowledges that there are biblical passages with universalistic connotations as well as biblical passages which narrate the condemnation to be endured by those who do not believe: Brunner’s attitude to these two divergent scriptural strands is to affirm that both are the Word of God and constitute a “challenge” to decision for faith, which does not necessarily imply that there are actually any people who are not saved.49 For this reason we cannot deny the possibility of universal salvation.50

Given the fact that the preponderance of humanity does not profess the Christian faith, if it is the case that the justifying faith necessary for salvation is communicated only in the context of the historical encounter of the human being with the Ekklesia, how is universal salvation even a possibility? Concerning this question, Brunner notes two hypotheses. First, it is possible that the consummation of history is being deliberately delayed by God because humanity is not yet converted: “who will exclude the possibility that the postponement of the end of history is being deliberately delayed by God because humanity is not yet ‘converted’: ‘who will exclude the possibility that the postponement of the end of history is being deliberately delayed by God because humanity is not yet ‘converted’?”51 Second, it is possible that one may be able to encounter Christ after death: 1 Peter 3:19 records that Christ was vivified by the Holy Spirit and by his power “preached unto the Spirits in prison,” which for Brunner suggests that “the question whether the possibility of the decision of faith is limited to this earthly life...remains open.”52 This particular possibility of post-mortem encounter, is, we recall, precisely the one which Augustine had categorically excluded. However, Brunner’s insistence upon the necessity of a personal encounter with and acceptance of Christ positions him to obviate Augustine’s objection to the possibility of universal salvation; namely, that it detracts from God’s judgment upon the wicked.

Affirming the possibility of universal salvation, Brunner nevertheless rejects the attempt to propose universal salvation as a theological doctrine. He develops a number of arguments against the doctrine of universal salvation, to which I now turn.

BRUNNER’S APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION (2): BRUNNER’S REJECTION OF THE DOCTRINE OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION

Brunner adopts an attitude of overt suspicion towards the advocates of the doctrine of universal salvation: he considers this perspective to be heretical, and, in its modern incarnation, to be the result of the pernicious infiltration of “an optimistic self-glorying picture of man.”53 As we have seen, Brunner is quite emphatic in his affirmation of the possibility of universal salvation. Nevertheless, he disavows the attempt to develop a universalistic soteriology on the grounds that its dogmatization necessarily precludes “the other possibility” of damnation,54 ‘confiscating’ from God both his freedom to elect in Jesus Christ and to reject outside Jesus Christ.55

Brunner presents four principal arguments against the characterization of universal salvation as a doctrine (as opposed to a hypothetical possibility). These are as follows: (1) the argument from Scripture; (2) the argument from doctrinal tradition; (3) the argument from human freedom; and (4) the argument from the separation of operations of the Father and Son. We now consider these in turn.

The first principal argument in Brunner’s critique of the doctrine of universal salvation is that this doctrine departs from the “clear teaching of the New Testament”: for Brunner, to divest the New Testament message of all content referring to a “judgment of wrath” is an irresponsible “perversion of the Christian message of Salvation.”56 Brunner summarizes his interpretation of the biblical message thus: “the Bible does not speak of universal salvation, but, on the contrary, of judgment and of a two-fold destiny: salvation and doom,”57 adducing a list of New Testament texts which make reference to this judgment, and averring that the New Testament clearly contains this notion of final damnation for unbelievers; and that, in departing from this, the universalist proposes “a fundamental perversion of the Christian message of salvation.”58

The second principal argument that Brunner develops is an argument from the history of doctrine. Brunner appeals to the normativity of the doctrinal tradition of the Church, and in his critique of Karl Barth’s doctrine of election, which he perceives as tending towards a universalistic soteriology, he charges Barth with

46 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 320. Emphasis in original.
47 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 416. Emphasis in original.
50 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 355.
51 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 400.
52 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 320. Emphasis in original.
53 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 334.
54 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 335.
55 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 314.
56 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 349.
57 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 552.
58 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 549.
This argument from tradition is developed further in Brunner’s appendix on apokatastasis, where he offers an abbreviated history of universalistic soteriological paradigms, stating that “the Church as a whole has recognised [them] as a heresy.” Brunner remarks that universalistic soteriological paradigms were heavily influenced by Platonist thought in antiquity, condemned by the Council of Constantinople, and only reacquired popularity from the Reformation era onwards, where they were adopted by Anabaptists, “enlightened thinkers” and, later, by liberal theologians like Schleiermacher. Completing his potted history of the doctrine of universal salvation in Christian tradition, Brunner concedes laconically: “this genealogy gives food for thought.” Without disclosing precisely what “food for thought” Brunner has in mind, from the tone of his discourse it is abundantly evident that he is endeavoring to generate an association between universalistic soteriology and theological heresy, and his implication is that it is therefore only “natural” that one should align oneself to such a soteriological paradigm if one has no compunction about infidelity to the doctrine of the church as it has been transmitted and sustained throughout the ages, substituting, as Schleiermacher did, a “monistic type of thought” for the authentic proclamation of the New Testament.

The third objection that Brunner raises to the doctrine of universal salvation relates to the human faculty of decision, to which we have already alluded: according to Brunner, a universalistic soteriology places exclusive emphasis on the divine election of humanity at the expense of the human being’s capacity for decision. This soteriological paradigm, which he discerns in Barth’s theology and which he terms “objectivism,” orients its focus exclusively onto the objective fact of divine salvific revelatory agency in Jesus Christ, considering the subjective element in the history of salvation, namely, the appropriation of and integration into this history of salvation through faith, to be redundant. The salient point of such a soteriological model is that God has decided for humanity and the gravity of humanity’s rejection of this decision in the act of unbelief is underemphasized because he “misses his chance of achieving his humanity...by missing his integration at the point where alone it can happen—namely in the Word of God.” The Word of God, Jesus Christ, encounters the human being historically, and in this encounter the self-seeking autonomous human being is confronted by the reality of its limitations and ultimate dependence on God, and it is called to affirm its true nature; that is, to belong to God. We are all made consciously cognizant of our subterranean awareness of our rebellion against God in the state of unbelief, and in the act of faith we respond to the call of Jesus Christ, accepting the objective truth of his lordship over us. “Only in faith is man’s being known as a being of the self received from the Thou...only thus has our self come to its true self...because the Lord encountered it in history in His challenging claim and the bestowal of His assurance...[through which] its true being and its true humanity are given to it. For only as a loving self—instead of a dominating, self-assertive self—can it be truly human...It cannot become a loving self by its own efforts, but only because it is ‘first loved.’” In the revelation-event, the human being is presented with a vision of reality in Christ, who rescues us “from the wrath of God,” and the “absolute free grace of God, purely generous love...applies to all in so far as they believe. Whoever excludes himself, is excluded...But he who allows himself to be included, he who believes, is ‘elect.’” Universalism is a form of “cheap grace” since it does not accept the destiny-forming character of the responsible decision of the individual not to believe and not to be elect.

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60 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 352–355.
61 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 353.
63 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 351.
64 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 351.
65 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 333.
66 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 140–143; 146.
67 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 146. Emphasis mine.
68 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 142.
69 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 142 & 150.
70 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 150.
71 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 145.
72 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 309. See 311 for emphasis on the individual character of this acceptance.
73 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 320.
74 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 422.
In connection with, and as a consequence of, this accentuation of the subjective-receptive dimension of the economy of salvation, Brunner distances himself from the doctrine of infant baptism. Brunner questions the value of baptism itself, but he affirms that whatever salvific function it may have, its efficacy is undoubtedly contingent upon faith.75 He claims that, for Paul, baptism was extrinsic to the faithful response of the human being to God; and that Paul’s teaching is irreconcilable with the practice of infant baptism.76 Consequently, Brunner pronounces his unambiguous theological sympathies with the Anabaptists on this issue, contending that the real reason for their ecclesiastical marginalization was the inextricable connection between the doctrine of infant baptism and the doctrine of the state church.77 Implicit in this assertion is the notion that, with the emergence of a secular state, infant baptism serves no discernible purpose, a conclusion which Brunner embraces, writing that “men of today, at least, have no time for a Church which on the one side indiscriminately baptizes every child...and on the other side preaches justification by faith alone.”78 In other words, baptism, insofar as it is conceived in soteriological perspective, must for Brunner express the individual’s response in faith.

For Brunner, the decision of a human individual for God is grounded in the act of God in his self-revelation in Jesus Christ, which issues from his gracious love for humanity and desire to be with human beings, and, potentially (subject to the universal reception of Jesus Christ in faith), with all humanity. The salient feature of this soteriological paradigm, and the one which introduces us to Brunner’s fourth major objection, is the relationship between the Father and the Son in Brunner’s theology. Brunner’s fourth principal objection to the doctrine of infant baptism is that underpins Brunner’s schematization of the divine ‘disposition’ towards the world. God is the Holy One, that is, the separate, exalted one.80 In his act of self-revelation in Jesus Christ, his holiness attaches itself to, and is concretely expressed as, Love: when the Father has dealings with the world in and through Jesus Christ, the love-modality of his holiness is operative. This love-modality of the divine self-disposition towards humanity in revelation in Jesus Christ is not discontinuous with the being of the Father in himself but rather constitutes the concrete expression of the being of the Father: “God the Father is really He who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ, in His Holy and Merciful authority, speaks to us as ‘I,’ the Holy and Merciful God Himself is really speaking to us. God is the One who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ as the God for us. ‘The love of Jesus is really the love of God. Thus God is not merely the Loving One in His relation to us, but in Himself He is Love.”81 On the other hand, when the Father has dealings with the world outside of this revelation in Jesus Christ, his holiness attaches itself to wrath. The divine work of salvation is God’s opus proprium (‘own work’) and his work of wrath is his opus alienum (‘other

One might enquire how God can dispose himself in two radically disjunctive ways towards his creation, and it is this distinction between the deus revelatus and the deus absconditus that underpins Brunner’s schematization of the divine ‘disposition’ towards the world. God is the Holy One, that is, the separate, exalted one.80 In his act of self-revelation in Jesus Christ, his holiness attaches itself to, and is concretely expressed as, Love: when the Father has dealings with the world in and through Jesus Christ, the love-modality of his holiness is operative. This love-modality of the divine self-disposition towards humanity in revelation in Jesus Christ is not discontinuous with the being of the Father in himself but rather constitutes the concrete expression of the being of the Father: “God the Father is really He who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ, in His Holy and Merciful authority, speaks to us as ‘I,’ the Holy and Merciful God Himself is really speaking to us. God is the One who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ as the God for us. ‘The love of Jesus is really the love of God. Thus God is not merely the Loving One in His relation to us, but in Himself He is Love.”81 On the other hand, when the Father has dealings with the world outside of this revelation in Jesus Christ, his holiness attaches itself to wrath. The divine work of salvation is God’s opus proprium (‘own work’) and his work of wrath is his opus alienum (‘other

In his articulation of the operational separation of the Father and the Son, Brunner relies extensively on Luther’s distinction between the deus revelatus (‘revealed God’) and the deus absconditus (‘hidden God’): the deus revelatus designates the loving God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ; whereas the deus absconditus designates the wrathful God, the Father as he is in himself, distinct from his act of self-revelation, and distinct from the Son. We encounter this wrathful God if we seek God outside of Christ.82 Brunner also describes these two modalities of divine agency by means of Luther’s concepts of the deus nudus (‘the naked God’) and the deus velatus (‘the veiled God’): we are unable to experience the magnificence of God in itself, so in revelation his “terrible majesty is graciously veiled... He makes Himself finite and knowable for our sakes.”83 There is a fundamental conceptual unity between these two polarities: the deus nudus is the deus revelatus and the deus velatus is the deus revelatus; the God who does not reveal himself is the God of naked majesty and power, and the God who does reveal himself is the one who reveals himself in mystery, “in this veiled form as love.”84

75 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 55.
76 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 54.
77 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 56.
78 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 98. Brunner also claims to leave the question of infant baptism open (cf. 78); there is, however, no reason whatsoever to suggest that he actually does so.
79 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 515.
80 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 199 & 214.
81 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 232–234. “There are works of the Father, which are most certainly not the works of the Son.” Brunner does claim that the classical formula opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa “must...be used with extreme caution,” which would appear to suggest a qualified approval of the formula; however, in his procedure it is beyond dispute that Brunner completely abandons this cardinal dogmatic principle.
82 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 232.
83 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 170.
84 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 171.
85 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 172.
86 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 158–160.
87 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 553.
88 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 227–228.
work’ or ‘alien work’) which he undertakes “cogentem malitiam hominum” (in light of human evil); that is, in response to the rejection of his loving dominion which unbelief entails. 89 In the case of the love-modality of the divine self-disposition in revelation, i.e., in his opus proprium, God reveals himself as he really is, but in this opus alienum, we do not have a real encounter with God, and we do not see God as he really is. 90 In this connection, Brunner approvingly cites Luther’s remarks attributing the operation of the divine wrath to the obstinacy of human unbelief: “he must make use of his sword...[to] crush those who try to resist his rule and his peaceful government, or to do harm to his people. But in his hall and in his castle there is nothing but mercy and love.” 91

To summarize the principal elements of Brunner’s critique of universalistic soteriology: according to Brunner, a theology of universal salvation (1) contradicts the message of the Bible; (2) departs from the doctrinal tradition of the Church; (3) results in an objectivism which does not give due emphasis to the responsibility of the human in the shaping of its destiny before God; and (4) does not take account of the separation of operations of the Father and the Son.

**DISCUSSION**

There is a great deal about Brunner’s position which is to be commended. I have already noted how Brunner’s position represents an inversion of Augustine’s position, and this inversion is significant because it attempts to do justice to the historicity of human experience. Brunner’s emphasis upon the historical mediation of faith through the Ekklesia follows directly from the affirmation of the historicity of the human being, avoiding the atomized conception of grace which conceives of grace embracing the atomized individual human being in abstraction from her situation in the world. Such an atomized conception of faith leads to an atomized conception of salvation, which does not take adequate cognizance of the fact that in the redemption of humanity Jesus Christ calls the human being not into a state of individual enrapturement but into his own communal, corporate reality which exists concretely in the world as the Kingdom of God, and the intrinsically social character of the Christian vocation is key to Brunner’s understanding of the Kingdom of God: “The final realization of His will is the coming of His Kingdom, the coming of that which brings humanity and history to their consummation. This is the basic content of the word basileia tou theou—God’s kingly rule...The sovereignty of God is present in the Person of Jesus Christ. The realm where Christ’s sovereignty is immediately exercised is the Ekklesia, meaning the fellowship of those who have their new life in Christ...Life in the Spirit is above all life in agape—life in a love that is not merely enjoined upon us and of which we are conscious only that it is obligatory, but a present life in the love which through faith in Christ has become a reality in the life of the Ekklesia brotherhood. For through this faith man is changed from one who lives for himself into one who lives for God and his brother.” 92

Brunner’s third chief argument against universalism, according to which the doctrine of universal salvation divests humanity of its charge to responsibility, represents a clear corrective to the objectivism which Brunner justifiably detects in Barth’s earlier writings. An objectivist soteriology, as Brunner notes, concentrates entirely on the objective character of the Christ-event and does not factor in the subjective response as a co-determinant in the salvation history of the human being, which inevitably detracts from the freedom of humanity. Brunner seeks to safeguard the human capacity “to make a real decision,” 93 and he argues that any doctrine of universalism or predestination of necessity sacrifices this capacity. 94 This element of Brunner’s argumentation is, in my opinion, both the strongest one and the one which exhibits the most theological coherence as well as consistency with his own theological method. Furthermore, it is plausible that Barth, at whom this criticism was primarily directed, adjusted his quasi-universalistic framework in his later theology to take account of Brunner’s objection, acknowledging that the doctrine of universal salvation trivializes the threat of damnation which humanity faces. 95 For the later Barth, in the history of the salvation of humanity there is a subjective determination (sinfulness) which becomes realigned in the act of the faith in concert with the objective determination of the human being (obedience), and which is the destiny of humanity, but which may or may not be realized. 96

Nevertheless, there are a number of reservations about Brunner’s critique of the doctrine of universal salvation related to its consistency with his overarching theological method and assessment of the order of normativity of doctrinal sources. Furthermore, there are a number of concerns about the consequences of Brunner’s argumentation for the Christian doctrine of God.

For example, in his first argument against the doctrine of universal salvation, Brunner remonstrates with the proponent of a universalistic soteriology on the basis that the doctrine of universal salvation departs from the scriptural testimony. This alone, according to Brunner, should be perfectly sufficient to

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89 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 230.
90 Brunner, Dogmatics II, 180.
91 Luther in Brunner, Dogmatics I, 174.
92 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 362–363. On the other hand, in light of Brunner’s argument from doctrinal tradition against the doctrine of universal salvation, it is debatable whether Brunner’s concern for the modern concept of historicity merits his clear departure from the dogmatic tradition affirming the operation of salvific grace outside the bounds of the visible Church, a doctrine professed almost universally in the history of the dogmatic tradition.
93 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 351.
94 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 358.
95 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV/3-1, The Doctrine of Reconciliation, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 477.
96 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV/3-1, 469 & 477–478. There is room to object that Barth only permitted of a subordinate subjective determination and not the co-ordinate subjective determination upon which Brunner insisted.
disarm the universalist: “there is one point which even they cannot gainsay: that in so doing Karl Barth is in absolute opposition, not only to the whole ecclesiastical tradition, but—and this alone is the final objection to it—to the clear teaching of the New Testament.”97 However, in his discussion of the question of universal salvation, Brunner presupposes (1) an absolute dogmatic normativity for the Bible, in addition to (2) a conceptual unity to the Bible in terms of its doctrinal message, neither of which has any foundation in his theological methodology, and which, if present, would by Brunner’s own logic commit him to an overt repudiation of the mere possibility of universal salvation, an assertion he does not venture.

Brunner’s insistence upon the absolute normative character of scripture in his approach to the doctrine of universal salvation stands in tension with his theological method, because Brunner adopts a radically different orientation to scripture at the outset of his Dogmatics in the section entitled Prolegomena: The Basis and the Task of Dogmatics. In this methodological section, Brunner does accept a scriptural normativity, but he proceeds to repudiate the notion of “absolute” scriptural normativity, claiming that “the word of Scripture is not the final court of appeal, since Jesus Christ Himself alone is this ultimate authority.”98 Brunner offers a most instructive account of why this is the case: the Scriptures are not themselves the Word of God, but instead witness to the Word of God (Jesus Christ), who is “the real norm” of Christian doctrine.99 In the act of apostolic witness, Brunner explains, the scriptures are composed by a circle of authors, all of whom are grasped by the reality of Jesus Christ and who report their encounter with this reality refractively, by which he means, according to the conceptual categories of their own limited, individual, historically conditioned perspectives. Most significantly, the apostles do not all share the same ‘catalogue’ of propositional insights, but only the existential insight that we have encountered God in the event of Jesus Christ, and Brunner is quite ardent in his insistence that there is no unified biblical system of doctrine, stating that “the doctrines of the New Testament to a great extent differ from one another,” from which he concludes that “the unity of the witness of the New Testament...lies solely and alone in Him, the One who is confessed, but not in the teaching of the witnesses.”100 “Only those who hold an obstinately doctrinaire view” can deny such differences among the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament.101

This has important repercussions for Brunner’s appeal to a monolithic biblical witness in his repudiation of the doctrine of universal salvation, since this appeal runs directly counter to the critical christocentric hermeneutic which he establishes in the methodological section of his work. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the Bible contains such a uniform teaching against universal salvation, since Brunner himself repudiates the notion of a biblical consensus against universal salvation when he states that there are “passages in the Bible which speak of universal salvation,” which nevertheless “failed to make an impact”, that is, which failed to acquire significant following in the early Church tradition.102 Brunner’s argumentation, therefore, is demonstrably inconsistent in this context, because his Biblicalist treatment of the question of universal salvation is antithetical to the hermeneutical approach he establishes and seeks to pursue in his Dogmatics. Therefore, if one wishes to remain faithful to Brunner’s overarching theological method and scriptural hermeneutic, one cannot accept Brunner’s claim that an alleged biblical consensus against universal salvation, whose existence Brunner himself repudiates at certain points, is by itself “the final objection” that dogmatically invalidates the proposition.103

The second principal argument which Brunner deploys against the doctrine of universal salvation is the appeal to ecclesiastical tradition. I have recounted how Brunner undertakes to cast a suspicious light upon the proponent of universalism by reference to its marginalized character within Christian doctrine throughout history, which he accomplishes by associating the doctrine with its heterodox antecedents. Like his biblical appeal, this traditionalism represents a remarkable volte-face, discontinuous with his fundamental approach to theology. To turn again to the Prolegomena of the Dogmatics, Brunner dismisses the Church’s claims to absolute dogmatic authority with great suspicion: dogma is not the “final authority, forcing...[one] to suppress his own view entirely.”104 Brunner contends that the task of the theologian is to approach the dogma of the Church critically: “The Church should...[give] its recognized teachers...every facility for the critical examination of their present Confession of Faith, in order to extend its scope. Thus the theologian stands on the threshold which both separates the existing Confession of Faith from the future, improved Confession, and also serves as the point of transition from the one to the other. His point of departure is the existing Confession of faith; but before him there stands the ‘given’ revelation in the Scriptures.”105 The theologian is charged not to accept dogmatic tradition uncritically, but to examine and to improve it: “there falls to dogmatics a second task, namely, that of critically examining the dogma which the Church lays before it, and, when necessary, of providing a better dogma.”106 On the basis of this relativized concept of the normativity of Church doctrine and the mandate to pursue a critical examination of the dogmatic tradition, the doctrinal consensus of the Church against universal salvation does not constitute a conclusive argument, since it implicitly attributes a normative function to Church authority which Brunner would instinctively repudiate.107 It is true that, for Brunner, dogma has a certain normativity, but this

97 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 349.
98 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 47.
99 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 47.
100 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 46–47. Emphasis mine. Cf. 68.
101 Brunner, Dogmatics II, 248–249.
102 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 422.
103 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 349.
104 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 53.
105 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 57–58.
106 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 80.
107 Unlike his argument from scripture, however, Brunner does not appear to claim that the argument from tradition represents a conclusive argument.
is subordinate to the Bible which itself only has a relative normativity and which is bound by the absolute normativity of Jesus Christ.

This line of argument also has negative repercussions for Brunner’s theology as a whole, for, if we were to apply this argument from tradition to Brunner’s theology, we could find at least six significant junctures at which his formulation of Christian doctrine could be deemed suspect: (1) the repudiation of infant baptism; (2) the repudiation of the identification of the Bible with the Word of God; (3) the repudiation of the Trinitarian formula, opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa; (4) the affirmation of the mere possibility of universal salvation; (5) the repudiation of the possibility of justifying faith in history which does not bring the justified human being into the visible Church; and (6) the affirmation of the possibility of one’s accepting Christ after death.

Moving onto the concept of God which Brunner’s critique requires, Brunner’s doctrine of the divine nature, or more accurately, its interior disposition, is a matter for serious concern. Brunner, as I have indicated, rejects the classical formulation opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa; he contends that this formulation leads inexorably to ‘Christian Monism,’ which for him is the basis of universalism, since it does not take account of the separation of functions in the interior disposition of God. According to Brunner it is necessary “to make a clear distinction between the works which God does in and through the Son, from those which He does outside the Son of his Love.”

Hayes points out that Brunner’s argument that the Father reserves all judgment to himself is simply unscriptural, since there are biblical texts which clearly assign the faculty of judgment to the Son. Furthermore, Hayes alludes to how this characterization of the relation between the Father and the Son could be problematic: “Brunner himself is, perhaps, on dangerous grounds in his criticism...is the ontological ground of this dialectic truly, as he believes, the separation of the Father from the Son?” It is the theological problems entailed by his characterization of the internal relations of the Trinity that I now wish to explore.

The first observation that I should like to make is methodological: Brunner’s conception of the separation of divine functions does not follow from his reflections on the nature of Trinitarian doctrine. The doctrine of the Trinity is, for Brunner, a problem for dogmatic theology and is not to be considered an integral component of the faith: “it does not belong to the sphere of the Church’s message.” According to Brunner, it is only in the event of divine revelation that we catch a glimpse into the true nature of God as self-giving love: “the knowledge of God as our Father is the work of the Son, and is the counterpart of the truth that Jesus is the Son of the Father.” Brunner argues that we should express reserve when reflecting upon the doctrine of the Trinity; and that “we must give up the endeavour to construct a doctrine of the relation between the ‘Trinitarian persons,’” because this leads to tritheism. Brunner also objects to the undertaking on phenomenological grounds: he holds that “to make the mutual relation of the three persons within the Trinity a subject of theological discussion” is impossible as the pre-existence of Christ is “the final term” in the process of reflective faith.

Brunner’s procedure vis-à-vis reflection upon the Trinity, however, is inconsistent with the theological methodology he prescribes. On the one hand, he argues that reflecting upon the interior disposition of the Godhead, that is, upon their relations to one another, is a perilous undertaking, while on the other hand, he proceeds to conduct such a reflection by constructing a model of the relation between God and the world which is in essence predicated upon the tangential character of the relation between the Father and the Son: in certain cases, the Father acts through the Son, but in other cases, he acts alone. Whether Brunner is aware of this or not, this characterization already claims a great deal about the interior disposition of the Godhead, and, tragically, although Brunner’s eschewal of the attempt to construct a Trinitarian doctrine may have been grounded in reservations about the potentially tritheistic doctrine that would result, he ends up venturing into the same conceptual territory as the tritheist by separating the operations of the Father and Son.

Moving on from purely methodological concerns, Brunner’s principal theological claim is that God the Father acts in concert with the Son to effect salvation but alone to effect damnation. He grounds this, as we have already seen, in the notion of the divine as the Holy One, whose holiness attaches itself to love in Jesus Christ and to wrath outside Jesus Christ. This position, I argue, is unsustainable on the basis of Brunner’s own concept of God. Let us explore this. For Brunner, holiness means separateness, distinctness, but this implies separation from something else: holiness entails that “He is Wholly Other against all else.” For this reason, “holiness [has to] merge into love”: love, concretized as the act of divine self-revelation, stems from the nature of God as the Holy One who wishes to be recognised as such by otherness and to share his very self with otherness. “The Love of God...is the fundamental nature of God. God’s nature is the radiation of spiritual energy, an energy which is the will to impart himself.” If it is the case that the divine love, the self-implicative volution, is sourced in the nature of God itself, then what can one say of wrath? Does this also have a source in God?

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109 Hayes, Emil Brunner, 53.
110 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 206.
111 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 208.
113 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 225.
114 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 160.
115 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 190.
Brunner claims that the Father exercises his wrath without the mediation of Jesus Christ in response to humanity’s failure to acknowledge his holiness. This raises a major dogmatic problem which, apart from its grounding in the separation of the divine functions, relies upon two mutually sustaining positions which are theologically suspect: the state of potency of God and the mutability of God. Brunner argues that the Father’s act of condemnation of those outside Jesus Christ is an opus alienum, in which God does not encounter personally but impersonally through the judgment of the law.117 But it is debatable whether one can speak coherently of a dei opus alienum in the first place, since this attributes a contingent element to divine agency: if one wishes to categorize the divine act of wrath as a dei opus alienum in the way that Brunner does, one is committed to the proposition that the divine nature, impeded in its fundamental act of self-expression (love) by human sin, is itself conditioned by the unfavorable human response to divine self-revelation to the extent that its agency acquires a completely different modality, a modality of exclusion (wrath), in which the divine nature qua self-impartiariative volition is radically subverted. This leads one to enquire whether this is consistent with Brunner’s conception of God as “Absolute Subject.”118 This stands in tension with the doctrine of the immutability of God and thus runs directly counter to the biblical doctrine of God.119 Brunner attempts to reconcile this characterization of divine wrath with the immutability of God by adding Luther’s claim that God “must make use of his sword...[to] crush those who try to resist his rule and his peaceful government, or to do harm to his people. But in his hall and in his castle there is nothing but mercy and love.”120 However, for this characterization to be reconciled with the doctrine of the immutability of God, the act of wrath would have to constitute an expression of the modality of divine agency as holiness attached to love and not a subversion of this modality. We saw how Augustine obviated this problem by insisting that any language about wrath in God did not refer to God in himself but simply to the effect of divine providence upon his creatures, and Brunner’s radical departure from Augustine’s framework at this juncture means that it is a challenge for him to uphold the immutability of God, since God’s action without Jesus Christ is characterized as holiness which attaches itself to wrath rather than love, a self-disposition which by Brunner’s own argumentation can be seen to be inconsistent with the fundamental nature of God as self-giving love.

Ultimately, Brunner’s concept of the wrathful nature of the agency of the Father without Jesus Christ renders Brunner’s concept of God in revelation meaningless. Brunner states that “God the Father is really He who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ, in His Holy and Merciful authority, speaks to us as ‘I,’ the Holy and Merciful God Himself is really speaking to us. God is the One who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ as the God for us. The love of Jesus is really the love of God. Thus God is not merely the Loving One in His relation to us, but in Himself He is love.”121 However, in consideration both of his claims about the operational separation of the Father and the Son and of the wrathful modalization of the Father’s agency outside Jesus Christ, it is completely devoid of meaning to claim that “God the Father is really He who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ,” since it appears that God does not actually reveal himself (deus natus) in Jesus Christ but rather a veiled, contingent modality of his nature (deus velatus). Brunner criticizes Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination on the grounds that it means that we cannot worship God truly as the God of love,122 but it is debatable whether Brunner’s articulation of the distinction of operations in the Trinity permits us to call the Father the God of love, since it appears that he is only the God of love when he is velatus in Jesus Christ.123

Brunner’s polarization of the modality of the agency of the Father acting with the Son against the modality of the agency of the Father acting alone also points to a soteriological problem of the utmost significance. Brunner’s doctrine of God, by dividing the works of the Father from those of the Son, dissolves the ontological unity of the Trinity and provides dogmatic theology no basis for reflection upon God as an integral subject. This raises a serious concern, because Brunner claims that the call of humanity to Christian discipleship is a call to attain the integrity of its being: the fallen man, he writes, “misses his chance of achieving true humanity...for by missing his integration at the point where alone it can happen—namely in the Word of God—he becomes disintegrated man, who has fallen both from his own wholeness and from fellowship...The man who is not founded in love is also unable to love, he must seek to achieve domination.”124 Here Brunner claims that the personal affirmation of Jesus Christ communicates two character-

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117 Brunner, Dogmatics II, 120.
118 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 239. One could theoretically answer that God has limited his power in creation (cf. Brunner, Dogmatics I, 251.), but I should note that, for Brunner, this self-limitation originates in the nature of God himself and is not adversitiously imposed upon him—there is no sacrifice of the nature of God.
119 See Ps. 102: 27 & Mal. 3:6.
120 Luther in Brunner, Dogmatics I, 174.
121 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 227–228.
122 Brunner, Dogmatics I, 331.
123 Brunner derives most of his theological material in this context from Luther, and I suspect that Brunner’s primary weakness is his application of the doctrine of the deus abscinditus to the objective sphere (ontology) when it is only applicable to the subjective sphere (epistemology). Brunner remarks that philosophical reflection in and of itself can only lead to a wrathful, annihilating concept of God, and that it is impossible to arrive at a loving God when we commence with the notion of God as “Absolute,” see Brunner, Dogmatics I, 171 & 187. However, to proceed from this point of departure to the supposition that God is actually a wrathful God when he is encountered outside revelation is to transform an epistemological truth, a truth of subjective reason, into an ontological truth, a truth of objective reason, which is wholly unwarranted, and which, I hasten to add, radically contradicts Brunner’s harniario-logico-epistemological framework which denies that we can arrive at any truth about God without divine revelation: he writes that “the ascent of the soul to God is a false path, the itinerarium mentis in Deum does not end in the Living God, but in the abstract ens realissimum of Neoplatonist speculation; the true God can be known only by His coming down to us...rational knowledge itself does not give us any access to that Wisdom of God.” Brunner, Revelation and Reason, 319–321.
124 Brunner, Dogmatics III, 146.
istics to the human being: (1) integrity; and (2) love. However, Brunner’s doctrine of the agentive separability of the Father and the Son, which implies the contingent character of the agentive co-operation between the members of the Trinity, entails that, since the Trinity is not constituted integrally, it cannot conceivably be positioned to confer integrity upon human beings in the event of revelation. This also applies to love: if God is not really love in his primordial (nudus) state but only in his veiled (velatus) state, this necessitates the accidentalization of the love-modality of divine agency, which means that it is also meaningless to claim that God shares his being as love with us, for he is not primordially a loving being in the first place.

Incredibly, despite Brunner’s assertion that Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination does not enable us to confess the Father as a God of love, Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination may represent a more theologically satisfactory account of salvation and damnation, since in Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination there is no implication of a fundamental discontinuity between the redemptive agency of God in Jesus Christ and the condemning agency of God outside Jesus Christ: all events are subject to divine providence, which is guided by divine love. In his Institutes, Calvin insists that this providential concern includes God’s predestination of sinners to damnation, writing: “by God’s providence man has been created to undergo that calamity [of damnation].”125 By his providence, God “make[s] good even out of evil,”126 and divine providence does not operate solely to the benefit of the soi-disant ‘elect,’ but “strives to the end that God may reveal his concern for the whole human race”127: even in the mire of sin, death, and damnation, this divine providential grace is at work in the world, giving each creature the “impulsion” to act.128 Divine providence is not something which occurs only at certain junctures: it is “the determinative principle for all human works and plans,”129 precisely because God so loves the entire world and all the creatures within it that “it is his care to govern all creatures for their own good and safety, and even the devil himself.”130 This means, in accordance with Calvin’s providential doctrine of predestination, that even in the fires of hell, God’s dealings with the condemned in no wise imply that he ceases to love and to care for them: according to Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination, the condemnation of the reprobate is to be conceived as a function of this providential care. None of this commits Calvin to the doctrine of universal salvation, but what it does is safeguard the integrity of God in his dealings with humanity: in accordance with Calvin’s position, just because humanity turns against God in sin and refuses to accept his offer of fellowship, this does not mean that God, in the dealings he has with the fallen creature who condemns himself, ceases to orchestrate his own agency in accordance with his nature as love, even if God accepts the creature’s refusal to be elect. As Augustine states, the wrath of God “indicate[s] the effect of His vengeance, rather than any disturbance to which He is subject.”131 Accordingly, perhaps it would have been judicious for Brunner, in the articulation of his critique of the doctrine of universal salvation, not to have dismissed the contribution of Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination so precipitously.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have expounded Emil Brunner’s approach to the question of universal salvation. I have argued that Brunner’s position represents a clear inversion of Augustine’s position: whereas Augustine accepts the concept of an invisible Church, but rejects the possibility of universal salvation, Brunner insists upon the concrete historicity of Christian faith whilst remaining open to the possibility of universal salvation. I have drawn attention to the principal objections Brunner has lodged against the doctrine of universal salvation, suggesting that several of them are radically inconsistent with the theological method he himself proposes.132 Furthermore, I have argued that Brunner’s doctrine of the agentive separability of the Father from the Son generates serious problems for his doctrine of God which may not have arisen if he had drawn upon the providential foundation of Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination.

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131 Augustine, *City of God*, 366.
132 I have done so without overtly endorsing either the objections or the theological method: my intent here was merely to draw attention to the logical relation between these two elements, and a treatment of the cogency of Brunner’s theological method will have to wait for another occasion.
Plato understood that describing God is impossible. However, according to Gregory of Nazianzus, to know God is even less possible. Gregory radicalizes apophaticism in this way as a critique of Eunomius and his claim to know the divine nature by definition as that which is without origin. However, one can take apophaticism in at least two very different directions. One direction might argue that because God is unknowable and ineffable, therefore, in the words of Sallie McFague, “all language about God is human construction and as such perforce ‘misses the mark.’” Accordingly, one might argue that very few or even no religious or theological claims are any more inherently valid than another, and that such claims are to be evaluated by strictly moral or pragmatic considerations; theology should likewise progress from dogmatics to the methods of the general study of religion. However, another way of taking such radical apophaticism is precisely to recognize the enduring significance of revelation for theology. Rather than the final word, God’s ineffability and transcendence presupposes God’s condescension and revelation in the Trinitarian economy.

The following paper is an exercise in historical dogmatics. In it I attempt to offer what Paul Ricoeur called a non-violent appeal concerning the enduring significance of revelation for theology, and its implications for how we should think of theology as a discipline and the methods that we use in its study. In this endeavor, I have chosen to draw extensively from Gregory Nazianzen’s *Theological Orations*, but complimented by material from Catherine LaCugna, Paul Ricoeur, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther. I have taken this route in order to cover over their real theological differences, but in order to make a more broadly ecumenical argument that focuses on an area of greater consensus, the doctrine of the Trinity. But the tradition from which I approach Gregory is not without its own reception, for Philip Melanchthon once praised Gregory as “the perpetual voice of the Church.” Gregory’s trinitarian theology is a fitting subject also because it is inherently concerned with the human knowledge of God. For my argument is focused upon the unity of the economic and immanent Trinity, which has epistemological consequences that are incompatible with the view that theology is reducible to human construction.

“Only the suffering God can help.” So wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer from Tegel prison on 16 July 1944. On what basis did Bonhoeffer make such a claim? According to Catherine LaCugna, how we answer this question gets at the very heart of Christian theology. After all, this was one of the major points of division between Nestorius and Cyril in the Christological controversy that led to Chalcedon in 451. Nestorius strictly denied that one could say God suffered, not even in the person of Christ, and considered it a pagan mentality to do so. Cyril, on the other hand, was quite adamant that the personal union of God and humanity in the person of Christ meant that in some paradoxical sense God was born, suffered, and died for us. One could affirm here a real communication of attributes, but the formulas themselves are not as important as the unity of the person, a point shared by Gregory, Cyril, and Bonhoeffer. For them, all human and divine attributes in Scripture are to refer to this single person, Jesus Christ, God on earth who suffered and died for us. This Christological debate has some proximity for us today, in that 

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1. This route differs from that taken by Tuomo Mannhaerma, who has argued for a doctrine of *θέωσις* in Luther as the center of justification; see Braaten and Jenson eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Knut Alsvåg took a similar route to that proposed here in “Impassibility and Revelation: On the Relation between Immanence and Economy in Orthodox and Lutheran Thought” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the American Academy of Religion, Baltimore, Maryland, November 22–26, 2015).


3. Nestorius, in his reply to Cyril’s second letter: “[T]o attribute to the Godhead, in the name of this appropriation [of the human nature], the properties of the flesh that is associated with it (and I mean generation, suffering, and death)... is either the error of a pagan mentality, brother, or a spirit sick with the madness of Apollinaris and Arius and other heresies, or even something far worse,” in John McGuckin, *St Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Press, 2004), 367.

4. In his third letter, Cyril replies: “[W]e understand that there is One Christ Jesus, the Only Begotten Son, born united with his flesh in a single worship, and we confess that the same Son and Only Begotten God, born from God the Father, suffered in the flesh for our sake, in accordance with the scripture (cf. 1 Pet.4:1) even though he is impassible in his own nature,” ibid, 270.

5. See Bonhoeffer’s “Lectures on Christology,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 12*; Best and Higgins, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 283–4; paraphrased in H. Ashley Hall, *Philip Melanchton and the Cappadocians: A Reception of Greek Patristic Sources in the Sixteenth Century* (Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2104), 100.

which the idea of the suffering God is moving even for theologians disinclined to speak of revelation.

Many are reluctant to return to this way of thinking because we are now so aware of “the constructive character of all human activities.” Claims to revelation in the past have often and without question covered over various ideological systems that justified the oppression of one group over another, such as the justification of slavery in this country, or naively masculine images of God, or our ecological irresponsibility. Disillusioned, we are inclined toward a methodological skepticism in theology, as Erasmus had once advocated in his debate with Luther in 1523. Like Erasmus, we consider confidence in theological matters to be a result of arrogance. In the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, we are more aware today than ever of “the historicity of our being,” and of how everything we think and do is thoroughly interpretive.

However, according to Paul Ricoeur, this is not a reason to reject the notion of revelation. On the contrary, this insight into the historical conditionality of the human being is the very reason that we must relinquish our desire to ground everything in our own consciousness. In an essay titled “Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” Ricoeur argued that “the pretension of consciousness to constitute itself is the most formidable obstacle to the idea of revelation.” In his earlier work The Symbolism of Evil, Ricoeur argued that “the will recognizes itself as evil, and admits its guilt, only in meditating on the symbols and myths carried by the great cultural traditions that have instructed the Western mind,” though he explains later that he had no intention of excluding non-western traditions with this comment. In other words, the self does not have a direct access to itself in its own consciousness, but understands itself only through external symbols, texts, narratives, events, and so forth.

This recognition of our historical and hermeneutical conditionality brings about “on a purely epistemological, even a methodological level, consciousness’s abandonment of its pretension to constitute every signification in and beginning from itself.” This constitutes “a conversion diametrically opposed to that of Feuerbach.” What does this mean? For one thing, Ricoeur argues for an epistemology of external testimony, and an openness to the possibility that particular historical moments can become invested with absolute significance. “It is precisely the function of the category of testimony... to demolish a bit further the fortress of consciousness.” To recognize the necessity of external testimony hermeneutically and epistemologically is not simply to impose a heteronomous authority, argues Ricoeur, but to open the imagination. It is to recognize our dependence as historical beings upon external persons and traditions for what we know and how we think. And it is through such external testimonies and revelations that we come to understand and know ourselves.

However, “reflection cannot produce this renouncing of the sovereign consciousness out of itself without contradicting itself. It can only do so by confessing its total dependence on the historical manifestations of the divine.” “The initiative belongs to historical testimony.” As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his Habilitationsschrift Act and Being, “the concept of revelation must, therefore, yield an epistemology of its own.” We may say then that a general epistemology must yield its claim to establish the methodological terms on which theology is studied. And we may extend this point to any purportedly scientific methodology that intends to say something unilaterally about the nature of theology. Rather, the method of theology must be born out of and serve its own subject matter.

But surely not all talk of revelation is equal. Indeed, while accepting Barth’s critique of liberal Protestantism, Bonhoeffer nevertheless pointed out many of the problems for a theology of revelation in Act and Being. He criticized problems with Barth’s earlier concept of revelation as the act of a divine Subject, for which revelation and faith become ahistorical. He also critiqued the problems of a conservative construal of revelation as the objective doctrinal content of the church, or we may add those of a subjective mechanism of inspiration in the production of the Bible. In contrast, drawing from Martin Heidegger’s fundamental ontology the insight that being precedes thought, Bonhoeffer argued that revelation is the person of Jesus Christ, who is a unity of God’s act and being for us, also existing as the church-community. In this way Bonhoeffer was able to affirm simultaneously that

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13 Erasmus, Diatribe, EAS 4, 28 f.; for Luther’s response, De Servo Arbitrio, LW 3:89, 97.
16 Ricoeur 2013, 4.
17 This critique of Husserl resembles that of Jacques Derrida, though without the latter’s reluctance toward the idea of originary moments that bear and unveil truth, e.g. Of Grammatology, Gayatri Spivak trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 10–18.
18 Ricoeur 2013, 144.
20 Ricoeur 2013, 145.
21 Ibid, 150.
22 Ibid, 151.
23 DBWE 2:26.
24 “The Sorbonne, the mother of errors, has very incorrectly defined that truth is the same in philosophy and theology,” Martin Luther, Disputation Concerning the Passage “The Word Was Made Flesh” (1539), in LW 38:239–79. This in contrast to a unitive epistemology; see e.g. F. LeRon Shults, The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 50–58, 68–82.
25 “Those [human beings] to whom God is revealed are the very ones to whom God cannot become revealed . . . They would have to conceive of themselves as not existing in order to conceive the Word of God coming to them,” Karl Barth, [Die christliche] Dogmatik (1927), 1:287; cited in DBWE 2:94. “The danger of a theology of consciousness is averted here, but "at the expense of the historicity of human beings and, hence, of the existential character of act" (DBWE 2:95). Rooted in the Reformed doctrine of the finitus non capax infiniti, the result of this conception is that "God’s freedom and the act of faith are essentially supratemporal" (DBWE 2:76–80). But if revelation has no ontological continuity in history, then neither can there be any real theological knowledge. See also Michael DeJonge, Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, and Protestant Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
26 DBWE 2:75–105.
the revelation of God is present for us immanently within history, as well as that this revelation, this person, remains free with respect to that history, and is not reducible to it. In other words, for Bonhoeffer, God has plunged into history in the person of Jesus Christ.

However, it may be objected that the incomprehensibility of God stands finally against any talk of revelation. After all, doesn’t the idea of revelation make God somehow intellectually comprehensible for us? The tradition of apophaticism represented by Vladimir Lossky, for example, would prefer to speak, if at all, of divine energies rather than revelation.27 Indeed, eastern theologians are right to point out and critique the Hegelian influence in much protestant theology of revelation, which ultimately desires to do away with the ineffability of God by conflating revelation with an Absolute Knowledge of God as pure thought, “attainable in pure speculative knowledge alone.”28 After all, Palamas saw Basil’s distinction between the divine essence and energies to be necessary to affirm in light of the ineffability of God, seeking to tie the spirituality of the vision of God not to a sensible perception or an intellectual vision, but to θέωσις or divinization. Nevertheless, it is worth considering LaCugna’s argument that the essence and energies distinction in the east may parallel the division of the economic and immanent Trinity in the west. LaCugna states:

The divine ousia, even though unknowable in itself, cannot be elevated beyond the divine persons. But in [Gregory of Palamas’] theology, since the divine hypostases belong to the supraessential, imparticpable essence of God, and since the energies, not the divine persons, enter into communion with the creature, Palamism widens the gap between theologia and oikonomia by postulating a divine realm comprised of essence and persons not directly accessible to the creature.29

In the words of Aristotle Papanikolaou, the essence and energies distinction “may render the doctrine of the Trinity superfluous,” since it is now the divine energies, rather than the persons of Christ and the Holy Spirit, that make God present and known to the human being.30

In contrast to Basil’s argument that we humans have knowledge of God only in God’s energies, Christopher Beeley argues that “Gregory has a stronger doctrine of revelation.”31 For Nazianzen, the incomprehensibility of God is precisely the presupposition of God’s condescension to and illumination of us in the Trinitarian economy. Jesus Christ is the Light of Light, whom we see in the Light of the Holy Spirit.32 This illumination or revelation is not a knowledge of the divine essence or οὐσία as such, which remains always unknowable. But should we not say that revelation for Gregory is indeed a real knowledge of the ὑποστάσεως, the persons, in whom alone the divine οὐσία exists?

In the so-called Five Theological Orations, preached in the chapel of the Resurrection just prior to his troubled presidency at the council of Constantinople, Gregory of Nazianzus is dealing with opponents on two fronts. On the one hand, he is battling the “good” Nicenes about the homoeousion of the Holy Spirit. On the other, he is responding to a new cadre of Arians, the radical Aetios and his secretary Eunomius. These later Arians well beyond the original position of Arius, who taught that God the Father was transcendent and as such unknowable to the human being.33 Since the Logos is a distinct hypostasis from the Father, and is derived from the Father, Arius reasoned that this Logos must have come into being at some point. In the words of Plato’s Timaeus, “it isn’t possible to bestow eternity fully upon anything that is begotten.”34 For Arius, to posit the Logos as eternal would be to posit two unbegottens, “two self-sufficient first principles.”35

At least part of this argument of course invites a debate about the meaning of the term “begotten” when applied to God. It makes some sense then when Aetios and Eunomius sought to solidify its meaning by insisting in addition that words revealed essences. Since the term “begotten” is the opposite of “unbegotten,” they reasoned that the ousia of the Father, who is “unbegotten,” must be positively different from that of the Son, who is “begotten.” Thus, these theologians defined God by the predicate: that which is without origin [ἀγέννητος]. Therefore, while Arius at least spoke of the divinity of the Son in some lesser sense, and of the ineffability of the divine ousia, for Eunomius this ineffability is denied. What was at stake? They were convinced that the revelation of essences by words was necessary to affirm in order to protect the possibility of theology and of the knowledge of God.36 After all, if our language cannot directly apply to God, how then is theology even possible? As Luther would later say, they believed themselves able to peer into the invisible things of God.37 Remarkably, Eunomius is even reported to have said that “God does not know (ἐπίστασιν) anything more about his own essence than we do.”38

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32 Ibid, 90–113.
33 Rowan Williams ascribed this fact to the Alexandrian influence upon Arius, in Arius: Heresy and Tradition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 145; Andrew Louth, on the other hand, ascribed this to the doctrine of the creatio ex nihilo, a doctrine which Arius and his opponents shared, and which stood in contrast to a Neoplatonic optimism concerning the vision and knowledge of God, in The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: from Plato to Denis (New York: Oxford, 1981), 75–7; contra Williams, Christopher Stead argued against any significant Neoplatonic influence upon Arius, in “Was Arius a Neoplatonist?,” Studia Patristica 32 (1997): 39–51.
34 Plato, Timaeus, 37d, Donald Zeyl trans.
36 Beeley 2008, 92; cf. Plato, Creat. 430a–431e.
Gregory begins the first theological oration in a way evocative of Luther's polemic against the pride of reason:

I shall address my words to those whose cleverness is in words. Let me begin from Scripture: "Lo, I am against you and your pride." [Jer 50:31].

Gregory accuses his adversaries of mere "strife of words," with whom there is no rest from controversy. These "mere verbal tricksters" act as if theology is simply a game of human argument.

"[T]he great mystery" of our faith is in danger of becoming a mere social accomplishment [τεχνύδριον]. I am moved with fatherly compassion, and as Jeremiah says, "my heart is torn within me." [Jer 4:19]. Let these spies therefore be tolerant enough to hear patiently what I have to say on this matter, and to hold their tongues for a while—if, that is, they can—and listen to me.

"Discussion of theology is not for everyone." It is for the proper time and place, "whenever we are free from the mire and noise without," and for those "who have been tested and found a sound footing in study, and, more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul."41

41 Ibid. Purification or κάθαρσις is the removal what is impure, ἄναγνος, that which prevents us from our ascent to God in divine illumination (Ora. 28.2–3; Beeley 2008, 109). This platonism is interpreted biblically by Gregory, where purification is "a contrite heart and the sacrifice of praise" (Ps 50.23; 51.29), and a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5.17), and the new person (Eph 4.24), and the like, as the Scripture loves to call it" (16.2; Beeley 2008, 87). Jesus Christ assumes and purifies human nature in the incarnation, applied to us individually in baptism (30.1, 38.7; Beeley 2008, 83–4). In this way, Gregory offers a complex synthesis of elements of the neo-platonic model of contemplation, ascension, and descent associated with the Nicene orthodoxy of trinitarian descent. See John McGuckin, "The Vision of God in St. Gregory Nazianzen." Studia Patristica 32 (1997): 149–52. Purification is not a major theme in Luther's theology, and he replaces the contemplatio in the medieval practice of oratio, meditatio, contemplatio with tentatio, namely the suffering of the effects of God's powerful Word, at the heart of his theology of the cross; see Oswald Bayer, Theology the Lutheran Way, Lutheran Quarterly Books, trans. and ed. Jeffrey Silcock and Mark Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). However, Luther does speak of purification in his Sermons on the Gospel of St John, where he distinguishes between two kinds of purification in parallel to the two kinds of righteousness, one which is imputed by the purity of Christ alone in baptism and the Word (i.e. Jn 15:3), and the other in which we grow in this life; the latter must grow from the former as works from faith (LW 22:426). In addition, purification is not for Gregory a strictly linear progression of human achievement, and he sharply criticizes the excessive rigorism of the Novatians on this score, a position praised by Melanchthon (39.18; Beeley 2008, 88; Hall 2014, 99). So while there is a significant difference here, it should not prevent comparison. Where Gregory focuses on trinitarian descent, be and Luther are quite similar in their arguments, which is what I have chosen to focus upon in this paper. My orienting theme here is close to that of divine condescension in the works of J. G. Hamann; see John R. Betz, After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J. G. Hamann (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
the creation, we may know that there must be some divine origin of things, but not what or Who.53

Here Gregory is more critical of the analogy of nature than Augustine, perhaps as critical as Luther.54 However, Gregory does not want us simply to abandon all reason in a form of fideism. Rather, like with a Buddhist koan, Gregory wishes for us to truly pursue reason tenaciously, so as to see that reason will only get us so far. As Nicolas of Cusa states in *On Learned Ignorance*, “it is evident that Philosophy (which endeavors to comprehend, by a very simple understanding, that the maximal Oneness is only trine) must leave behind all things imaginable and rational.”55 However, since this is impossible for philosophy, the human being makes a final effort to try to see, to gain a direct mystical vision. But God refuses to grant this direct vision even to Moses. Meister Eckhart’s doctrine of the “little point” in the soul endeavors to comprehend, by a very simple understanding, that the maximal Oneness is only trine) must leave behind all things imaginable and rational.55

However, for us to truly pursue reason tenaciously, so as to see that reason will only get us so far. As Nicolas of Cusa states in *On Learned Ignorance*, “it is evident that Philosophy (which endeavors to comprehend, by a very simple understanding, that the maximal Oneness is only trine) must leave behind all things imaginable and rational.”55

Therefore, even as Gregory cannot deny such omni-predicates as omnipotence mentioned before, nevertheless, they do not actually say anything about God. “For what has the fact of owning no beginning, of freedom from change, from limitation, to do with [God’s] real, fundamental nature?”62 Gregory continues:

A person who tells you what God is not but fails to tell you what he is, is rather like someone who, asked what twice five are, answers “not two, not three, not four, not five, not twenty, not thirty . . . [etc. etc.]”63

Now had Gregory known a thing or two about calculus and mathematical limits, he might not have used a mathematical illustration for this point, though it is well taken nonetheless. I don’t know my friend Lisa by saying not Charlie, not George, not Alex, not RJ, and so forth. Also, my dad is that which is without hair, and I am that which is without a job. All these are empty conceptual placeholders, mere rational projections, that really say nothing about who we are.

How then is knowledge of God possible if theology is impossible for the human being? Gregory gave us a hint in his earlier orations when he said that his little point in the soul, was that which is without hair, and I am that which is without a job. All these are empty conceptual placeholders, mere rational projections, that really say nothing about who we are.

Faith rather than reason shall lead us, if that is, you have learned the feebleness of reason to deal with matters quite close at hand, and have acquired enough knowledge of reason to recognize things which surpass reason. If so, it follows that you will not be a wholly earthbound thinker, ignorant of your very ignorance.66

55 *De Div. Ets. I*, 10.29
58 McGuckin also describes Gregory’s position with this phrase in 1997, 149.
For when we abandon faith to take the power of reason as our shield, when we use philosophical enquiry to destroy the credibility of the Spirit, then reason gives way in the face of the vastness of the realities. Give way it must, set going, as it is, by the frail organ of human understanding. What happens then? The frailty of our reasoning looks like a frailty in our creed. Thus it is that, as Paul too judges, smartness of argument is revealed as a nullifying of the Cross. Faith, in fact, is what gives fullness to our reasoning.69

As Luther states, because people “misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things.”66 If Gregory’s opponents had yet gained this more mature knowledge of “the frail organ of human understanding,” and we might add, of all of its hermeneutical and historical conditionality, then they would not have so quickly scorned the strange revelation of the crucified God.

Gregory in no way wishes to stop at apophasis. Like Origen before him, Gregory states that, as the human being Jesus Christ, “the Incomprehensible might be comprehended.”67 The true theologian, for Luther, does not seek to penetrate into the invisible things of God through the creation, but instead remains with “what is visible of God” made manifest through the cross of Christ.68 God is ontologically present for us in Jesus Christ, the icon and glory [κλέος] of the Father.7 Jesus Christ is the Logos of Theos enhumanized, God made visible.72 We should even say: Jesus Christ is theology, the knowledge of God. For the confession of the divinity of the Son and the Spirit is theology for Gregory.73 Thus, while theology and economy are distinguished by Gregory, nevertheless theology is in this way “the fuller clarification, deepening, and extending of the meaning of the divine economy.”74 For we “worship the Crucified,” Gregory says, God lifted up upon the cross.75

Regardless of how similar or different our situation may be today, to continue to insist at this juncture on a form of theological skepticism is to once again divide the economic and immanent Trinity, to consider what God is “really like” to still be somehow inaccessible or unknowable to us, behind the veil of our intellectual, linguistic, or cultural conditionality. But this is simply to return to the initial point about God’s incomprehensibility and our own limits, which is in no way a refutation of God’s revelation in the Trinitarian economy, but rather the presupposition of it. Gregory is well aware that terms like “Trinity,” “hypostasis” and “ousia” are indeed human conceptual constructs, but they are nevertheless employed in service to the revelation of God the Father in the persons of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In the words of Henri Bouillard,

History thus manifests at the same time the relativity of notions, of schemes in which theology takes shape, and the permanent affirmation that governs them. It is necessary to know the temporal condition of theology and, at the same time, to offer with regard to the faith the absolute affirmation, the divine Word that has become incarnate.76

In service to that revelation, such terms and concepts are examples of faith giving fullness to reasoning, and as such are no longer reducible to human construction.77 They have become a part of the grammar of the Church.78 This is not to make a metaphysical claim anymore than a mythological one.79 Gregory has already torn down the possibility of peering into invisible realities by pure speculative reason. Moreover, the “reality” to which I would refer us here is the world already reconciled in Jesus Christ.

In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already

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70 Forde 1997, 71.
71 E.g. Col 1:15; D. A. Sykes explains that “The epic κλέος is made to answer to all the uses of the biblical δόξα, strengthening the τικεον language in the same way as δόξα does in, e.g., Origen, Jo. 13, 25 (p. 249. 30. M. 14. 444A),” in Gregory, Claudio Moreschini, and D. A. Sykes, Poemata Arcana (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 97.
72 Nazianzen, Ora. 37.1–3; in Beeley 2008, 123, 141; see also Athanasius, de Incarn. 15.1–2, 16.1.
73 Beeley 2008, 194.
75 Nazianzen, Let. 101.5; ref. John 3.
79 See also Bayer 2007, 3–32.
borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ.\footnote{80}{Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, DBWE 6:40.}

The Trinity is not a metaphysical theory that awaits putting into practice, but rather already is both God’s act and being for us and for our salvation. We truly know this Jesus Christ, the revelation of God, through the Spirit’s ministry of word and sacrament in the church community.\footnote{81}{Beeley 2008, 265; see also Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, “The Creed,” art. 3; this not to the exclusion of concrete discipleship, e.g., Jon Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator, trans. Burns and McDonagh (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 43; nevertheless, for Bonhoeffer, the justification of the sinner in Word and sacrament is God’s ultimate Word over us and is the core of the revelation of Christ as the new human community of reconciliation in the forgiveness of sins; yet in order that that Word might actually be heard as gospel and that it might comfort, respect for the penultimate in this life in concrete obedience to Christ toward liberation of the oppressed is essential and is also God’s Word; see Bonhoeffer, Ethics, DBWE 6:137–145; for more on Gregory’s understanding of the knowledge of God by the whole body of the church, see Daniel Oppermann, “Sinai and Corporate Epistemology in the Orations of Gregory of Nazianzus,” in Studia Patristica 67 (2013): pp. 169–78; J. Jayakiran Sebastian is quite right then when he says that Gregory “would certainly acknowledge the reality of the involvement of the Trinity in the life of the people,” in “Interwined Interaction: Reading Gregory of Nazianzus amidst Inter-religious Realities in India,” A World For All: Global Civil Society in Political Theory and Trinitarian Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 171–2.}

Gregory’s hermeneutic here consists of extended typology that is often functionally equivalent to allegory along the lines of an Origenist model of a three stage progressive revelation; see Kristoff Demoen, Pagan and Biblical Exempla in Gregory Nazianzus, Lingua Patrum II (Brepols, 1996), 249–86; see also Demeon “The Pradigmatic Prayer in Gregory Nazianzen,” Studia Patristica 52 (1997): 101; see also Joseph Trigg, “Knowing God in the Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianzus: the Heritage of Origen,” God in Early Christian Thought: Essays in Memory of Lloyd G. Patterson, McGowan, Daley S.J., and Gaden, eds. (Boston: Brill, 2009), 83–104. This is the reason for Gregory’s boldness in affirming the ὁμοούσιον of the Spirit despite there being no letter of Scripture to directly prove it, something which Melanchthon is reluctant to acknowledge; see Hall 2014, 140. of Christ \textit{par excellence} simply because it incarnates and realizes our communion within the very life and communion of the Trinity . . .\footnote{83}{John Zizioulas, \textit{Being as Communion} (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s), 110–14.}

As Bonhoeffer concludes \textit{Life Together},

Through this ministry of word and sacrament, we not only worship, but are also actually taken into the very life of the Holy Trinity, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. For if I am baptized in the name of the Holy Spirit, who grafts me to Christ and divinizes me in baptism, so that by the Spirit I come to know God \textit{[Οὗτος ἐγώ]}, then surely the Holy Spirit is true God.\footnote{84}{DBWE 5:102.} As Gregory concludes, “One links with the other, a truly golden chain of salvation.”\footnote{85}{See Arcana 3.15–16; Melanchthon considers this general argument of the Cappadocians to be conclusive; see Hall 2014, 139–40. Luther does not object to the language of “parraking of the divine nature,” as we see in his commentary on 2 Pet 1.4, perhaps written in 1522; see LW 30:153–4.}

For Gregory, the Trinity is not a collection of three instances of the same class or genre.\footnote{86}{Nazianzen, Ora. 31.28.} The unity of God the Holy Trinity resides in God the Father as the sole source of the ‘Trinity and of the whole of the economy of salvation.\footnote{87}{Beeley 2008, 306.} Contrary to some modern thinkers, the monarchy of the Father does not constitute subordinationism, since such an interpretation would again presume that being “unbegotten” is essential to the definition of the Divinity, the very position Gregory is always attacking.\footnote{88}{McGuckin 2001, 247.} The monarchy of the Father is what gives rise to the distinct identities of the three persons of the ‘Trinity. This is by virtue of the manner in which the Father gives generation, in one case by manner of a “begetting,” and the other by “procreation,” both equally mysterious and beyond our complete. The life together of Christians under the Word has reached its fulfillment in the sacrament.\footnote{89}{Nazianzen, Ora. 31.9; Beeley 2008, 209; LaCugna 1991, 391; contra Wolfhart Pannenberg, \textit{Systematic Theology} v. 1, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 334; on Luther’s subscription to the monarchy of the Father, see WA 10.1:151.7–155.24, 183.13–186.8, cited in Robert Kolb, \textit{Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith} (New York: Oxford, 2009), 113.}
committed all sins. For God actually made him to be the actual guilt and the curse of the sins of the entire world, as if he himself had such a powerful impact.”

Eternal and invincible righteousness.” These two “come together and collide with the same Person, who is the highest, the greatest, and the only sinner, there is also ing become a curse for us—for it is written: cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree.”

Paul says in Galatians that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written: cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree.”

There are no abstract hypostases that exist apart from the divine nature that they share; there are only the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are unoriginate, begotten, and proceeding Divinity. Likewise, the divine nature does not exist apart from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are the Divinity.

Now if the divine ousia exists only as the hypostaseis of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then we cannot bypass the thoroughly personal notions of sin and forgiveness for theology. In his 1535 Commentary on Galatians, Luther recognized this connection. In contrast to Jerome, he favors a literal interpretation when Paul says in Galatians that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written: cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree.”

Christ is not simply punished for the sins of the world, but rather accepts the actual guilt and the curse of the sins of the entire world, as if he himself had committed all sins. For God actually made him to be sin for us.”

Here Luther insists that we must read the church fathers in the light of Scripture. “Whatever sins I, you, and all of us have committed or may commit in the future, they are as much Christ’s own as if He Himself had committed them.” Therefore, “in the same Person, who is the highest, the greatest, and the only sinner, there is also eternal and invincible righteousness.”

Two “come together and collide with such a powerful impact.”

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90 Beeley 2008, 222.
92 2 Cor. 5:21.
93 LW 26:278; Nazianzen has a notion of a “great exchange” that has some parallels with Luther’s, following from the principle that what was not assumed was not redeemed (Lett. 101:3, 5; see also Formula of Concord, Ep., Art. VIII, affirm. thesis 10). When responding to the Eunomian desire to subordinate the Son to the Father, Gregory comments on the same texts in Galatians and Corinthians: “No—look at this fact: the one who releases me from the curse was called “curse” because of me [κατὰ θεὸν ἐμοὶ ἐμὺν ἀνυπότακτον ἑαυτοῦ ποιεῖται].”
94 “No—look at this fact: the one who releases me from the curse was called “curse” because of me [κατὰ θεὸν ἐμὺν ἀνυπότακτον ἑαυτοῦ ποιεῖται].”

The faith that alone justifies—trust [fiducia] for Luther, and not fides acquisita—is true worship that attributes divinity rightly to God. To trust completely in Christ, to have faith in Jesus, is to attribute total and complete divinity to him as the new human being through whom life and righteousness comes to humanity.

When Arius denied this, it was necessary also for him to deny the doctrine of redemption. For to conquer the sin of the world, death, the curse, and the wrath of God in Himself—this is the work, not of any creature but of the divine power.

Faith ascribes divinity to Christ as belonging essentially to him, and not accidentally. Could this not shed a fresh perspective on Gregory’s use of the term “hypostasis” as an instance of faith giving fullness to reasoning? By defining divinity tautologically, the Arian position renders personhood an accidental characteristic of divinity, as does any attempt at a direct vision of the divine ousia apart from the hypostaseis. Yet, this is what we all attempt to do all the time, left to the devices of reason alone. For how can reason deduce the person? Isn’t it rather the case that the person must be revealed?

We come up against this Jesus Christ and attempt the usual academic process of the classification of objects. We try to understand this divine Logos from the human logos. We demand to know how this could be the case that God could take flesh and be revealed. We demand that this revelation be falsifiable by our own rational criteria.

However, as Bonhoeffer points out, the constant asking of the “how” question shows that we are “chaired to our own authority.” The sinner is trapped in its game of rational self-determination and self-justification. This is the heart curved in on itself, the condition of sin, which for Bonhoeffer is not the choice for evil, but rather the taking on of the knowledge of good and evil itself.

96 Ibid.
97 i.e. Gal 3:1–3 and Rom 10:17.
98 Rom 3:26, 5:1–21.
99 LW 26:282.
101 As Norris points out, “From Gregory’s viewpoint, it would always be odd to attack anything Arian with the narrow syllogistic arguments they so preferred. Too much modern theology has employed Arian methods to denounce Arian positions, a pyrrhic victory,” in “Gregory Nazianzus’ Poemata Arcana: A Poetic, Musical Catechism?”, Union Seminary Quarterly Review 65 (2013): 74, n.46. So also Luther in the 1539 Disputation: “20. This is indeed not because of the defect of the syllogistic form but because of the lofty character and majesty of the matter which cannot be enclosed in the narrow confines of reason or syllogisms.” Thus, for theology we must learn “a new language in the realm of faith apart from every sphere.”
102 DBWE 12:283.
apart from God’s Word. As Bonhoeffer understood, like Luther before him, the claim to a knowledge of God by our own powers or abilities, and the claim to be able to do what is good by our own abilities, are two sides of the same coin.

Indeed this piety [of the knowledge of good and evil] was supposed to consist in humankind’s going back behind the given word of God to procure its own knowledge of God. This possibility of a knowledge of God that comes from beyond the given word of God is humankind’s being sicut deus; for from where can it gain this knowledge if not from the springs of its own life and being? Thus for their knowledge of God human beings renounce the word of God that approaches them again and again out of the inviolable center and boundary of life; they renounce the life that comes from this word and grab it for themselves. They themselves stand in the center.104

CONCLUSION

To reclaim this center, God the Logos has taken flesh and fully entered history as the person of Jesus Christ. This means that there is such a thing as revelation, immanently present within the circle of our historical conditionality. As Christians, we truly know Jesus Christ, and thus truly know God, even if we are not always clear about how we know that we know this Jesus. Such is the task of a dogmatic reflection on the epistemological consequences of Trinitarian theology.

If there truly is such a thing as the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, then not all theology can be reduced to human construction. And if theology cannot be reduced to human construction, then dogmatics as a critical discipline of testing concerning sound teaching about that revelation is methodologically necessary to the discipline of theology. In line both with this dogmatic principle and with the nature of hermeneutics, our method here has been neither that of the pure historical continuity of a consensus antiquitatis, nor that of an historicist gap or of a systematic consensus antiquitatis. Rather, Bonhoeffer’s argument is that a more Trinitarian approach is necessary for biblical hermeneutics. E.g. Irenaeus, Adv. Haer., 1.10.1; Brevard Childs, Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 31–2; Gadamer 2004, 176–7; 326–8; Anthony Thiselton, New Horizons in Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 156; James Voelz, What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World (St Louis: Concordia, 2003), 219–29; see also Telford Work, Living and Active Scripture in the Economy of Salvation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Our method here has rather been that of a critical historical continuity according to a dogmatic guideline, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

One of the early courses I was privileged to take at Union Theological Seminary in New York was on Dietrich Bonhoeffer with the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Professor of Theology and Ethics, Christopher Morse. This course gave me an important orientation as a young Lutheran at Union. His dogmatic approach to Bonhoeffer was shaped by his work on Barth, an approach that, though criticized by some Bonhoeffer scholars concerned to highlight the real theological differences Bonhoeffer had with Barth, is nevertheless justified because of their common affirmation of a theology of God’s Word and revelation in contrast to a theology of consciousness. Through his courses and many discussions, I learned that dogmatics was not a rigid and backward discipline of simply repeating the formulas of the past, over which the adjective systematic was always to be preferred, but was indeed rather the critical task of Christian theology, by which we hold all things under the light of Jesus Christ, the revelation of God.

We cannot speak of the suffering God and then turn around and speak of all theology as mere human construction. There is a difference between “theology” as our academic or human discourse about God, limited though necessary, and that “Theology” or revelation of God that some of our concepts are made to serve. In the words of Catherine LaCugna:

By carefully qualifying the concept of God’s ‘inner life’, and by making all metaphysical claims function directly with respect to the economy of salvation, a revitalized doctrine of the Trinity calls to account all theologies of God, it forces us to admit their partiality and inadequacy, and it requires that every interpretation of who God is be measured against what is revealed of God in the economy. The doctrine of the Trinity is in this sense not a teaching about God but the doctrine that specifies the conditions and criteria under which we may speak of God.107

This is a matter not of our talk about God, but of God’s condescension and revelation for us.

103 Bonhoeffer and Nazianzen diverge quite drastically here. For Nazianzen, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil caused the fall only because it was partaken of too hastily— and rather represents the vision of God that is identical with θέωσις. See e.g. Poemata Arcana, 7.118–22. Still, even for Gregory we may say that “they grab it for themselves.”

104 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, DBWE 3:108.


106 For more on Melanchthon’s theology of church history and of the authority of the early fathers, see Hall 2014, 53–66.

The Strange Worlds of Apocalyptic, Christian Ethics, and Princeton Theological Seminary

Ezekiel 11:14–20
2 Corinthians 5:16–6:2

Nancy J. Duff

The following is a convocation address that was delivered in Miller Chapel at Princeton Theological Seminary on September 5, 2013. Although direct reference to the work of the New Testament scholar, J. Louis Martyn, is made frequently throughout the address, the influence of Christopher Morse also stands behind everything I say about the significance of apocalyptic for theology and Christian ethics. Christopher was my advisor in the Ph.D. program in Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, starting in 1979, and continues to be my mentor and friend as well as conversation partner regarding all things apocalyptic.

PART I: THREE WORLDS

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor. 5:17–19) As I begin my 23rd year at Princeton Seminary, I know that everything has become new. But I say that not because we stand at the beginning of a new school year (although I always find the beginning of school energizing), nor because we have new faculty and administrative staff joining us (although I welcome you with enthusiasm), and not even because we have a new president. (Of course, Mr. President, you aren’t entirely new here, but I’m pleased to congratulate you as you begin your first full academic year with us, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak tonight.)

All of those things are exiting, but they are not the things that make everything new. Everything is new because God has made it so. There is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. Keeping that in mind, and the fact that this is an occasional address (neither a sermon nor strictly speaking an academic lecture), tonight I’m going to reflect on our life together at this seminary by describing what I’m calling the strange worlds of apocalyptic, Christian Ethics, and Princeton Theological Seminary.

First, the Strange World of Apocalyptic

Many Christians are rightly suspicious of the word “apocalyptic” as it refers to the expectation of the end of the world, for it can generate terribly irresponsible attitudes. Forty years ago, Hal Lindsey’s popular book, The Late Great Planet Earth, equated God’s end of the world with nuclear holocaust, making the latter something Christians could anticipate with joy. There are also apocalyptic minded people, like Harold Camping, who declare the world will end on a specific day. (In his case, most recently, it was May 21, 2011.) And not long ago, the Left Behind series expressed cruel delight in the eternal destruction of those who are left behind at the rapture.

When I refer to apocalyptic, I am not thinking of Hal Lindsey, Harold Camping, or Left Behind theology. I’m referring to Pauline apocalyptic as addressed in the work of the New Testament scholar, and one of my teachers, J. Louis Martyn. While Pauline apocalyptic does refer to Paul’s expectation of the imminent end of the world, it does so with a twist, because he is not just referring to a future event. In Pauline apocalyptic, the New Age, which is, according to Lou Martyn, “the space of grace, the orb of life, the sphere of power under the Lordship of Christ, the arena of freedom and life” is engaged in battle with the Old Age, which is “the space of evil and sin, the orb of death, the sphere of power generated by the powers and principalities, the arena of slavery and death.”

These are not, however, two spheres that stand side by side from which we are to choose. One world, the New Age in Christ, has invaded the other and created a new reality. We are called to live within that new space created by God’s revelation in Christ and become living parables of divine action. Furthermore, according to Martyn, Pauline apocalyptic provides us with bi-focal vision so that we can see in the world around us “the profound depths of evil and the profound heights of God’s redeeming power.” Apocalyptic helps us understand what it means for the church to “have inherited both the triumphant Hallelujah Chorus

1 M. Craig Barnes became the seventh president of Princeton Theological Seminary in January 2013. He also serves as professor of pastoral ministry.
and the suffering world.” I will return to those aspects of Pauline apocalyptic shortly, but first we turn to the strange world of Christian ethics.

**The Strange World of Christian Ethics**

Christian ethics really isn’t as strange as it is complex. There is no agreement among scholars regarding how to define it, how to identify its various parts, or how to describe its relationship to Christian belief. Using an image employed by the nineteenth century Jewish scholar, Leo Baeck, Lou Martyn says that ethics has had difficulty finding a “stable home” within Christianity. Sometimes, ethics has been “banned to live in a sort of shabby lean-to, having no organic relation to the main house of faith.” Here, ethics is an afterthought to right doctrine and is often restricted to personal piety, where it can become comfortable with the suffering of others, since personal piety can encourage us to protect our clear conscience even if doing means that others have to suffer.

In the broader world of academic theology, there are theologians who focus almost exclusively on right doctrine. For them, faith becomes strictly a matter of right belief, ignoring what responsible action looks like when we obey the God in whom we believe. These theologians may, in fact, be protecting important affirmations of the faith, but they have little need to bring together what we believe with what we do.

On the other hand, ethics has sometimes been allowed to leave the lean-to and take over the house of faith completely. Here, ethics constitutes the whole of Christianity. Issues of justice and human welfare (which are neglected when ethics is banished to the lean-to) take over entirely and turn the Church into a social service agency or a community of political activists. In the broader world of academic theology, there are theologians who define the Church solely as an organization to promote social justice, believing that long established Christian doctrines, such as the uniqueness of Christ and the sovereignty of God, have caused so much suffering in the world, they need to be dismantled. These theologians may, in fact, be doing good things, but they have no need for classic Christian doctrine or for the mysteries and practices of faith.

Lou Martyn insists that neither image (ethics banned to the lean-to or ethics taking over the house of faith entirely) is consistent with Pauline apocalyptic. Because Paul’s letters include sections of moral exhortation, it’s easy to divide them into theology, on the one hand, and lists of vices and virtues, on the other, or doctrine and application, but that interpretation of Paul is on the wrong track. Every theological affirmation in Paul’s letters is also an ethical statement, and every imperative arises from a theological affirmation.

And the ethic one does find in Paul is not the one people are usually looking for. Ethics often focuses on the human agent’s ability to know and to do the good. In what Martyn calls the theological two-step, this view understands God as offering human beings grace and a choice between good and evil, and by exercising free will, we are, in turn, free to choose or reject what God offers. But in Paul, Martyn says, the focus is not on the autonomous, human agent; ethics is first of all concerned with what God has done, is doing, and will do for us. Our task is not to turn what God has done into universal principles that we follow; our task is to obey God, who has set us free, and to become living parables of the New Creation with our actions always pointing to what God has done for us and for the world.

**Finally, the Strange World of Princeton Seminary**

Like ethics, the Seminary isn’t strange, so much as it, too, is complex. Most institutions are rather easily identified as primarily liberal or mainly conservative. But when I first came to Princeton Seminary in 1991, I would hear graduates say: “Princeton Seminary was never that conservative when I was a student there.” And then, on another occasion, I would hear some graduates declare: “When I was a student, Princeton Seminary was never the liberal institution it has now become.” So, which was it? And which is it? Are we conservative, or are we primarily liberal? Well, in fact, faculty and students, administration and staff, represent a broad spectrum of views from very conservative to very liberal, and all kinds of positions in between. Some of us affirm classic Christian doctrines; others embrace feminist, womanist, and liberation theologies; and some of us try to bring them together in conversation. Many of us are Presbyterian, but we also represent a variety of Wesleyan and Baptist traditions, and we have an increasing number of Pentecostals. We are Episcopalian, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, UCC, Disciples, and no doubt many others that I’m leaving out.

Studies show that seminaries that have the least conflict and the greatest growth (or, these days, the slowest decline) are those made up of like-minded individuals—most especially conservative evangelical seminaries. At PTS, we are not like-minded. Our differences can challenge us to grow individually and as a community, but they can also erupt into serious conflict, which can do serious harm. Besides doctrine, biblical interpretation, and particular moral issues, conflict can arise in situations that involve race or gender or sexual orientation. When Paul tells us that God has given us a ministry of reconciliation, we need to take that very seriously.

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8 Ibid., 67.
9 Christopher Morse also makes this claim in, “The Ethics of Heaven,” chapter four of *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 75–98.
10 This is one of the reasons why public display of the Ten Commandments is wrong from the perspective of Christian faith (besides being unconstitutional). It reduces the commandments to a list of rules to live by, omitting the prologue that tells us who God is: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2).
**PART II: PUTTING THESE THREE WORLDS TOGETHER**

Having described the “strange” worlds of apocalyptic, Christian ethics, and Princeton Seminary, now I want to put the three together to see what we may discern about our life together as we begin our new academic year. There are two aspects of Pauline apocalyptic as Louis Martyn describes it (that I touched on earlier) that I think are especially important for us to consider: bi-focal vision and the changed reality in which we live.

**Bi-focal Vision.** Martyn says that bi-focal vision stands at the heart of Pauline apocalyptic. Many of us see the world with uni-focal vision. Some of us look at the world pessimistically and see only suffering. We see that nothing will ever change and that problems are too big to solve. Others of us look at the world and see only the good things. We see that progress has been made, things are changing, and life is good. Lou Martyn says that Pauline apocalyptic challenges our uni-focal vision and provides us instead with bi-focal vision so that we see both the profound suffering and evil in the world and God’s triumphant grace. Walter Brueggemann says that we are shaped by the character of our discourse and that ethical reflection must be mediated through “disclosures of hurt and articulations of hope.”

If our life together is to be successful, we must be able to see and disclose past and present hurt. It serves no one for us to deny the moral failures that have marked our past or to ignore the legacy of those failures that is very much with us today. But if our life together is to be successful, we must also be able to articulate our hope, which includes remembering the moral strengths of our past and living into our calling today.

There was a time in our history when the seminary’s most eminent theologians refused to condemn slaveholders. They didn’t promote slavery (they thought it was wrong), but they advocated a very gradual change away from slavery, and they said some terrible things about slaves. And yet, *Theodore Wright*, the first African American to earn a degree from a theological seminary in the U.S., graduated from Princeton Seminary in 1829. A 1953 graduate, *James Reeb*, who was white, risked and lost his life marching with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama. We have graduated African Americans and Asian Americans and Hispanics who have become leaders in the church. Bi-focal vision allows us to see that our history includes human sinfulness, and it allows us to see the triumph of God’s grace.

There was a time when the seminary’s founding theologians believed that while Paul’s statement that women should be silent in the churches was universal and timeless, Paul’s references to women who prophesied in the church was limited to his own time and no longer valid for today. And yet, *today* the ordination of women simply isn’t an issue for Princeton Seminary or for the denomination that supports it. It is a given that we support women who join our student body to fulfill their call to ordained ministry. Bi-focal vision allows us to see that our history includes human sinfulness, and it allows us to see the triumph of God’s grace.

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12 This is a theme that runs throughout Bonhoeffer’s work.

mism are not the same thing and that by God’s grace you will continue to disclose your hurt and articulate your hope.

If someone says to you: “What are you doing here? You’re a woman,” tell them they aren’t living according to the New Creation where in Christ there is no male or female (Gal. 3:28). Tell them that what you’re doing here is what Mary did and what Phoebe and Priscilla and Junia did: you are learning to give witness to the One who was born in a manger and who died on the cross for us—for all of us.

If someone says to you, you are a sinner in the eyes of God because you’re gay, tell them that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and that in passing judgment on you, they are condemning themselves (Rom. 3:23 and Rom. 2:1). Tell them, you are a child of God, created by God, saved by God, and sustained by God—just like everybody else.

And, of course, you don’t have to be a person of color, or a woman—you don’t have to be gay or lesbian—to defend those who are. Lou Martyn suggests that Pauline apocalyptic leaves us with a question: “Where are you in this apocalyptic, cosmic conflict?” Not “where should you be,” but “where are you?” And he says, “the answer is as clear as the question’:

Look! God has placed us in [God’s] struggle for redemption, the ultimate outcome of which is not in question.

God has … placed us in the front trenches of his apocalyptic war of redemption, that in the power of [God’s] unconditional grace we may fight the only good fight in the world, the fight of the God who is the Passionate Advocate of every one of us.\(^\text{14}\)

Of course, not everyone here agrees with all that I’ve said. We are not a like-minded institution. Some years ago, a friend of mine and I visited a church for an Ash Wednesday service. When the time came to go forward to receive ashes, I stayed behind. I know that receiving ashes is a meaningful part of Ash Wednesday for many people; it’s just not for me. As my friend got up to walk forward, she leaned toward me and said, “There are no Christians on this pew.” Since I was the only person left on the pew, I was stunned. I had always known this person to have a gracious, non-judgmental spirit about her. So, when she came back, I had to say something. I turned to her and asked: “Do you really think I’m not a Christian because I didn’t want to receive ashes?” She looked at me as if I had lost my mind. “What in the world are you talking about?” she asked. I responded by saying, “Well, you said there were no Christians on this pew, and since I was the only one left sitting, I thought you were saying I’m not a Christian.” She leaned very close to me and spoke slowly and clearly: “Cushions,” she said. “I said there are no cushions on this pew.”

There are no cushions on these pews in Miller Chapel either. But the pews are full of Christians. We are not like-minded Christians. We aren’t always going to agree. And our disagreements matter. They will sometimes cause some of us to harm others; they will sometimes cause heartache or anger; and they will occasionally cause some of us to stumble and fall. But at the beginning of this academic year, as we welcome new students, new faculty, new administrators and staff, and the new President, we are reminded that God has reconciled God’s self to us in Christ and has given us a ministry of reconciliation. God has taken our hearts of stone and given us new hearts—hearts of flesh that can share the pain and the joys of others however much we may disagree. Here, at the beginning of the academic year, we can use bi-focal vision to see into the depths of suffering and into the heights of God’s triumphant grace. Let us hear and believe that God will give us one heart and put a new spirit within us. For God has spoken:

‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you’ (2 Cor. 6:2).

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

Moving Heaven and Earth: A Womanist Dogmatics of Black Dance as Basileia

EBONI MARSHALL TURMAN

I got shoes.
You got shoes.
All God’s chil’ren got travelin’ shoes.¹

The decisive thing is 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 not only other people think and speak of reality, being, and events, but in which we theologians also think and speak in our everyday lives.²

Womanist spirituality holds all these…realities in a rigorous hermeneutical circle that moves beyond the known to the unknown and pushes for a rock-steady testament of the faithful who refuse to accept a world as interpreted through the eyes of those who are the key masters and mistresses of hegemony.³

What difference does heaven make for black women? What does it mean for black women to consider heaven? Does an announcement of the difference heaven makes or the assertion even that heaven makes a difference at all, matter for black women when the hellish truth of life too often scars the everydayness of their social and spiritual realities? These are decisive questions, especially for black women in the Black church—those preaching women, “mothers” of the church, Sunday school teachers, powder room attendants, choir soloists, ladies’ ushers, daytime receptionists, pastor’s aides, and pew warmers—all who count themselves


² Christopher Morse, The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 50.

tially thwarts Morse’s ecclesial appeal to rehear the good news as “now,” precisely because the very real consequences of sexual-gender discrimination contravene the assertion of the “now-ness” of heaven. Nevertheless, black womanist eschatology propels itself up on the black eschatological vision that emanates from black churchwomen’s enduring assertion which affirms that although the kingdom may not come when you want it, as in the kingdom may not be proximate, the kingdom is always coming right on time, as in it is yet approximating, to affirm the viability of the transcendental present as the primary eschatological criterion for a trustworthy black womanist eschatology. In light of the incongruent reality of sexism in the black church and black women’s disproportionate presence and active participation in the church, a brief consideration of the usefulness of Jürgen Moltmann’s claims of promissory significance and Morse’s engagement of Karl Barth’s appeal to divinatory imagination and faithful disbelief as prerequisites for rehearing heaven, precede my reimagining of black womanist eschatology in light of Christopher Morse’s considerable contributions.

Echoing James Cone, the essay positions black art through the lens of dance, black women’s un-choreographed but liturgically performed movement in the black church, as incarnate evidence of the significance of heaven for black churchwomen. The essay finally concludes with an abbreviated exploration of Emilie M. Townes’ concept of womanist apocalyptic vision to stretch and push beyond Morse’s appeal to rehear heaven, insofar as rehearing heaven, in and of itself, is insufficient as a faithful response to black women’s lives. Taken alone, rehearing heaven does not correspond with their flesh and blood realities. Instead, a black womanist eschatology builds upon black theology’s consideration of black art by theorizing black dance, more specifically, the reach, the stand and the sway of black women in the black church, as evidence of the difference heaven makes for black women. Black churchwomen’s embodied movement reveals a radical plerosis as the primary criterion for black womanist eschatology. Black women’s plerotic act in the black church insists upon putting heaven on their bodies, in spite of the ecclesial circumstances that would oppose it. In other words, a black womanist eschatology situates black dance as evidence of black women wearing heaven, when hearing and even rehearing heaven is just not enuf.

**Introduction**

Womanist eschatology resonates deeply with the heaven-as-myth ruminations of Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich, both of which resist the univocal literalism that posits heaven as merely a cosmological occurrence. Hearing of heaven as myth compels Tillich to take an ontic turn toward “symbolic descriptions of the being of God and creation,” while Bultmann attends more exclusively to the primacy of personal encounter with divine activity. Although methodologically distinct, both Bultmann and Tillich advocate demythologization and deliteralization toward the end of the existential redelection of the significance of the Gospel. This move toward anthropological re-depiction exempts the import and significance of heaven from the limits of antiquity that identify it as an “exact historical happening,” insofar as it re-descriptively positions the gospel to fit the “true to life conditions” of human existence. For both Bultmann and Tillich, heavenly news or any news of the Gospel is dreadfully impotent unless it addresses the existential circumstances and historical contexts of its hearers as living subjects. James H. Cone’s late 20th century consideration of eschatology as it relates to black life in America reverberates with Bultmannian and Tillichian claims of heaven’s existential significance. Turning to black art, namely, the spirituals and the blues or what Cone identifies as the secular spirituals, black theology similarly resists the positivistic historicism of eschatological literalism and privileges the significance of black historicity as it considers heaven. In his assertion of the eschatological precision of black music, Cone readily admits that, “the concept of heaven is the dominant idea…expressed in the black spirituals.” To be sure, black scholars like W.E.B. Dubois and Benjamin Elijah Mays among others, have appropriated their observation of the redundancy of “heaven” in the “sorrow songs” as evidence of the otherworldly, mythically objectified, and thus ultimately inept character of the Negro spiritual; the spiritual that “amidst the wilderness and lonesome valley of black suffering,” merely points toward “Eternal Good” and the ultimate justice of things. In concert with thinkers like Howard Thurman, John Lovell, Miles Fisher, and Anna Julia Cooper, however, black theology contends to the contrary.

When Marian Anderson, the great black contralto, for example, reminds us in her rendition of *Heave’n* *Heave’n* that: “I got shoes; you got shoes; all God’s children got travelin shoes,” the correlation of “heav’n” with “shoes” indicates, for Cone at least, an eschatological claim about heaven that is not otherworldly. In other words, “heaven” is not removed from the reality of the material deprivation of black life in history; rather, heaven, God’s future which is always approximating, is also ineludibly related to what is, as in concrete black impoverishment in

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6 gender discrimination. While visible, these clergywomen typically have little to no power as it relates to leadership and decision-making. For further treatment on sexist practices in African American churches see Eboni Marshall Turman, *Black and Blue: Uncovering the Ecclesial Cover-up of Black Women’s Bodies through a Womanist Reimagining of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 71–89.


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8 Morse, 37–40.

9 Ibid., 34–38.


the historical world. Indeed, black art as constituted by the spirituals reveals that the “kingdom of God is at hand,” so much so that when the Negro spiritual speaks of “de promised land…on de oder side of Jordan,” or “when black slaves sang, ’I looked over Jordan and what did I see,’” they were in most instances employing transcendentally coded language to identify and convey their present realities. In fact, within the context of the black spirituals “Jordan” functioned as a signifier for the “Ohio River” and “Canaan” was oft employed as synonym for the “North.” This indicates, over and again, a black eschatological vision irrevocably tied to earthly liberation; a vision that holds black historicity and God’s future together in a fusion dialectic, a tense synthesis, that consistently yields a transcendent present.13

Black womanist eschatology has heretofore been similarly situated insofar as it embraces news of heaven as an existential happening and aims to reach beyond extricate and disinterested assertions of literalist Christian eschatologies that presume normative significance for black women. Accordingly, womanist systematic theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher regards the transcendent present of black liberation theology as that which rightly locates heaven within the context of a fusion criterion, as she explicitly emphasizes that God “is not only in and with creation,” but exists beyond history and thus transcends worldly material realities.14 Baker-Fletcher’s consideration of heaven from the perspective of a womanist eschatological gaze engages black liberation theology, the social gospel, traditional African religions, and Native American belief systems to assert the transcendent and immanent simultaneity of God’s “not yet.”15 Baker-Fletcher’s womanist eschatology asserts that “the hereafter is in the here and now,” even as it transcends creation and exists beyond history:

Not only is it [eternity] now and not yet; it is past and present. The “hereafter” or eternity is not only in the future but in the past… It is indeed a fullness of time in which past, present, and future coexist together.16

The tense synthesis or fusion criterion of black and womanist eschatology that is constituted by the interconnection of past, present, and future asserts that the black past, its present, and the “not yet” future of God, though distinct, are never mutually exclusive. Instead, both Cone’s engagement of heaven within the Negro spirituals, and Baker-Fletcher’s examination of heaven in proto-womanist social gospel theology and praxis, reveal that the “future is not simply a reality to come,” but it is also and equally a “reality that has already happened… and is present now in the midst of the black struggle for liberation,” to which we are primarily accountable in the here and now.17

To be sure, black eschatology contends that the concept of heaven is not exhausted by present existence.18 In other words, the black spirituals reveal that heaven also functioned as hope in the ultimate future of God, a hope constituted by a new black humanity that defied the malevolence of white supremacy, slavery, and Jim Crow. The transcendent present, however, as black and womanist eschatological principle reveals that, although distinct as mentioned above, the past and the future are inseparable from the present, precisely because the scandal of the gospel reveals a God “our help of ages past,” who breaks into the present on the side of the oppressed, liberating them now to live into and for God’s future as pre-disclosed in the lifespan of Jesus Christ.

The eschatological reciprocity inherent in black and womanist eschatologies—the inseparability of the past, present, and future as revealed in the lifespan of Jesus Christ—similarly guides Christopher Morse’s groundbreaking eschatological investigation, The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News, and allows for striking parallels to be drawn between black and womanist eschatologies and Morse’s liberal theological project. In fact, Morse makes explicit claims throughout the text about heaven’s implications for the on hand and the at hand, that is, for the aggregate of the present moment, asserting even that, “‘the last day’ is the day ‘at hand.’”19 Interestingly enough, however, it appears that it is the logic of eschatological reciprocity, not its mere application, that distinguishes Morse’s heaven and that displaces the compulsion to privilege the present as the primary determinant of the “end.”20 As noted above, while black and womanist eschatologies clearly articulate that the past, the present, and God’s future are not mutually exclusive, they both contend that eschatological reciprocity is dependent on the prioritization of the present which necessarily determines the scope and moralscap of the transcendent present and transcendent future. In other words, present historical realities necessarily regulate the contours and substance of God’s in-breaking future for the world. While likewise embracing the inseparability of past, present, and future, however, Morse alternatively engages Jürgen Moltmann’s assertion of heaven as promise to propose an eschatological logic that prioritizes God’s futurum as that which, literally, “makes all the difference in the world;” a future that is not relegated to some “pie in the sky, sweet by and by” phantasm, but rather that unqualifiedly determines “this day.”21

Morse seizes Moltmann’s distinction between futurum and adventus to undergird his radical contention about the difference heaven makes, especially as it relates to those who might contend that heaven makes no difference at all. For Moltmann, futurum refers to the historically factual character of “a becoming that emerges from the potentialities of the past,” while adventus connotes the active coming of God’s “promised future that ultimately determines what becomes of the
is situated as the ultimate redemptive possibility for the black church. This is a the integration of women in spaces that previously prohibited their participation futurum per the gaze of Moltmann’s in the black church. If past and present participate in and reproduce the circularity of the very gender oppressions they even their radical inclusion defies God’s promise to do a “new thing” (Isa. 43:19) religious leadership in the black church is a non-negotiable imperative in the work consequences of its tortured past. While the inclusion of women in positions of leadership severely inadequate in terms of presently redeeming human communities from the faulty fix, however, because contemporary history reveals that integration alone is significant as that which has been taken in the past and/or withheld in the present. In other words, God’s basileia as news affirms that the shoeless will certainly get shoes, but the promise of God forecasts that much more than shoes—whether Payless or Prada—are coming to them.

Because sexual-gender discrimination is a stronghold of a past racialized and gender mythology that continues to haunt the present, it is precisely this what is to come that is as significant as what was (past) and what is (present) for black women in the black church. If past and present kата sarkа realities determine the future per the gaze of Moltmann’s futurum, or if God’s reign is limited to a future reversal of the present (kата sarkа) order of things per the black liberationist gaze then the integration of women in spaces that previously prohibited their participation is situated as the ultimate redemptive possibility for the church.” This is a faulty fix, however, because contemporary history reveals that integration alone is severely inadequate in terms of presently redeeming human communities from the consequences of its tortured past. While the inclusion of women in positions of religious leadership in the black church is a non-negotiable imperative in the work of dismantling sexual-gender injustice and approximating the kingdom on earth, even their radical inclusion defies God’s promise to do a “new thing” (Isa. 43:19) insofar as it, in many instances, merely pours “new wine into old wine skins.” The stronghold of patriarchy often paralyzes black women to the extent that they participate in and reproduce the circularity of the very gender oppressions they formerly sought to escape by oppressing others who defy the embodied normativity agreement upon by the typically male arbiters of ecclesial power.

To the contrary, Moltmann’s adventus connotes a new reality; a “new thing” that comes into the present and “is not accounted for as an extrapolation from any available residue of what has gone before.” It mirrors Morse’s kата sarkа insofar as the adventus, that is, heaven’s coming, is not readily visible and is independent of human historicity. Morse further asserts Moltmann’s adventus as the “promised future that ultimately determines what becomes of the past and the present, and not the other way around.” Lest the charge of recondite otherworldliness be ascribed to Morse’s claims, he readily concedes that hearing heaven as a promised future necessarily accounts for the “sufferings of this present time” (Rom. 8:18). In fact, for Morse authentically perceiving heaven requires radical engagement with kата sarkа social historical realities, precisely because heaven is coming into human realities. The catch here is that a Moltmannian eschatology presupposes that while heaven is coming on earth, the reality of heaven is never limited by an earthly struggle with the “cosmic powers of this present darkness.” In other words, the kата sarkа historicity which constitutes the injustices of the “real world” in which we live, and move, and have our being, which oppose heaven on every side, do not constrain the “glory about to be revealed” to what is visibly apparent; rather, the kата sarkа, or that which is coming, is real and really stronger than the inequities that threaten our bodies and our souls.

**SEXISM IN THE BLACK CHURCH AS BARTHIAN DAS NICHIGE**

Sexism in the black church is the antichrist. It is “the nothingness” that opposes (not prevents) heaven’s inbreaking insofar as it seeks to “usurp rule and authority in the place of heaven itself” (Eph. 6:12).** Sexism in the church attempts to control women according to a deadly and delusional patriarchal norm that defies the eschatological prerequisite that radically prefers “whosoever.” It identifies heteronormative maleness “in public” as superior to all else, while regularly, even if implicitly at times, casting aspersion on women, children (especially black girls) and sexual minorities who defy black male heteronormativity. To be sure, the sexist realities of the black church are not contemporary phenomena merely exacerbated in this millennial moment of woman empowerment frenzy. It can be traced back to the first hand testimony of black women preacher pioneers like Janena Lee, Julia Foote, and Zilpha Elaw among others. As noted in the scholarship of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham on the history of black Baptist women and the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., religious historian Anthea Butler’s work

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21 Ibid., 46 (italics mine).  

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24 This is evident in black women’s participation in sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia. In the black church, black women’s sexism is often demonstrated in their stated resistance to female pastors.  
26 Ibid.  
27 Ibid., 64.
on black women and the Church of God in Christ, Marla Fredericks’s anthropological inquiry on Southern black women’s spirituality lived out Between Sundays, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes groundbreaking sociological study of black women’s roles in church and community, the creative agency of African American churchwomen across ecumenical, class, and regional boundaries has historically and quite compellingly navigated dual-sex polity and other restrictive gendered frameworks in the black church through preaching, teaching, community organizing, and the development and cultivation of Mother’s Boards and other women’s spaces for women’s work.

Womanist ethicist Keri Day broadens these trailblazing analyses of women and the black church by rebelling against the traditional framing of the black church as a “surrogate world” as in the imagination of ethicist Peter Paris on the one hand, and the black church as a “wilderness experience” as womanist theologian Delores S. Williams concedes on the other. Day instead asserts that for black women the black church has historically functioned as a community of transcendence. Day appropriates Victor Anderson’s concept of transcendence theologically and/or construction of such hope and spaces is dependent upon the primary hopelessness and displacement of black women’s bodies that is connected to racialized gender discrimination. Although not altogether mistaken in the effort to understand the multiplicity of black church identities, especially in light of the fact that some black churches, although not nearly enough, do affirm women as pastors, preachers, and religious leaders, any move to assert that the black church as a tradition is for black women or that it even possesses the ability in its current expression to address the needs of black women based on individual gains is duplicitous—period. It tells a half-truth, and thus suggests that half-baked is good enough for black women without seriously accounting for the fact that although justicemaking is always incremental, God’s justice never is. Resolving to feign blindness, ignorance, or even worse, to appeal to the comfortable virtue of some malformed sister trinity of black women’s surrogacy, black women’s moral crucifixion, and its redemptive value, or even to point toward an otherworldly eschatological hope in the face of gender inequality in the pulpit, sanctuary, and community house, all while humming “we’ll understand it better by and by,” does nothing to erase or amend the insidious nature of sexism in the black church right now.

Black churchmen and black churchwomen’s perpetual rehearsal of articulating the redemptive value of the black church in spite of its continued exploitation of black women is tiring, defeatist, and unjust. It repels potential for resurrecting the black church in the 21st century insofar as it ignores or, even worse, co-signs vile language, liturgy, and practices of patriarchy—like preaching afro-misogyny, demonizing containment ethics that require that black women’s bodies be “covered up” in very specific ways to dilute and contain their organic inner Jezebel, and gender tokenism that suggests that one black woman is enough to approximate gender equity in the pulpit—that have historically sustained the black church; all for a spattering of Sunday morning or Wednesday night hope that is negated every time a woman is told that she cannot vote in a church meeting because according to the church bylaws she does not exist, or every time a little girl who says “I want to do be a pastor” is told that she cannot, according to some bastardized Pauline hermeneutic that projects human bias onto God.

The fact of the matter is that black women disproportionately comprise the black church constituency and labor force as in Townsend Gilkes’ exhortation that “if it wasn’t for the women there wouldn’t be a church,” (quite literally according to James H. Cone’s probe that doubts the value of saving souls without saving bodies is especially resonant when considering the usefulness of transcendent hope and women’s spaces in black churches, particularly because the very articulation and/or construction of such hope and spaces is dependent upon the primary hopelessness and displacement of black women’s bodies that is connected to racialized gender discrimination. Although not altogether mistaken in the effort to understand the multiplicity of black church identities, especially in light of the fact that


29 See Riggs, Plenty Good Room, 27.

There is no doubt that sexism in the black church is a psychic and behavioral doppelganger of sorts. To echo Emilie M. Townes' consideration of the cultural production of evil, gender discrimination in the black church not only reveals that African American churches participate in the reproduction of white supremacy in black face, but eschatologically speaking, the sexist black church is a counterfeit reality that privileges past *kata sarka* racial-gender mythologies to oppose the *en sarki* authority and advent of heaven. Nowhere else is this more apparent than in the lie that is typically fashioned along the lines of, “God does not call women to preach” or more generously, “God does not call women to be pastors,” both of which are claims that continue to be asserted in the new millennium, and many black women, young, old, and in-between actually believe and endorse this defective assessment.

Americanist Saidiya Hartman identifies the act of believing the lie that has been told to you about yourself as the “ethic of perfect submission.” Hartman essentially argues that persistent oppression generates an optimal environment for psychic degeneration in which the marginalized come to believe, accept, and embrace the lie given to them by the arbiters of power. It is evident that this ethic is at work in black churches as it relates to black women’s labor that is far too often exploited in the name of Jesus and for the sake of black men. The ethic of perfect submission essentially concedes that black women can run the church; they just cannot lead it. It bars black women from the senior pulpit based on superficial presumption of unsuitable genitalia. In light of this, black women have sought to engage their calls and spiritual yearnings in alternative spaces that have historically been deemed appropriate for women—among children, in classrooms, in kitchens, as caregivers, and more generally as helpmeet to black men. In the church, black women disproportionately embody the aforementioned capacities as volunteer Sunday school and nursery teachers directly responsible for disciple-ing the next generation of believers; as volunteer hospitality managers who supervise the physical nourishment of the pastor, congregation, and wider community through food service; as volunteer ministry leaders who advance the pastoral leadership at the highest levels. Clearly, their underrepresentation is not due to black women’s lack of capacity for ministry, which is clearly and fully lived out in their doing of ministry that substantiates the life of the church, but because of their bodies—because they are women. This means that no matter how hard black women hope or pray, cook or clean, sing, teach, preach, or perform, the black church functions as a social negative that says “no” to the full *inesis* of black women based on the sum of past and present estimations of the value and virtue of black womanhood. As such, sexism in the black church is irrevocably linked to the past and present, or as I have contended elsewhere, to *kata sarka* social historical realities that oppose God while exercising “a pseudo-agency that is distinctly other from...God’s good creation in the biblical drama of creation and redemption.”

Sexism in the black church is Barthian *das Nichtige* insofar as it seeks to impose hell with deadly resistance on black women and thus nullify heaven’s coming to black women’s *real* world.

Sexism in the black church as Barthian *das Nichtige* demands eschatological vision; a vision of a “coming” future that stimulates an “at hand” pro-clitoral/pro-woman revolt that functions as the epistemological and ontological threat to afro-ecclesial gender discrimination. This eschatological vision cannot be fully determined by present realities that merely beget a reversal of the present order as it rides the slippery slope of solipsism that refuses to believe that there really can be a new way—a way that defies the contours of what has hitherto fore been done. Instead, eschatological vision that is accountable to black women’s experience of gender discrimination in the black church, that is, the experience of Barthian *das Nichtige*, must nullify all that opposes heaven’s coming by demanding that the church as it is presently constituted, pass away. As noted in Matthew 10:39, whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake, will find it; thus, inducing sexism in black churches to pass away allows room for a new ecclesial thing to come to pass, a new black church that resists the sacralization of male pastoral leadership, black women are unable to claim authority within the asset itself, that is, moral authority within the church.32

As the hands and feet of the black body of Christ on the ground, it is troubling that the predominant roles of women have been *accurate* typified in common parlance as the “backbone” of the church. Black women’s work is central to the functioning of the entire church yet women continue to be severely underrepresented or categorically invisible in churches as it pertains to pastoral leadership at the highest levels. Clearly, their underrepresentation is not due to black women’s lack of capacity for ministry, which is clearly and fully lived out in their doing of ministry that substantiates the life of the church, but because of their bodies—because they are women. This means that no matter how hard black women hope or pray, cook or clean, sing, teach, preach, or perform, the black church functions as a social negative that says “no” to the full *inesis* of black women based on the sum of past and present estimations of the value and virtue of black womanhood. As such, sexism in the black church is irrevocably linked to the past and present, or as I have contended elsewhere, to *kata sarka* social historical realities that oppose God while exercising “a pseudo-agency that is distinctly other from...God’s good creation in the biblical drama of creation and redemption.”


33 Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 64.
of theosocial violence against black women, and against any body that defies the arbiters of the sexist status quo.

Rehearing Heaven: A Morsian Interlude

Womanist eschatology affirms that out of nothing, even the nothingness of Barth’s *das Nichtige* as evidenced in the reality of gender discrimination in the black church, God can still make something. God is able, period; and this affirmative assumption is the theological substance that undergirds black womanist theological postures that insist on making a way out of no way. Morse echoes this expectant womanist theological imagination in his engagement of the Barthian categories of ‘divinatory imagination’ (*diviniatorischen Phantasie*) and ‘faithful disbelief’ (*ein Akt des im Glauben begründeten Unglaubens*) as primary mechanisms of resistance against the invasion of *das Nichtige*. Morse concedes that even amidst hell, God is coming; that is, God makes a way in the world out of its apparent ‘no way’. His tag-team deployment of Barth’s ‘divinatory imagination’ and ‘faithful disbelief’ makes this way palpable, or rather, permits a rehearing of heaven in spite of heaven’s opposition in the real world. This opportunity to rehear the gospel as news, as that which God is doing “this day” beyond the present line of human vision, thus facilitates a relevant rehearing of heaven for black women, even as the usurpation of heaven’s coming manifests as the existing reality of sexism in the black church. Morse concedes that despite “real world” evidence, it is *how* one hears and rehears the reality of heaven as news that determines the quality and intensity of the difference heaven makes in life. He posits divinatory imagination and faithful disbelief as the requisite components of faithful rehearing that begets trustworthy eschatological inquiry.

To assert that rehearing heaven requires disbelief might initially present as theologically suspect; but Morse concedes that faithful disbelief implies a refusal to believe in anything that is hostile to heaven’s coming no matter the dominance of its sound vibration in the world. In other words, to believe and actively participate in heaven’s counterfeit opposition, namely and for our purposes here, sexism in the black church, or any prevailing though death-dealing practice in the real world, is in fact the apex of unfaithfulness, even as these practices are often characterized as God-ordained by the arbiters of the status quo. Faithful disbelief, however, is the:

- active disbelief of noncompliance and refusal of allegiance toward what the Gospel exposes as countervailing opposition to heaven’s coming; that is, the enmity biblically characterized as evil and demonic.

Consequently, as opposed to Bultmann’s turn to demythologization as it relates to biblical cosmological imagery, Morse exposes Barth’s faithful disbelief (*Unglaubens*) as not so much concerned with meandering cosmic literals, but with evil in the real world. Hearing of heaven as a faithful disbeliever does not merely mean unraveling those “gates strung with pearls” or demolishing those “streets paved with gold” which so often constitute the visions of heaven that arrest the Christian imagination of one’s first hearing. Instead, to rehear heaven through the auspices of faithful disbelief has everything to do with actively resisting evil; that is, resisting any and everything in the world that defies the veracity of the Good News. Rehearing heaven in ways that “overpower and disenthrall” heaven’s opposition casts divinatory imagination as the bedrock of the theological exorcism that faithful disbelief engenders. At its core, it definitively expels heaven’s opposition in the world; however, it is important to note that faithful disbelief cannot be fully actuated unless it is solidly rooted in a “third” way. Said differently, one cannot faithfully disbelieve heaven’s opposition in the ‘real world’ unless there is a ‘real’ heaven in which to believe in the first place.

The substance of this sort of heavenly vision is especially complex given that, as Morse concedes, “heaven is distinctive” and “its cosmic reality does not conform to any general metaphysics or generic ontology premised upon” an ambiguity of being. Although heaven is biblically likened parabolically to the “real world,” (as in, “the kingdom of God is like unto . . .”) because of its “now” implications, the reality of heaven is that it does not correspond actually with any form of worldly univocity. For the womanist theologian this is especially intriguing because it begs the question: how, then, might black women see and hear heaven in light of the fact that, as gospeled, its sight and sound defy the impulses of binary hierarchical human epistemologies that insist that heaven is “this” and not “that.” In other words, how might black women rehear heaven as it necessarily disrupts sexism as *das Nichtige*, especially when heaven’s possibilities are, literally, infinite, that is, not circumscribed by the boundaries of normative eschatological respectability; or more succinctly, what does it mean to rehear heaven based on the reality of black women’s present realities in African American churches?

As noted above, the dynamism of the Negro spirituals that James Cone attends to in his treatment of the spirituals and the blues concedes an epistemological privilege of the oppressed which asserts that heaven for black people does not readily correspond with the eschatological vision of the arbiters of moral power.

34 For further treatment on womanist perspectives on how God presents a way forward for black women despite the impossibility of present circumstances, see Monica Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).
35 Christopher Morse exposes the significance of Holy Saturday in his discussion of the Good Friday/Easter dialectic. Too often, inquirers are eager to jump from the suffering of Good Friday to the Easter celebration. Morse suggests the critical importance of God in Christ’s descent beyond suffering, even into the depths of hell, out of which God “makes a way” toward resurrection.
36 Morse, 63.
37 Ibid., 1–50. The significance of the *how* is made evident by the comprehensive attention Morse gives to various theologies of heaven before asserting his intersection of the reality and hope of heaven.
38 Ibid., 62.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 60.
Basic continuity of language notwithstanding, the vision, import, significance, and even proclamation of heaven, namely, crossing that “chilly Jordan” or awakening on that “great gettin’ up morning,” manifests distinctly across boundaries of Christian difference, and yet “comes from thence,” all the same.

Black womanist eschatology contends that something of heaven is known to black women that escapes the gaze of male normative eschatological vision as it manifests in the black church. The experience of sexism and the subjugation of black women in African American churches as it relates to male power compels a hearing of heaven “at hand” that is accountable to black women’s experience of heaven’s opposition in church and society “this day.” Heaven cannot be confined by sexist realities precisely because the coming basileia as gospeled disrupts its “would-be nullifying opponents,” das Nichtige, and transforms what is in order to establish what ought to be. For black women what was and what is sexism in the black church opposes but does not impede what is coming; that is, heaven’s inbreaking. In fact, the “at hand-ness” of God’s basileia has concrete implications for the present and affirms Morse’s claim that heaven and earth are inseparable. While inseparable, however, it should be noted that heaven and earth are unconfused. This means that God’s reign is always accountable to social historical realities or what is taking place, but not limited to the boundaries of the “real” world. Because heaven is paradoxically that which is “on hand ‘this day’ for ‘the glory forever’” it comes into the world with the intensity of a “new” earth, processing from the en sarki Christ event that, on all accounts, surpasses human understanding.

To realize the fullness of heaven’s en sarki reality that interrupts the normativity of das Nichtige in the world, that is, those death-dealing kata sarka social historical realities that demonize and dehumanize the oppressed, one must rehear heaven in a way that stretches beyond eschatological literalism and prophesies significance. Heaven matters. For Morse, its import is not to be found in its signification as an otherworldly place to which the faithful will ascend when “this old life is over;” nor the simple assumption of material gain that contravenes the life of the world, and thus mirrors the reality of heaven’s “coming” even to the precincts of the profane, those places we least expect God to show up. Rehearing heaven is thus constituted not only by what has been explicitly said about it, but by the poetic; that is, by that which is seen, heard, and felt emerging between and, in many instances, in spite of the sounds of the “real world.” Rehearing the coming to pass (the “invisible, as music”), yet this day (the “positive as sound”) reality of heaven can be actualized through poetic sensibilities that are commensurate with, though distinct from, the good news inasmuch as its expressed lyricism parabolically relays the essence of God’s basileia.

Morse subsequently appeals to Emily Dickinson’s, “This World is Not Conclusion,” to demonstrate, most powerfully, that the parabolic significance of heaven is not confined to biblical texts. Such confinement to historical reports or scribal inscription would, in fact, negate the basileia “at hand.” His Barthian impulse instead highlights the significance of secularism of life in the world (der Profanität des Weltlebens) toward the end of encountering heaven’s reality, or a real heaven with worldly significance. Consequently, the parabolic import of heaven is found in the poetic sensibilities that transpire outside of the temple. Pro-fanum (“outside the temple”) poetry and artistic impulses affirm the relationship between heaven’s reality and the “real” world. Eavesdropping outside of the temple or inquiring of those people, places, and things that are not explicitly religious, and perhaps are even irrelevant and contemptuous of sacred claims, gives birth to divinatory imagination that further informs the temple, empowering the “church’s talk of a heavenly kingdom” to acquire parabolic significance that extends into the life of the world, and thus mirrors the reality of heaven’s “coming” even to the prophane places we least expect God to show up.

**This is the Remix: Dancing Revelation with Withered Hands**

Black womanist eschatology delights in Morse’s treatment of Barth’s exhortation to locate eschatological significance in the strange interruptions of the world by first appealing to Alice Walker’s “loves dance” as definitive evidence of womanist identity in order to decidedly assert black dance as the pro-fanum divinatory imagination that mirrors the “parabolic truth of the basileia of heaven’s reality” for black women in the black church.

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41 Ibid., 121.
42 Ibid., 60.
43 Ibid., 61.
44 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 66.
Charles H. Long’s classic treatment of signs, symbols, and images in the interpretation of religion is instructive for black womanist eschatology insofar as it wrestles with the irony of that which is not explicitly said, but emerges symbolically, or as Morse might concede, with parabolic significance. Like Toni Morrison’s much later assertion of unspeakability as it relates to the horrors of black women’s realities, Long contends that non-Western peoples and cultures that were forced to “undergo the creativity of the Western world...were present not as voices speaking but as the silence which is necessary for all speech.” While asserting that the philological terrain of Western cultural creativity, that is, imagination (that was not so divine), was not the exclusive language of humankind, Long further maintains that those subjugated by Western creativity or as a townesian ethic might suggest, those whose lives were dominated by the spectacular authority of the fantastic hegemonic imagination, “existed as the pauses between words,” or the vibrations between sounds. Not only were those pauses necessary for approximating the speech act, but even more, Long proposes that it was in the silence that dispossessed peoples and cultures spoke in ways that did not merely speak, but signified, pointing to something beyond the what is. Accordingly, Long makes sense of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* by insisting that the phonological creativity of the oppressed is found in the silence that is present between words. Embodied presence engenders a silent counter-language of sorts that articulates not primarily as “speech-act,” but rather through presence in the pause. In other words, the existential substance of the dispossessed black body within the context of Western cultural creativity has historically articulated between words, in silence beyond language that has been exhausted by the forms of the “real” world.

As both the sophisticated vocabulary of professional black performance and the improvisational social movement that emerges from within communities of African American descent, black dance is an embodied and “in-body” lexicon that functions as a primary source for the task of womanist theological reflection. Black dance as the phenomenological there-ness of a black body that silently articulates within the creative matrices of dominant forms, namely, *das Nichtiger*, is divinatory imagination at its best. Forasmuch as black dance shows itself by way of choreographed and/or improvisational symbol—in the long lines, for instance, of [Judith] Jamison, the rounded shapes of Dudley [Williams], the gentle pulse of [Katherine] Dunham, the new jill swing of Rhapsody, and [Talley] Beatty’s odd time—black dance itself cannot be said. Instead, it disbelieves “real world” historical claims of black bodily subordination and imagines and enfleshes a black bodily reality that is approximating, though not proximate. Black dance is thus parabolic insofar as it points to a not yet reality that is only known through the veracity of “real world” flesh and blood. Black dance offers a precise, though often overlooked, corporeal language of images that transgresses the hegemony of texts and lingual idiom all while speaking the unspeakable. Cultural formation in the loud silences of the black community situated beyond the gaze of white creativity where the dancing black body functioned as primary signifier (i.e. the soul train line) reveals a fundamental ontology of the articulating body, the body that does not speak but signifies.

Long argues that the interrelation of language with the silence of those who have “undergone” the creativity of the Western world functions as “the basis for a new ontology” that is inclusive of a range of experiences including poetic sensibilities expressed through symbol, idea, image, or alternative materiality; an expression of existence that according to womanist incarnation ethics extends even to the line, shape, time, and pulse of the body. Hearing the silences in the poetic through the inaudible body that moves—the very act of which is mostly antithetical to metanarratives of theological inquiry and method—moves us toward what Long concedes as that which inevitably constitutes black experience in the Western world. The silent presence of the black body as it moves to and fro, in and through, the interstices of dominant hegemonies parabolically speaks. The shape, line, pulse, gait, and timing of the black body even in the context of white and/or male meta-choreography, theological and otherwise, articulates something about ebony realities that gesture beyond the *kata sarka*, those normative hegemonic cultural continuities that Long would attest to, toward a “new thing” that Morse argues is coming although “not yet.”

To be sure, black dance is not an exclusively *pro-fanum* act. Elsewhere I have explored at length the embodied movement of black women in the black church through a choreographic deconstruction of three primary movements—the reach, the stand, and the sway—that can be observed in many African American churches across denominational affiliation. Black women’s embodied movement is sacralized in the church insofar as it typically emerges within the context of devotion and worship at the behest of the Spirit, and in response to the proclaimed and/or intoned Word. Black women’s sacred dance employs socially subjugated bodies—black women—as parabolic signifiers that use the potency of the present to signal the supremacy of the transcendent, which is to come this day for the glory forevermore. Beyond the hegemony of text, black sacred dance reveals a future that is “not yet” through the bodies of black women who enflish the reversal of the present order. In the poetic sensibility of sacred dance one observes the reconstitution of black women’s bodies that are normatively counted as “last” in relationship to the “first” place of black men in the church.

To reach one’s arms up while spiritually cast down, to stand while emotionally bowed over, and to sway back and forth in the attempt to rock steady while mentally shaken by the turbulence of the multiple practices of gender discrimination in the black church is black women’s embodied act of faithful disbelief that affirms that there is another way; a way whereby every valley *really* is exalted and the crooked places *really* are made straight (Is. 40:4); a way that is not yet but is

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51 Ibid., 167–171.
coming in defiance of the present das Nichtige of black women’s “real world” in the church. Black women’s dancing bodies defy their own kata sarke historicity, what was and what is, in the very act of embodying adventus. In other words, the act of black women’s coming into the church in spite of its Afro-heteropatriarchal opposition to black womanhood that nullifies their full humanity unveils the radical and redemptive capacity of bodies that have been broken under the weight of sexism in the black church, and that move or better yet that still dance a revelation of coming justice, even with withered hands. It is only through the broken body that is reconstituted that humanity approximates the glory forevermore. The assertion of the physical and moral integrity of black women’s bodies amidst countervailing forces in church and society is “like unto” the en sarke event of Christ that yields the advent of the kingdom. Black womanist eschatology, thus, concludes that in the black church sacred dance is the basileia at hand that makes a difference for black women who are subjected to gender discrimination. It is the dance that demands that the black church move—at least beyond its present moral failure as it relates to black women.

Concluding Plerosis: “Putting On” the Basileia

Forasmuch as black womanist eschatology embraces Christopher Morse’s provocative exhortation to rehear the gospel as news, in her consideration of womanist spirituality as social witness, theoethicist Emilie M. Townes posits that womanist eschatological hope must always be partnered with apocalyptic vision.\(^52\) This sort of vision affirms the reality of “God accomplishing [God’s own] divine plans within the context of human history,” that is, of God’s coming to do God’s work, while also insisting that God’s coming is actualized “by means of human agents” who actively participate in particular social actions that have universal implications.\(^53\) In other words, womanist eschatology is incomplete if it replaces human doing with a rehearing of God’s coming, or merely being “on hand” for what is “at hand.” Black sacred dance reveals black women’s compulsion to do—to utilize embodied agency to “make a way out of no way;” that is, to put their bodies on the land in demonstratively showing a God at-hand even amidst das Nichtige. In the sacred dance we observe that black women are not limited to only rehearing heaven, especially in light of who is disproportionately privileged to speak and be heard in the context of the Afro-ecclesia. Black women’s bodies instead reveal a womanist plerosis that shows them “putting on” the basileia—the embodied reach toward what is not yet defies the cast down reality of what is. Womanist eschatological plerosis thus contends that black women not only rehear heaven. They are not only being “on hand” to rehear what is “at hand” in the coming of the basileia that disrupts and destroys the countervailing forces of God in the world, but through sacred dance black women wear heaven on their bodies even as they are subject to heaven’s opposition. It is a Pauline contention that “when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, ‘death is swallowed up in victory’” (I Cor. 15:54). Black women’s sacred movement is hope embodied. It is the plerotic act that yields a reversal of black women’s social brokenness and the performance of a wholeness that is coming in defiance of what is heard in the “real world.” Black sacred dance is the embodied imagination of a coming future that will be that, which determines what is. It is in the sacred dance—the reaching, the standing, and the swaying that black women wear Sunday after Sunday—that one might glimpse the real difference that heaven makes.

\(^{52}\) Townes, In a Blaze of Glory, 121.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 122.
Beyond Consolation: The Significance of Failure for Faith

Heather Wise

Christopher Morse, the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Professor Emeritus of Theology and Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, teaches how to “test the spirits,” not only of the tradition, but also of ourselves, as theology witnesses our transformation into who God made us to be.¹ The following presentation, which I gave on April 25, 2013 at Columbia University’s Teacher’s College for non-theologians engaged in an interdisciplinary seminar series, shows how Morse’s work influences theology and theology’s engagement with other disciplines, so we can best find what it means to be human, or, as Bonhoeffer emphasized, following the apostle Paul, that “God is for us.”² In gratitude for all Morse has taught me about doing dogmatics as a “theology of freedom”—each one of us invited to test the evidence presented because God, as “the One who loves in freedom,” can be trusted to confirm or convict what we conclude—I write as a witness to what God is doing and the difference it makes in our lives and communities as my mentor has so faithfully done for decades.³

Introduction

Before turning to the theme of the day, I want to introduce my disciplines and method for this diverse group gathered for the interdisciplinary seminar. While not an ethnographer like many of my colleagues in the seminar series on “Religion and Failure” in the Anthropology of Religion at Teacher’s College, I am a clinically trained chaplain and scholar in the fields of Psychiatry & Religion and Systematic Theology. As a chaplain, my method for reporting clinical experience follows the standards of the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, which includes verbatim material (that maintains confidentiality), self-and-other reflection and theological interpretation. As the founder of Clinical Pastoral Education, a clinically trained chaplain and scholar in the fields of Psychiatry & Religion and Systematic Theology, Christina Scalo teaches how to “test the spirits,” not only of the tradition, but also of we ourselves, as theology witnesses our transformation into who God made us to be.¹ The following presentation, which I gave on April 25, 2013 at Columbia University’s Teacher’s College for non-theologians engaged in an interdisciplinary seminar series, shows how Morse’s work influences theology and theology’s engagement with other disciplines, so we can best find what it means to be human, or, as Bonhoeffer emphasized, following the apostle Paul, that “God is for us.”² In gratitude for all Morse has taught me about doing dogmatics as a “theology of freedom”— each one of us invited to test the evidence presented because God, as “the One who loves in freedom,” can be trusted to confirm or convict what we conclude—I write as a witness to what God is doing and the difference it makes in our lives and communities as my mentor has so faithfully done for decades.³

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¹ 1 John 4.1–2. For more on “testing the spirits” and theological method, see Christopher Morse, Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief, 2nd Edition. (New York: Continuum, 2009).

6 Ulanov, The Unshuttered Heart, 64. When a pastor in Barcelona, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “It sometimes seems to me like all our work comes to grief on the care of souls.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Testament to Freedom, 406.
9 Morse, Not Every Spirit, xviii and, 14–31.
10 Ibid., 14–20.
personal dimensions, for understanding the whole human person in relationship.11 Important to note, work with the psyche refers to its wider frame of reference in the term psyche-soma, as soul and body are inseparably connected and the psyche is not a discrete individualistic entity, but relational.12 For Christians, theology must attend to psychosocial reality because God acts through Jesus Christ apoca-
lyped (Gk “revealed”) in the flesh and blood realities of this world. As psychoana-
lyst and theologian Ann Belford Ulanov writes, God also comes to us in the flesh of the human psyche.13

To “serve dogmatics” means to critically reflect upon related disciplines, such as history, ethics, philosophy, sociology, and psychoanalysis, in light of what God is doing and the difference it makes. Herein lies the difference between anthropology of religion and theological anthropology. Anthropology of religion studies humans and their communities of faith on their own terms, while theological anthropology studies humans from the standpoint of God’s action and its import in the world today. Christian theology says we are created human, but, under the influence of evil in this world, we fall away from our true humanity. We are called, as the apostle Paul writes in Romans and 2 Corinthians in the New Testament, to no longer live kata sarka (Gk, “according to the flesh”), but through Jesus Christ en sarki (Gk, “in the flesh”), which restores us to our true, embodied humanity.14

For a dialogue between religious studies and theology, the crucial question then is how to understand and test experience for what it actually means to be human. Both fields and their subfields have much to say on this which I cannot go into now, but I hope this paper will open up the conversation and be part of creating a bridge between them as church father Irenaeus said the glory of God is the living person.15

Faith and Failure

This essay offers a philosophical, psychoanalytic and theological assessment of what happens when faith fails. Contrary to what many people realize, faith, as a human mode of trusting in God, is meant to fail. Like all idols we make of the things we love, faith fails because it does not transmit the ultimate, but merely points to it. So what do people of faith do in the face of failure when even faith itself no longer obtains?

Following philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s seminal essay “On Consolation” in The Religious Significance of Atheism in which he argues that God is beyond our consolation, and his explication of the function of symbols in Freud and Philos-

phony, I consider what we do when faith fails, our symbols break, and we still long for consolation. I also adjudicate group psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion’s theory of O (ultimate reality), K (finite reality; knowledge), and –K (the loss of both O & K) for what it offers to both science and religion for how we understand failure and possible responses to it. Relatedly, I investigate Bion’s column 2, which on his number and letter grid perhaps represents the place of necessary failure, and its connection with John Keats’ negative capability.

I relate the work of Ricoeur and Bion theologically to faith stories including the Judeo-Christian story of Moses not being consumed by the burning bush and the Christian story of what happens in the life span of Jesus Christ which includes incarnation, death on the cross, and resurrection. I remember Rachel’s refusal to be consoled when her children are killed and Job’s waiting for an answer from God. My thesis is that within these stories (and other faith stories) is healing in-

Experiences of Failure: What Happens When Faith Fails?

In my work as a hospital chaplain at the multi-faith, multi-ethnic New York Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia University Medical Center and Sloan Women’s Hospital/Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital of New York in the summers of 2009 and 2012, I have had the chance to experience up close what happens when faith fails. While we all have experienced failure, and some of us even the failure of faith, the hospital provides an acute lens on what happens to us when we arrive at the end of our own resources, including our ability to have faith. Confronted with painful crisis situations, patients, families, and staff all experience a testing of faith that,


12 C. G. Jung sees the psyche as relational and emphasizes individuation instead of indi-


14 See Morse, Not Every Spirit, 38–40, 150–155. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5.16, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.” See also Romans 8.

15 Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book 4, Chapter 20, Section 7. (Christian Classical Ethereal Library) http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/an01.ix.vi.xxi.html
regardless of faith affiliation (including that of “no faith”), reveals the ground we actually stand upon, even if what is revealed is that we feel completely groundless.

A seven-year-old girl has been actively dying for several months. When I enter the room her father screams, “Why is God doing this to my little girl, to my BABY!” The girl cries out for more oxygen and a nurse helps her administer it to herself. Her mother, sitting anxiously over her daughter’s bed, rocks back and forth saying, “God, just please take her, take her, take her now.” She then yells, “God just save her! Save her!” Her father asks why God would do this after God saved his daughter from multiple defects at birth and through countless surgeries.

Why give them seven, long, wonderful years of her life, only to take her now? He says, “Why is this happening to us, when there are a lot of bad parents in the world who do terrible things to their children? Why doesn’t God take their children?” To add to this family’s loss, bankrupted by medical bills and out of work, they live in this hospital room with all their possessions and when their daughter dies at 3am on an upcoming day, they will be homeless by 4pm.

In another experience, I am the chaplain on-call and paged to rush with the entire medical team to the room of a 15-year-old oncology patient who has just had an unexpected heart attack. After trying to save her, the lead doctor declares the girl brain dead and tries to explain to her shocked mother that her daughter will not recover, in order to get her permission to end care. The mother refuses to end care, at first agreeing for the nurses to stop giving her daughter oxygen manually, but then, as she watches her daughter’s breathing and heartbeat slow down, insists they resume giving her oxygen. The mother starts praying aloud, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!” Standing a few feet behind her, I add to her prayer, in a nearly silent whisper, “Yes, Jesus.” She turns around enraged, “Do not say Jesus is here! Jesus is not here! Do not say he is here! Jesus is NOT here!”

In a final example, a teenage patient I worked with for weeks on one of my regular units, the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit, attended the annual Children’s Hospital prom and was released to go home. Now, she returns to the PICU, and it is unclear whether or not she is actively dying, but she does eventually die a month later. Her mother, a very devout Spanish-speaking Christian wants me to visit her daughter, but then, as she watches her daughter’s breathing and heartbeat slow down, she thinks faith that believes in the providential God, the moral God, must give way to the ultimate, and enter into a place in which nothing we can say or do can provide consolation either to ourselves or to others. As Morse writes, at the heart of theology we have to pay attention to the biblical Rachel, whose refusal to be consoled when her children are killed reminds us that we cannot offer easy consolation, or what Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.”

When faith fails, however, it feels like the end of the world, because psychologically it is. It is the end of the world, as we knew it. We cannot see beyond the failure, beyond the loss, and we still long for consolation, even as it eludes us. If we are not ushered into the “no place” of the loss of faith in the face of failure, perhaps our faith has not failed. But what does it mean to say that faith, as a human mode of trusting in God, is meant to fail? We turn now to investigate philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s insights into The Religious Significance of Atheism and the function of symbols in Freud & Philosophy as resources for people of faith who seek a consolation “beyond consolation.”

Ricoeur: “On Consolation” and the Function of Symbols

In his essay, “On Consolation,” in The Religious Significance of Atheism, Ricoeur considers that God is beyond both our accusation and consolation. He thinks faith that believes in the providential God, the moral God, must give way to what he calls a “tragic faith.” He writes, “Atheism must mean the destruction of the moral God not only as ultimate source of accusation but as the source of ultimate protection, as Providence. But if atheism is to have any religious significance, the death of the providential God should point toward a new faith, a tragic faith, which would be to classical metaphysics what the faith of Job was to the archaic law of retribution professed by his pious friends.”

First, Ricoeur says atheism means the destruction of the moral God, the providential God of accusation and consolation. God as both wrathful retribution and, as in classical metaphysics, the summum bonum, or the “highest good,” has been destroyed. What does this mean? Providence comes from the Latin word providio, provides or foresees it, “sees to it.” God provides for God’s creation. What actually dies here, is not God as Providence, but providence as wish fulfillment. Many see God as simply a heavenly parent who will punish and reward. The cries of my seven-year-old patient’s parents express this type of God. They alternate between accusing God—“how could God do this to my baby?!”—and wanting God’s consolation and intervention—“God, please save her!” The law of

16 Morse, Not Every Spirit, 9–12. For key scriptures pertaining to Rachel’s refusal to be consoled, see Genesis 35.15–20; Jer. 31.15, and Matthew 27.46. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, ed. by Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 43–56. “Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace. Cheap grace means grace as bargain-basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate sacrament...grace without a price, without costs.” (43)
18 Ibid.
retribution, the talon law of eye for an eye, appeals to her father. He asks why God cannot take the child of a bad person instead.

While it is not Providence, but providence as wish fulfillment that is destroyed by a tragic faith, it is not God as the summum bonum, but God as the summum bonum understood by the philosophers to mean God is what is highest and best of our world that is destroyed. This is the sense in which Martin Luther said a “theology of glory” could be used to avoid suffering, or what he called the “theology of the cross.” While we can trust a God who cares for creation and in whose glory we will participate as God’s beloved, we can mistakenly expect God to be found only in what is good to us and can sometimes end up worshipping human potential. This does not allow for suffering, or a God who enters into it, such as perhaps when the mother of my patient who died of a sudden heart attack screamed, “Jesus is NOT here!” She may have expected to be able to call God down and to be protected and consoled, for God to intervene to save her daughter. Just as the law of retribution has to die because it is not the true law of God in the Torah, the God of the philosophers is not the God of the Gospel.

Ricoeur says for atheism to be significant for religion or faith means that it must point to a tragic faith. For Christian tradition, atheism would also signify the end of “religion,” in what Bonhoeffer called the need for a “religionless” Christianity: “The end of religion means the end of our human practices of getting to God in the face of what God is revealing to us through Jesus Christ made incarnate in the particular sufferings of our world.” Both point to this tragic faith that, for Christians, is found in the testimony of what happens with Jesus Christ through incarnation, death on a cross, and resurrection. We, in the failure of our faith, in the death and destruction we face, cannot get to God. Jesus Christ comes into the world, born in a stable, into the worst of our inhumanity and suffering, not out of the perfect mind of the philosophers.

Jesus Christ is then crucified on a cross, which means he suffers with us everything we suffer. But he suffers on our behalf, not to appease a bloodthirsty wrathful God, no, that is still retribution. He suffers for us, faith tells us, to put an end to all our human suffering. This does not mean our wounds go away or are trivialized. No, this faith is tragic. We carry our wounds with us. However, all that would reject us, all that we would reject, in our sin and suffering, evil and injustice, our inhumanity to one another and ourselves, is ultimately rejected and overcome. This is the hope in the promise of the resurrected body of Christ, of which the whole world is considered a part. The body maintains its scars, but no longer operates on the basis of them, as what we have lost has been regained through no effort of our own, but through God’s grace.

It is easier to blame ourselves or others when faced with tragic loss, to turn pain into punishment. It is much harder to suffer it and allow it to potentially be transformed into a tragic faith. As I experienced with my patient, who I thought had been made well and would not be returning to the hospital, but then came back to die, it is hard to sit at the foot of the cross and suffer our loss of consolation, and our inability to console or be consoled, and wait for God, as Job did. Our faith fails because human faith, as a mode of trusting in God, is meant to fail. We cannot resurrect ourselves and have come to the end of our faith and wait with hope for what lies beyond consolation.

We now turn to Ricoeur’s essay on hermeneutics found in *Freud & Philosophy*, in which he explains how symbols function, and which I relate to stages of faith and failure’s place within them. The first phase of faith is a pre-critical stage, which Ricoeur calls the “first naïveté.” In the first naïveté we are in a one-ness with our faith and its symbols. Symbols point to something beyond themselves and are alive “with the sound of music.” Faith feels meaningful. Important to note, some people will live their whole lives in this stage because their faith has not failed and they are able to remain in this primary relationship with it. We do not break people’s symbols or take away their faith.

But for many of us, life intervenes. Our symbols break and no longer transmit the ultimate to us. Ricoeur calls broken symbols “signs,” which are flat and univocal because they no longer convey anything beyond themselves. This is the phase of demythologization and critical faith. We take what Ricoeur calls the “regressive vector” of the symbol and go back into its history to discover what

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23 See Morse, “The Life to Come” in *Not Every Spirit*, 318–346. “Hell has no eternal dominion. If what God eternally rejects throughout all creation, with the fire of a love that remains unquenchable, is every opposition to our being loved into freedom, including our own, then the hellfire and damnation of Judgment Day is precisely the one true hope of all the earth. The old question of whether or not grace is “irresistible” only becomes a problem when theology forgets Who it is whose judgment is confessed to be coming. What else is the Crucifixion if not the resistance to grace? What finally does a Resurrection faith refuse to believe, if not that the resistance to grace is ever its cessation?” (341)

24 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. by Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 47–75. “When God in Jesus Christ claims space in the world—even space in a stable because “there was no other place in the inn”—God embraces the whole reality of the world in this narrow space and reveals its ultimate foundation.” (63)

25 Ibid., 144. See also Ann and Barry Ulanov, “Resurrection” in *The Healing Imagination* (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 1999), 138–162.


21 For more on “religionless” Christianity, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8: Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. by John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

22 See Christopher Morse, “Bonhoeffer and the Task of Theology Today” (Course Paper for Class Use, 2012), 3. For Bonhoeffer, who was committed to the Christian faith and “life together,” this “end” of religion signifies the primacy of God and the penultimate nature of human faith.
lies hidden. Examples of this stage include Thomas Jefferson cutting the miracles of Jesus out of his Bible, or, the theological turn, particularly following Rudolf Bultmann, to demythologization which sought to separate the kernel of truth from the husk of myth in relation to Christian kerygma, or proclamation. While some will stay in this stage and seek a thoroughly historicized faith without any myth, this critical phase is on the way to a new kind of faith. As Ricoeur said, if some will stay in this stage and seek a thoroughly historicized faith without any “progressive vector” of the symbol. We ask, where is the symbol pointing? This but we participate in their remythologization by taking what Ricoeur calls the “progressive vector” of the symbol. We ask, where is the symbol pointing? This is a return to faith, but not to the first naiveté. We cannot pretend we do not know what we discovered in the critical phase. But we now have a deeper faith, one might call it a tragic faith, as we see myth and history for what they are, but do not reduce faith to either perspective. As theologian Karl Barth wrote, the better term for history in relation to biblical faith, for instance, is “saga” because it evokes non-univocal history and myth and yet is more than the sum of its parts. For Christians, we discover the saga of faith is that the story of what happens with Jesus Christ is our story. As symbols arise on their own, faith comes back to life on its own. We now turn to investigate psychic reality to consider further what it means that faith fails because it does not transmit the ultimate, but points to it.

Bion: “Becoming O” and Necessary Failure

In Attention and Interpretation, British group psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion theorizes the way ultimate reality and finite reality function together psychically by extrapolating from empirical research he conducted with his analytic patients. Bion calls ultimate reality O, for an unbroken circle of the whole of reality, and finite reality K, for the knowledge we have of the ultimate. In his theory, O is becoming K, or knowledge. We only know ultimate reality once it enters the realm of finite knowledge and cannot know it on its own terms. In Christian theology, this would be the fact that we only know God through Jesus Christ incarnate in the flesh and blood realities of this world, and only one day will see God “as if in a mirror, face to face.” We cannot “be” or identify with O, or we would go mad, as we would lose our hold on reality, on our lives in this world. But we can open to “becoming O.” Bion writes,

“The religious mystics have probably approximated most closely to expression of experience of it. Its existence is as essential to science as to religion. Conversely, the scientific approach is as essential to religion as it is to science and is as ineffectual until a transformation from K into O takes place.”

For O to become K and K to become O, Bion says we have to leave behind memory and desire. While faith traditions seek to balance historical memory with contemporary insights, Bion says, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, that when we are not attached to memory or desire we can see what is really coming into view. A way to think of this transformation of K into O is to consider science. In a scientific method we have a hypothesis but then we test that hypothesis to see if it bears out in reality. If what we are considering is a hypothesis, we are left to consider if it has been transformed into O. This is how we get new insights and new data. O is becoming K, the knowledge of our new data, which in turn is, again, becoming O.

In another example, Christian dogmatics as a discipline functions much the same way as science in this regard. The testing of whether dogmatics is faithful to the teaching of the Gospel is whether it coheres with the spirit of God coming through Jesus Christ apocalypsed en sarki (“revealed in the flesh”). Dogmatics then is not a set of rote church doctrines, but rather a dynamic discipline constantly being tested by the spirit of Jesus Christ in our midst today. Morse writes that “because of a just and gracious God who tests all human testing” we can get on with the human work of theology.

If the transformation of O does not happen, we lose both ultimate and finite reality in what Bion calls –K. In an example from the New Testament, The Lord’s Prayer says, “Give us this day our daily bread.” In the Christian sacrament of

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28 Ibid, 524–551. Ricoeur calls the regressive and progressive vectors of symbols the archaeology and theology of the symbol, its genesis and eschatology. (525)
30 Some want to reduce the kerygma to “historically verifiable materials.” John A. McGuickin, Recent Biblical Hermeneutics in Patristic Perspective, 15.
31 Ricoeur, The Religious Significance of Atheism, 82.
32 Ricoeur, Freud & Philosophy, 543.
34 Barth, Church Dogmatics, III.1, 81, 83, 84, 90–91. See Morse, The Difference Heaven Maker, 41–44.
35 Wilfred R. Bion, Attention and Interpretation: a Scientific Approach to Insight in Psycho-Analysis and Groups (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 26. “It is darkness and formlessness but it enters the domain K when it has evolved to a point where it can be known.”
36 1 Corinthians 13.12. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”
37 Bion, Attention and Interpretation, 26–27.
38 Ibid., 30.
40 1 John 4.2. “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (en sarki) is from God. See Morse, Not Every Spirit, 139–170.
41 Ibid, 28.
42 Matthew 6.5–14. See also Luke 11.3.
the Eucharist, we eat our daily bread today. It cannot be baked too far ahead of time, and if you try to eat it too long after the fact, it will have become stale and you will break your teeth on it. –K is the loss of knowledge, and with it, the loss of becoming O. We cannot hoard what we know, which is why Bion says we must surrender memory and desire; not because we do not hold onto what we have, but we cannot crush it or we lose it. Theologically, Morse calls this living what is “at hand, but not in hand.”

In its most basic terms, from a theological standpoint, Bion’s theory paints a psychic picture of how immanence and transcendence work. On the one hand, we have our human religion, in Latin religare, “that which binds one back to oneself.” On the other, we have the self-revelation of God. The two are in a mutual relationship, which theologians have imagined in various ways. Paul Tillich said we have an ultimate concern that originates from and gets taken up into God’s Ultimate Concern. Barth said we have “tokens of revelation,” where God reveals God’s self to us but we cannot hold onto the tokens as if we can capture God in them. However, Bion’s column 2, on his complex number and letter grid, which I will not go further into here, perhaps denotes the place of necessary failure. In this column, Bion assigns all statements made during analysis by the patient and analyst that are knowingly false. They cannot help but make them. For Bion, our inability to do otherwise means we are close to knowing the truth, and column 2 is a resistance to and dread of transformation in O. Theologically, for instance, in the Judeo-Christian story of Moses in Exodus 33.18–33, he discovers he cannot see God “face to face” and live. Does this mean we have to turn away when too close to seeing God?

In Luke 22.31–34, Jesus tells Peter that he prays Peter’s faith will not fail. But then Jesus essentially tells him that his faith is going to fail and that when he comes back to faith, he should strengthen his brother apostles. Peter protests that there is no way he will fail Jesus—he is ready to go prison with him and die with him. But Jesus says, no, the cock will not crow this day “until you have denied three times that you know me.” This devastates Peter who denies Jesus and weeps bitterly over it.

What if we cannot help but fail, like Peter, and cannot overcome our limitations on our own? O is the overcoming of column 2, the ultimate rejection of our obstruction and resistance to being transformed in O. Theologically, Jesus Christ, through the cross, enters into what is false and failed in order to transform it. Could the overcoming of column 2 be a psychic picture of what happens when Christ goes into the far country of hell for us, to transform us and bring us back to ourselves? For Christian faith, the resurrection of Jesus Christ means resistance to grace is not the final word, or, in the words of Romans 8, “nothing can separate us from the love of God.”

For Bion, while we come up against our resistance to transformation in O, what poet John Keats called “negative capability,” the ability by which we are “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts and reason,” expresses the practice of opening to becoming O. Going into negative space, being in the place of failure, or the “no place” where we feel groundless and nothing new has yet arisen, we open to what is new, to God coming, and to our faith being renewed.

Facing Failure

One definition for failure is “fault.” In Christianity, fault is associated with sin. O felix culpa, the tradition says, O blessed fault that merited so great a Redeemer. Christian faith maintains that rather than never having failed or left the Garden of Eden, our falling away from God and returning to God’s open arms like the prodigal child give us far more than if we had stayed in our innocence. In the Christian faith, this is the promise of salvation. As one sings in the hymn “Amazing Grace,” “I once was lost, but now am found.” Or, as Barth put it, the only sin known as such is forgiven. We only know our loss and its significance after having regained in relation to what we lost.

In both Ricoeur and Bion, something happens which is not of our making. The word “religion” in the New Testament primarily refers to human practices that we create in order to get to God contrasted with the revelation of Jesus Christ as God coming to us. Though many interpret faith as presented in the New Testament to be a set of beliefs, or the act of believing, faith, or pistis, has a deeper connection to unbelief, apistis, (“I believe, help my unbelief!”) and to that which is “hoped for, but not seen.” What seems clear in the New Testament is that

43 Morse, The Difference Heaven Makes, 23.
44 Jung uses this definition of religion as pertains to the psychic function of religious experience. See Jung, Collected Works 8, 221. See also CW 5: 429.
48 Exodus 33.20. “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.”
49 Luke 22.34.
51 Morse, Not Every Spirit, 341. Romans 8.35–39.
53 Barth, Church Dogmatics, II.2, 768. “It is only forgiven sin that we know that it is recognized as sin, that it is sin. What we may more or less know apart from forgiveness is perhaps defect, error or vice. But to know sin as sin, as our rebellion against God, as our transgression of [God’s] command, we must know its forgiveness.”
54 See Morse, “Bonhoeffer and the Task of Theology Today,” 2–5. See also note 8, page 9.
55 Mark 9.24: “Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’” Hebrews 11.1: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”
any faith comes from God. 2 Thessalonians says, “Not all have faith, but God is faithful.”56 No one can chastise anyone for not having faith; it is a gift. Believing and faith belong to God, so rather than saying “You must believe in Christ!,” we might say, “Hallelujah! Christ believes in you!”

What does this amount to in non-Christian terms? It means a post-critical faith lets O be manifest in us and in our world, and opens us to seeing ourselves as not the ultimate source of our blame or consolation, or for what happens when tragedy confronts us, but as part of a wider frame of reference. We have our practices of faith, but we see now we do not create them, but relate to them and participate in shaping them as we are shaped by the world. We understand, with Bonhoeffer, that success is not what faith is about.57 Faith is living K open to O, even as column 2 resistance and –K are part of the reality we face.

Beyond Consolation

Toward the end of my time at the hospital, I taught Ricoeur and Bion to fellow chaplains. The question was pressed upon me, “But what about people who still want consolation?” As I pondered this question, I was asked to conduct a service for an enormous, mostly Spanish-speaking Christian family of a beloved woman and mother being taken off life support. We planned to pray and sing over her as she died. When I met with her son to plan the service and find out exactly what scripture or songs he wanted included, he said he wanted only one thing. “Consolation.” I laughed to myself because in that moment I saw what lies beyond consolation. It is a consolation we do not provide, which is not authored by us, but in which we participate and witness.

Witnessing is what one does when one merely stands as a presence with those who are suffering. When I was with my seven-year-old patient and her parents, I found the story of Moses and the burning bush helpful in this regard. In Exodus 3, an angel speaks to Moses from a burning bush that is not consumed. Moses turns aside to look to see how it is that the bush is still standing. Then God calls his name and Moses replies, “Hineni.” “Here I am!” God tells Moses to take off his shoes for he is standing on holy ground.58 Though the family burned with grief and rage, I thought about how God promised the bush would not be consumed. I took off my metaphorical shoes to stand with them on the holy ground of their suffering into which God was about to enter.

In another instance, I was witnessed to and provided unexpected consolation. In the PICU, I worked with a woman from China whose son was gravely ill and his condition uncertain. Not affiliated with any religion, she told me a friend had given her a Bible in Chinese and reading it was helping her. I asked her if any particular books or characters spoke to her. She could not name them in English, she said, so I clarified that maybe she could tell me the story that she felt helped her. With no background in the text or a faith community, she told me the story of Job and how his being open to what was beyond our understanding had ushered her into a relationship with God, who she felt comforted her now. I asked her how and she said it opened her to not knowing what would happen—whether her son would live or not—but to trusting God is bigger than that and is not a tyrant or evil or blaming us, but reaches out to us from the whirlwind.

I hope to have shown that failure is an integral part of faith philosophically, psychoanalytically, and theologically. We are limited human beings, though not without agency and capacity, and can open ourselves to receive what, or Who, wants to be made known to us and through us. While we never stop wanting consolation, our desire gets taken up into a wider frame of reference, which enables us to endure failure and see its fruitful capacities, even in the face of devastation that cannot be undone.

With Bonhoeffer, we can remember the point of faith is not our success. Rather, in the midst of the worst tragedies of life, wherever we are, we can try to witness what God is doing and the difference it makes. Bonhoeffer lived this faith all the way to the end of his life when he was hanged at Flossenbürg concentration camp by the Nazis just two weeks before the liberation of the camp by Allied forces at the end of World War II. A doctor at the camp reported seeing him pray before he went out to the gallows, and then again as he climbed the stairs. The doctor wondered who is this Rev. Dr. Bonhoeffer that he could do such a thing?59 Indeed, who? But Bonhoeffer would want us to see that what lies beyond consolation, as the significance of failure for faith, is nothing less than the Living God, coming into our particular situation, to transform us and reconcile the world.

56 2 Thessalonians 3.2b–3.
57 God’s faithfulness to us rather than our success is a primary theme for Bonhoeffer. For instance, see Bonhoeffer, “To the Brethren of Finkenwalde and the Pastors of the Confessing Church: Circular Letters in the Church Struggle and War Years (1936–1942)” in A Testament to Freedom, 475–476.
58 Exodus 3.4.
59 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 927–928.
Faith for Faithful Disbelievers: Christopher Morse as Systematic Theologian

D. Seiple

Christopher Morse has set out to salvage “dogmatics” as a theological discipline, but a first-year seminarian might naturally wonder if her teacher isn’t dodging the big issue. The most natural question for dogmatics would seem to be: What should any individual Christian, personally, believe? Yet even the faith statements Morse eventually offers are usually stated in terms of doctrine, as in “the Christian Faith” or “the church’s faith in God the Creator,” and a reader is bound to wonder if these locutions aren’t more sociological than personal, presented in terms of “the deposit of faith”—the “traditioned” symbolic representations of the “social facts” associated with worship.

Now it’s true that when it comes to what should not be included among those doctrines, Morse’s recommendations seem to take on a more personal aspect. Discerning “faithful disbeliefs” is something both individual congregants and church councils can readily do. Hence the subtitle of his book. But this presents an immediate obstacle. For it doesn’t take long for any novice seminarian to notice the unfamiliar dissonance this process produces. For example, one of Morse’s “proposed disbeliefs” is that “the life of Jesus Christ is not fully human.” Well, logically speaking, doesn’t this just mean that a Christian should believe that Jesus Christ “became fully human,” exactly as the Nicene Creed assures us? So why not just affirm the Creed? Why all the syntactical gymnastics here? What, one might ask, is Christopher Morse avoiding here?

Morse’s answer might be that he’s not the one doing the avoiding, and in this discussion, I want to make a bit clearer what this answer might mean—first through a comparison with some prescient reflections by William James, and then with an interpretation of Morse’s own work.

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2 “…all major controversies of true and false doctrine have been integrally related to issues pertaining to worship” (*Not Every Spirit*, 53).
4 *Not Every Spirit*, 166.
5 In his preface to the second edition, Morse recounts the discomfort that greeted the publication of his book (*Not Every Spirit*, xix).

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**WILLIAM JAMES AND RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITY**

“Faith” is often proposed as the answer to a troubled question: “What does it take for me to be saved?” But many who stumble their way into the office of a helping professional might begin instead with, say: “Why am I stuck in this crappy job?” Then come the biographical details—lost opportunities, adverse circumstances, bad judgments; and perhaps then, confessions of personal inadequacy. Finally: “What is there to do—how do I fix this?” If that professional is a pastor, one typical answer is going to be: “Have faith!” Or perhaps the despondent questioner no longer holds any hope that her life can be fixed, that there is anything that can be done—but once again, the priest says: “Have faith!” But how does such a person do that?

This injunction just to “have faith….” seems bland until the dots are filled in. And there are plenty of claimants to filling in those dots. Some claim that the Resurrection Power already lives in us—there’s everything to do, and we just need the prosperity pastor to remind us. And behold! There is an internet site to help us accomplish this, where we can play and replay the inspirational message, and learn that “when you gave your life to Christ, God put a power in you greater than any power you’ll ever face.” And so from now on, you’ve got it—“the power to accomplish your dreams.” This power is now in your possession—as long as you keep coming back for reinforcement. And, no, this is not addictive behavior.

On the other side are those who claim that things are so bad that there’s nothing at all to do—except to take in the diabolical horror of where, for all eternity, our sorry plight is likely to land us. Fortunately (we’re told) there are indeed a series of steps one can take—or rather, theological truths we are to assimilate step by step—which have the amazing feel of a straightforward Euclidean proof. At series end, we get our answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” Q.E.D! So (what a relief) there is indeed something to do! It’s simple-sounding, it’s exactly biblical (Acts 16:31), it promises to feel great, and there’s a website for this too. Then, just click where it says “I have accepted Christ today.” And there you have it.

But this is not the gospel Christopher Morse hears. To the question of whether “having faith” is something we should be doing, Morse and others who are influenced by Calvin and Barth, would say “No!” This would turn “faith” into a “work,” and this, he would say, is to miss the fact that the Christian faith believes Pelagius. But it’s one thing to say, as Morse certainly would, that a person should not aim at a faithful belief like one aims at a basketball hoop or at a stock acquisition. It’s another thing to identify the actual content of that belief, and if Morse is to be our guide, then don’t we need to find out what Morse is actually saying about this, as opposed to what he’s saying he’s not saying? So once again, don’t we need to understand what faithful beliefs a Christian should have? That is the question a novice reader of *Not Every Spirit* is bound to be asking.

6 [http://www.joel osteen.com/ Pages/ ThisWeeks Message.aspx](http://www.joel osteen.com/ Pages/ ThisWeeks Message.aspx) (sermon for April 20, 2014).
So let’s explore this. Both the prosperity preacher and the fundamentalist evangelical seem to be recommending that faith is indeed something we can do. Though Christopher Morse it too genteel to say this outright, these are the faithless believers—lacking, that is, Morse’s notion of “faithfulness,” which we will try to uncover here, and we will begin by asking this: While there may be lots wrong with these two answers, isn’t there also something right in the idea that we can’t just sit and wait for the natural world to take its course? Morse insists that beliefs harbor lies until their disbeliefs are uncovered, so might not even these rejected faithless beliefs harbor some truth? This possibility reveals, I think, a perplexity worth noticing, and it’s worth pausing here to set the scene.

As a way of framing this, let’s consider a famous section in William James’ Varieties of Religious Experience, which divides the religious sensibility into two types. The first James calls the “healthy-minded,” and this is likely (at first) to strike his reader as a fitting description. It has the attestations of solid middle-class common sense—that it’s best for people to weather hardships with sturdy resolve because once they do, they’ll find the universe a plaint ally. Here is the voice of Emerson, Whitman, Teddy Roosevelt. James cites Theodore Parker, a prominent Transcendentalist and Unitarian minister: for him, however cold runs the stream of life, it has never been “too strong to be breasted and swum through.” Should we ourselves not take on life in just this way—as a welcome, bracing challenge?

These healthy-minded are all over the internet these days. The universe is supposed to respond to the “laws of attraction,” so why dwell on the negative, since “all things work together for good to them that love God” (Rom 8:28)? We’ve earlier quoted Joel Osteen (pastor of “the largest Protestant church in the United States”), who assures us: “Life will go so much better if you simply choose to be positive.”9 Maybe we should keep in mind the words of William James: Briefer Version (New York: George Brazillier, 1954), 254.

Varieties, 6, 2014).

10 “Please observe, however, that I am not yet [sic] pretending to judge any of these attitudes. I am only describing them.” James, Varieties, 141.

self-protection against disturbance,” while manifesting all the while as faith—faith in “the all-saving power of healthy-mindedness as such, in the conquering efficacy of courage, hope and trust, and a correlative contempt for doubt, fear, worry.”10 We today know this to be a feature of public culture as familiar to contemporary Americans as it was to William James.11

Against this “healthy-minded,” James contrasts the “morbid” features of “the sick soul,” for whom “evil is an essential part of our being and the key to the interpretation of our life.”12 Morbid-mindedness takes many related forms (including James’ own experience of depression decades prior)—perhaps an abiding anxiety obsessed with signs of one’s own invisible election, or at least a gnawing recognition that evil is indeed a real force and a real danger to one’s own well-being. James’ point is not just that psychologically wounded people have trouble coping with life’s challenges. The real point here is that real life is so fragile, evil may so entrap us at any turn, that the temperament alert enough to register this danger can hardly embrace the shallow affirmations of motivational psychology—the sort of appeal that James dismisses as “the very consecration of forgetfulness and superficiality.”13 This is not just a case of emotional scars leaving one obtusely impermeable to the brisk tonic of positive thinking—though this may be true enough for some. The point is that such shallow affirmations are a temptation that should be resisted, if we deeply care about our own spirituality.14

So even though he claims only to be describing the varieties of religious experience, James himself specifically insists that healthy-mindedness is inadequate in just this way—because it turns away from genuine evil. James is explicit enough here: experiencing evil (and not just dismissing it as an inconvenient barrier to one’s own self-realization) “may after all be the best key to life’s signific- ance” and to “the deepest levels of truth.”15 So far so good.

But here’s the crux. This pronouncement comes relatively early, in Lecture VII. By the time James reaches the end of his extended presentation—thirteen lectures later—he seems to have softened his criticism of healthy-mindedness considerably. James himself espoused a radical pluralism and a moderately subjectivist epistemology, and given the vagaries of context and sensibility, he finally balks at supposing that “all men should show identical religious elements” in their views

12 James, Varieties, 87, 93.
13 This feature of American pop culture has been an enduring mark of American middle class life for two centuries, and the catchphrases of James’ own day—“the Gospel of Relaxation,” “the Don’t Worry Movement,” “Youth! Health! Vigor!”—probably sound a bit less quaint to us than the remnants of the Gilded Age might. These might almost be quotes from the last self-help book you viewed on Amazon, and if not, just turn on Sunday morning cable TV.
14 James, Varieties, 129.
15 James, Varieties, 137.
16 This term “spirituality” is not a term that Christopher Morse much cares for; yet “spirituality correctly understood has rich dimensions and a field of meaning that no related term quite covers.” See Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century, vol. 16, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedia of the Religious Quest (New York: Crossroad, 1985), xv.
17 James, Varieties, 160.
on life—even, apparently, in their estimation of the moral nature of the inner and outer worlds they inhabit. Here then is James the herald of cultural diversity, proclaiming that each of humanity's various attitudes is but "a syllable in human nature's total message," so that "a 'god of battle' must be allowed to be the god for one kind of person, a god of peace and heaven and home, the god for another." And this tension—between the "deepest level" of religious truth and the descriptive comprehensiveness of religious experience—this is a perplexity that James does not appear to resolve.

But why raise all this in a discussion of Christopher Morse? Because here is a perplexity that Morse's signature treatment of theology actually addresses, and I raise it to indicate that what Morse proposes has broader applicability beyond dogmatics. Though this is not the occasion to address this broader aspect in any detail, here I hope to remind us of what that treatment envision and to give an account of what the resulting content turns out to be. At the very end of this discussion, we will return to William James.

BEYOND FAITHLESS BELIEF

It is often the case that immense scholarly mileage gets fueled by a single biblical passage. Luther made a famous turn over Romans 1:17. Colleagues of Walter Wink will perhaps recall the impact of Matthew 5:41 on his life's work. And Christopher Morse may have just about cornered the contemporary market on elaborating Matthew 2:16–18—as which also turns out to be our point of contact with William James.

The story of course depicts the horrific events that follow the adoration of the magi—the slaughter of the innocents and, importantly, Rachel's refusal to embrace false hope in the wake of indelible evil. She "would not be consoled"—even by the birth of the Messiah (and even by the assurances of the prosperity gospel)—because even the Nativity event itself does not restore her murdered children, any more than the Resurrection erases the Crucifixion. But here's the other side of it: disbelieving the assurances of peace, peace where there is no peace—this does not entail that there will be no peace. Rather, it directs hopes elsewhere, to where the faithful Christian believer should expect to find their fulfillment. It has to direct one's hopes to the content of faithful belief.

Faithless believers, on the other hand, trust in the idols of their own self-protective instincts. Their "contempt for doubt, fear, worry" affords them "cheap grace," under the "pretense that there really is no dreadful harm in life from which to be reclaimed." Just because their own hope of salvation really lies only in the power of their own beliefs, faithless believers take doubt to be the enemy of faith. But this, Morse insists, is just plain wrong. Doubt is not an abrasive to faith: doubt is its whetstone. It sharpens people to awaken from the anxiety of escapism. This is not an observation unique to Christopher Morse, but its application to the systematic practice of theology is much less widely recognized than, arguably, it should be, and for the last thirty years Morse's professional mission has been to spread the word.

This may have been dimly discerned by James, and we can see this in the perplexity that confronts us in Varieties. (1) On the one hand, James holds that not just anything warrants our belief. Our beliefs should be subject to more than just our own best intentions, which can easily be rationalized into a vast artifice of authorization. Smart paranoids do this, and so can ingenious theologians. Accordingly, James the philosophical pragmatist famously recommends that we test our beliefs "by the verdict of experience," and that we do so not just by its momentary intensities but by its future consequences. And so (for James) despite our dedication to remaining unmoved by evil, only the experience of evil may open up the "deepest levels" of life's significance—not all at once, but in the fullness of. A significant life truly is objectively better than an insignificant one. (2) On the other hand, James the social scientist (and radical empiricist) remains cautious of any effort to compile a complete picture of existence. "Though he acknowledges a supernatural dimension of wholeness that sees beyond "the facts of physical science at their face-value," James' own proto-postmodernist pluralism drives most of his philosophical agenda, and this leads him to admit that despite its dangers, there is something right about healthy-mindedness. There are occasions for taking up the challenge of life, for reminding oneself of the dangers of wallowing, etc. In more difficult moments, this is where the "god of battle" comes to the rescue. Yet it remains unclear what this implies other than just descriptive comprehensiveness—about which a radical pluralist has not all that much more to say. (Plurality just is.) So then there seems to be at least a surface contradiction in what James does say here, and one has to wonder what he really means.

Where William James ends is where Christopher Morse might well begin, and I imagine him doing so (as usual) with a gesture of reconciliation. We can read Morse as a gloss on James' half-acknowledged perplexity, which dimly suggests that even the credulity of the so-called "healthy-minded" conceals a partial truth. Morse's explicit point is exactly the converse of this—that plausible beliefs, unexamined, conceal vitiating falsehoods—but this may be only one side of a larger truth. Moreover, the task of dogmatics is to do more than "simply cata-
holog the varieties of religious experience.”26 This is not at all to say that diversity of expression goes uncélébrated, but rather that the truth of a form of expression is no guarantee against its unintended distortion.

Morse’s method carries the historical familiarity of established procedure. It is well-known that this general approach—of moving ahead by establishing parameters of the permissible—is just what moved the doctrinal development of the church. Orthodoxy was a response to heresy. The problem of course is that actual historical details often confirm the suspicions of many of Christianity’s critics. The fact for example that “homoousios” was apparently introduced at Nicaea by Emperor or Constantine himself27 (whose magisterial motives we imagine to be not entirely pious) makes its subsequent adoption by the Council hardly a surprise, and the critical historian may find it hard to shake off the imperial aura of such doctrines, which have been known to sanction a betrayal of deep human expectations.28

On the other hand, the content of a doctrine is not reducible to the circumstances of its origin—a consideration neglected by many traditionalists. This insight is prized by Christopher Morse, who makes considerable headway out of the ambiguity of the Greek paradosis (“hanging over”), used both by Paul in “hanging over” the resurrection tradition he has received (1 Cor 15:3), and by the gospels in portraying Judas “hanging over” Jesus to Pilate (Mt 26:45; Mk 14:11). This reminds us that the very wording of the traditional story contains an implicit warning to be suspicious about any attempt at interpretation, to call upon other resources to test whether a given formulation contains the paradosis of freedom and not of betrayal.

This insight Morse takes as his central thesis—that “the truth of Christian doctrine harbors a lie whenever the faithful disbeliefs these doctrines entail go unrecognized.”29 It takes only a moment’s reflection on contemporary secular life to see the wisdom of taking this general approach to heart,30 but in both political and theological discussions, it’s no simple task to identify just what one should disbelieve. And so Morse offers not just a general caution against giving oneself over to the historicity of implied context—a consideration neglected by many traditionalists. This is not at all to say that diversity of expression goes uncelebrated, but rather that the truth of a form of expression is no guarantee against its unintended distortion.

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29 Not Every Spirit, 13.
30 One can only wistfully imagine what social gains could be had if something like Morse’s method were generally applied in political discourse. Looking back on the Obama presidency, for example, Jonathan Chait observes: “Liberals dwell in a world of paranoia of a white racism that has seeped out of American history in the Obama years and lurks everywhere, mostly undetectable. Conservatives dwell in a paranoia of their own, in which racism is used as a cudgel to delegitimize their core beliefs. And the horrible thing is that both of these forms of paranoia are right.” (emphasis added). See Jonathan Chait, “The Color of His Presidency,” NYMag.com, April 08, 2014, accessed April 20, 2014, http://nymag.com/news/features/obama-presidency-race-2014-4/.

**Test Results**

I shall not here attempt a full account of the criteria Morse recommends.31 I am more interested in the distillation of the gospel message he actually does provide. But in keeping with his own cautionary procedure, I shall also indicate some of the basis for his account, as best I can briefly summarize it.

Morse is no Christian triumphalist. He is very clear that no one needs to be a Christian in order to explore these matters. (This helps explain his keen interest in the awesomely atheist work of Alain Badiou.32) But one needs to be something. There is no access for anyone not reared in some particular human community—especially in its liturgical life33—and so “whatever talk may proceed from other [cultural] contexts,”34 the Christian project is not to talk of God in general but of God in relation to Jesus Christ—or, better, in relation to “what happens in the life span of Jesus of Nazareth.” It would be a mistake, for example, to argue from abstract properties defined by Chalcedon and then draw conclusions in isolation from actual human context. But this is exactly what fundamentalists often do.35

What is missing in fundamentalist accounts is the divine power accessible through worship. So even though the fundamental test for any Christian belief is congruence with scripture, that fundamental test must not be a fundamentalist enterprise. And of course!—some Union graduates might exclaim—who at Union would read scripture literally?! But that depends upon what one means by this. If “literal” entails “interpretive invariance” (as the terms today is usually taken to imply), fundamentalists might agree with many a liberal, at least on this hermeneutical aspect—that to accurately assess the text, one needs the definitive, invariant meaning that reflects what historically happened, either in terms of the historicity of actual events (e.g., Jesus actually rose from the dead) or in terms of the historicity of implied context (e.g., the actual authorial intention of the historical Mark was to reduce the tension among early Christian beliefs about Jesus). But though Morse insists that he reads scripture “literally,” he does not mean it in this way at all. His reading his unapologetically postliberal, whereby through a “literal” reading of scripture—by this he means a meticulous listening to the “soundings” of expression—gets sandwiched in between those parameters, and cannot remain uninspected.

31 Ever sensitive to the soundings of language, Morse has produced an alliteration of these criteria: Continuity of apostolic tradition, Congruence with scripture, Consistency with worship, Catholicity, Consonance with experience, Conformity with conscience, Consequence, Cruciality, Coherence, and Comprehensiveness.
33 “…all major controversies of true and false doctrine have been integrally related to issues pertaining to worship” (Not Every Spirit, 53).
34 Not Every Spirit, 115.
35 Here, for example, is Rousas J. Rushdoony quoting Van Til: “Orthodoxy takes the self-contained ontological trinity to be this point of reference. The only alternative to this is to make man himself the final point of reference” (http://chalcedon.edu/research/articles/the-word-of-dominion/).
of the text—we hand ourselves over to the "semiotic functioning intrinsic to this particular way of speaking."36

But we cannot give a hearing to the text (nor to any other vehicle for divine power) unless our interpretive language has resonance with the lives we actually have. "To speak of God at all is to employ language that we also use in speaking of subjects other than God."37 We proceed by *via analogiae* and not by *via remotionis*,38 and it is not enough to leave us only parameters of disbeliefs. Again, as we turn from our disbeliefs, where are we turning to?

Here then, we turn to the details of Jesus’ earthly biography. The Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, by making manifest “the uttermost depths of human misery,” also make apparent God’s promise for the “apocalypse of glory” which that narrative reveals—and reveals not just for the human Jesus, but also for us, in the “unprecedented glory of not being left orphaned but of being loved in a community of new creation beyond all that we can ask or imagine.”39 And this is really the crux of the gospel for Morse. Ever since his earliest work on the logic of promissory statements,40 he has insisted that the gospel message is eschatological, and that this message is not revealed “all at once” in the reportage of empty tombs and post-resurrection sightings. Indeed, drawing from the work of Arthur Danto41 and others, Morse insisted early on, purely as a *logical* matter, that the Resurrection event cannot be reportage. Despite valiant insistence by fundamentalists, the history of any event occurs within a narrative, and narratives make essential reference to the standpoint of a narrator who is not contemporaneous with the narrated events.42 (This explains his opposition to “univocal literalism” in hermeneutics.)

I do not think that application of an apriori logical schema settles the discussion, however, and I’m not sure that Morse now thinks it does. The best fundamentalists have a ready reply to all these “liberal” talking points, so the best any theologian can probably do, ultimately, is to suggest that one’s opponent has missed the message, for which Morse of course appeals to scripture itself. There Jesus the apocalyptic prophet speaks in parables conveying the incommensurability and transcendent nature of God’s kingdom—this “strange new world within the Bible.”43 If scripture conveys God’s Word, then its message must come to us not as the results scholars can offer, but as “divinatory imagination” (Barth).44 Since the form of this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:31), our sense of what is coming cannot be reliably framed with reference to the nature of what is disappearing—not as the foolishness of the world, in other words. We face an *adventus*45 that is irreducible to a *futurum*46 (Moltmann). And here, ironically, is where fundamentalist scholarship itself fails to meet the test of congruence with scripture!

Now, it’s not clear at this point whether Morse is making a metaphysical well as a phenomenological comment. A metaphysical interpretation of "adventus" would entail that the incommensurability is more than just our entrenched blindness to the deep (but still rationally formulable) structure of our own world—in accordance with, say, our having been already created in God’s image in a world that God has already deemed to be “good.” In other words, "transcendence" would have to mean more than simply “incommensurable with our present state of consciousness.” It would mean that the ordinary course of the cosmos would be radically altered as the eschaton approaches, analogous perhaps to the way that a creationist would preserve the belief in a “literal” six-day creation story. Morse may not wish to take such a position—after all, the metaphorical interpretation, as an explanation for the workings of the eschaton, would place him in the company of fundamentalists who reject the uniformity of nature just so they can explain the geological record on “biblical” presuppositions.47 In any case, what is clear is that, for Morse, if the Holy Spirit is our guide for the *adventus*—if God is still speaking to us today—then it will guide us into circumstances that are as new and uncharted as history itself, for which both dogmatic formulations and their contexts of application need rethinking.

However, there may be limits to the revisability of dogmatic formulations, and Morse’s efforts at a logically minimalist rendering of the gospel message work both as a hedge against endless revisionism and as a remedy against Christian exclusivism. So the Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection get interpreted, in terms of the Incarnation, Resurrection and Parousia, as the most encompassing symbol of the most fundamental gospel truth: For “sifted to the heart of the matter, all


37  Not Every Spirit, 120.

38  Not Every Spirit, 16.


42  *The Logic of Promise*, 101.

technical terminology aside...is the refusal to believe that any situation is hopeless—any situation. 49

The importance of this terminology is twofold. First, Morse sounds at times almost like an anonymous Unitarian Universalist: “the wider world of Christ’s life span” encompasses “the practices of all religions and human societies without regard to how ‘Christian’ these may claim to be in their ‘Lord, Lord’ talk (Matt. 7:21).” 50 And yet for Morse, the Incarnation remains the crucial dogmatic move towards that very universality: Jesus Christ becomes not just human, but Humanity itself—a “concomitance of crucified and risen life” that consummates in “apocalyptic vindication.” 51 The point is that there may be other (non-Christian) symbols that convey a similar message.

Secondly, this does indeed have metaphysical-sounding implications. Apocalyptic vindication—and this has to include our subjectively experienced well-being—is guaranteed through God’s Promise (in ways that we do not understand). The lifespan of Jesus Christ—a union of “narrative particularity and promissory universality” 52—actually encompasses our own lives in being “custom made to fit the actual circumstances of each and every recipient.” Here Morse is quite traditional: he believes quite “literally” in the afterlife—and not simply postmortem appreciation among friends and neighbors (no “cumulative residue of lingering influence”), not some diffuse remainder of psychic energy dispersed into the great vastness, and not a spiritualized continuance of a disembodied self that never dies. We do die. And we shall be resurrected—in-the body and in the full recollection “in glory of one’s own irreplaceable life story and name.” 53

If this is correct, then it seems possible to give an appropriately minimalist theological rendering of faithful belief (in words that stick fairly closely to Christopher Morse’s own), as follows:

Faith (or faithfulness) is

trusting in the promise

that engenders our hope

in the power of the One

who, through grace, will love us into freedom.

Summary Interpretation

There are three aspects to Morse’s faithful disbelief. The first, which he surveys in great detail, concerns the parameters of faith. The second, which he identifies less expansively, concerns the logically sparser formulations that lie

within those parameters and are governed by the analogy fidei (Barth). 54 But the third lies, as it were, perpendicular to both, and avoids capture by either parameter or creed. Here is a space that gets filled, in the process of testing the spirits, not by a doctrine at all. It gets filled by another spirit—the spirit of whoever the faithful disbeliefer has thereby become. For the real test is not of doctrines but of the interrogator, and the real goal is not to be a caretaker of settled dogma, but to be a steward of the mysterious divine economy, shown forth in “the saving power of Jesus Christ now coming into the actual flesh and blood sufferings that present themselves to us, and around us wherever we are located in space and time.” 55 And this is the reason that what is left within the parameters of disbelief feels so doctrinally elusive. For how can we capture the being of a person? How can we circumscribe in advance the changing circumstances of space and time?

From Morse we might see that “having faith” is not one of the things we can do; rather, faithfulness is one of the ways we can be. This comes clear, I think, in two related considerations. One of these gets expressed (as has been noted) as the injunction against idolatry—in this case, the danger that one’s own strivings take on the character of self-justifying, self-protective distraction from God’s will. Despite the Calvinist admonition to avoid making faith into a work, discerning which disbeliefs lead us toward faithfulness is certainly a crucial task—one that is specially assigned to those with the requisite gifts (the teachers of the church and the academy) to be made available for the further task of leading others ever more fully into “the faith.” The task is to “hand over” an entire sensibility towards life itself, one that will be a paradosis of freedom and not of betrayal. This is conveyed not by formulae, not by a computerized checklist of theological truths, not by repeated affirmations channeling the power of positive thinking. Nor is it captured once-for-all by a journal article or a textbook of theology. And this again is why faithful disbeliefs are crucial: because the formulation of faithful beliefs is necessarily minimalist.

The other consideration takes off from this, and gets reflected in Morse’s idea that theological inquiry is a reciprocal interrogation, 56 whose point is less about coming up with the right answers than it is about asking the right questions. From this angle, the proliferation of criteria in Morse’s test procedure has the benefit of ensuring a continual reappraisal, whose content cannot be entirely encompassed by the beliefs that result. The notion that the aim of dogmatics is not the establishment of settled doctrine might strike some as eviscerating rather than salvaging dogmatics. If Morse is right, however, one of the menacing traps in the Christian life—and the “great temptation” 57 faced by theologians and Christian philosophers—is not just cheap grace, but cheap utterance. Following Jesus is not easy, and this is partly because it’s not easily understood who it is we’re to follow, where it is we’re to go, and how exactly we will get there. And so

49 Not Every Spirit, 230.
50 Not Every Spirit, 304.
51 Not Every Spirit, 163–166.
52 Not Every Spirit, 150.
53 Not Every Spirit, 343.
54 Christopher Morse, “Raising God’s Eyebrows: Some Further Thoughts on the Concept of the Analogia Fidei,” Union Seminary Quarterly Review XXXVII, no. 1 & 2 (Fall 1981).
55 Not Every Spirit, 39, 42.
56 Not Every Spirit, 93.
57 Not Every Spirit, 43.
faithful silence is at least as important as faithful speaking: “the true proclamation of Easter can only be made by those who, in concert with Rachel’s voice, have first been silenced by Good Friday.” 58

Here then finally is the reason for such an elaborate rhetoric of circumlocution in Not Every Spirit. Though many a first-year seminarian has probably wondered if Christopher Morse couldn’t just have hired a decent editor, this misses the point entirely. Yes, Morse’s lists of faithful disbeliefs don’t exactly trip lightly off the tongue, and it’s a significant challenge to keep all the syntactical negatives properly in mind. It’s hard mental work. But given the mysteries of the faith and the complexities of real life, what else would one expect?

ONE FINAL DOUBT

However, after all is said and done, isn’t there a thorn gnawing at the side of this whole project? One can imagine a bright seminarian engaged in his own wide-ranging spiritual quest, perhaps experienced enough with the techniques of academic interrogation to be bothered still. For still, have we yet discovered whether or not what’s to be gotten from the process of testing the spirits is really true? How do we know it’s really the Holy Spirit that’s guiding us and not our own well-trained subconscious? How do we know that it’s really God’s power that we are trusting in? And how do we really know that we will really be resurrected? We may see signs—we in faith may have taken up our own pallet and walked away from an impending disaster, and we may see this as confirmation. But (as the logicians would say) a sign is only that—inductive confirmation—and from our earthly corner we lack even a true metric of its logical strength. If signs were more than this, the scribes and Pharisees would have stopped their murmuring.

This is particularly unsettling when we apply our own interrogative whetstone to Morse’s list of proposed disbeliefs. Morse deflects the notion that the Bible itself is God’s Word by disbelieving that “God’s Word can be confined and stone to Morse’s list of proposed disbeliefs. Morse deflects the notion that the Bible itself is God’s Word by disbelieving that “God’s Word can be confined and...


62 Since the failure of both logical positivism and classical idealism, leading philosophers (excluding, that is, the philosophically sophisticated polemists) have generally accepted the notion that there is no way of definitively establishing demarcating criteria for ad hoc unacceptability. And whereas the “harder” scientific disciplines can more or less spot the most likely ad hoc candidates (as theories that are experimentally unfalsifiable—parapsychology is a frequently given example), theology is in a dreadful position in this respect, since whatever might best confirm or disconfirm our most crucial beliefs lie outside the realm of possible earthly experience.


65 “What, then, are the marks? A strong feeling of ease, peace, rest, is one of them. The transition from a state of puzzle and perplexity to rational comprehension is full of lively relief and pleasure” (“The Sentiment of Rationality,” in The Writings of William James, 317).
hope alive. And in the practice of reconciliation that follows, though we probably have to do more listening than speaking, nonetheless, speak we eventually must.

St Augustine, towards the end of *De Trinitate*, said this about what he had written: “We have said this not in order to say something, but in order not to remain altogether silent.” Christopher Morse, now towards the end of his career, could have added: “We disbelieve so that our speaking might not lead us too far astray.”
The Humanity of Divinity

PHILIP G. ZIEGLER

I/ INTRODUCTION

This essay is a modest effort to reflect upon the peculiar way in which the study of divinity makes humanists of us all. In what sense does the proper subject of Christian theology include humanity? How is it that disciplined reasoning concerning God leads us to no less disciplined reasoning concerning human beings? And what, if anything, do the kinds of answers we give to such questions as these mean for what we think about the character of Christian theology as an intellectual discipline? Two theologians in particular will help us in the effort to explore such questions: John Calvin and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Both Calvin and Bonhoeffer—in their own time and in their own way—saw clearly that students of Christian theology may neither avoid nor begrudge asking and answering the Psalmist’s question, “What are human beings that you, Lord, are mindful of them, mortals that you should care for them?” (Ps 8:4). And both agreed that the subject of divinity itself requires that this question, i.e., the question of humanity, be on the docket. Over decades of theological research and committed teaching at Union Theological Seminary, Christopher Morse has invited his students to discern in particular the abiding provocation and salutary instruction to be had from critical and creative engagement with the legacies of both these theologians. I offer these few remarks as but a faint echo and brief footnote to his own gainful service to the churches, from which I myself have received much.

II/ THE HUMANNESS OF JOHN CALVIN?

“He’s a classic Calvinist, too. Let the punishment fit the crime, and then some’.

‘That’s not Calvinism,’ Rebus said, ‘It’s Gilbert and Sullivan’.”

If we were to take our cues from popular portraits of the French reformer, we would think Calvin unlikely to help us appreciate the humanity of the study of divinity. While undoubtedly a humanist in the quite specific sense of being a prac-

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1 In Scotland, where I live and work, the discipline of theology as a whole is commonly referred to as ‘divinity’ and theologians as ‘divines’; the American terminology of the ‘Divinity School’ reflects this heritage. Together with its narrower meaning—i.e., to refer to the reality of God as such—I also exploit the resonances of this wider meaning in what follows.

2 Ian Rankin, Rebus’s Scotland (London: Orion, 2005), p. 42.
titioner of the scholarly literary methods of early modern European intellectual culture, for many people Calvin has been a signal representative of the inhumanity even misanthropy of theology. The 18th century historian Edward Gibbon charged that "personal malice" and "envenomed . . . envy" were the sole motivations for the reformer's life and thought. William Barry's informative and scholarly entry on Calvin in the 1911 Catholic Encyclopedia casually refers to its subject throughout simply as "the dictator". Calvin, we read, embraced a perverse love of austerity amounting to a "Manichean hatred of the body", his work at its core is shot through with "concentrated pride", fractiousness, and scorn of others. Barry finishes with antiquarian flourish: "Geneva was the Sparta of Reformed churches; and Calvin was its Lycurgus." It is not only such scholars who have considered Calvin a misanthrope. Consider the portraits painted by our poets. Take this short excerpt from "John Calvin" by the Hungarian-Canadian poet Gyorgy Faludy:

"His forehead was unlined but moist, and shone above his long French nose. He didn't care to touch his wife, so he caressed his beard into smooth waves as he proclaimed the Lord thrust sin into men's souls so he could hurl them latterly into Hell. It was so vile, so horrible, it had to be believed.

In dreams he loved to hone castrating knives and in Geneva did away with lust, jailed loving couples, poets, all who smiled with happiness, or laughed, or studied books, and well-dressed men who danced."

Finally, treating of the case of "poor Servetus" Faludy goes on to imagine how, "Calvin had him burned on slow fire / his followers herding all the people there / to watch the blaze as, at his window, sniffing / that rank smoke, he licked his swollen lips." Closer to my home in Scotland, the poet Edwin Muir, has long invited his fellow Scots to contemplate the image of, "King Calvin with his iron pen, / and God three angry letters in a book / and there the logical hook / on which the mystery is impaled and bent / into an ideological argument."

The popular image of Calvin as a desiccated ideologue and despiser of all things human is well captured in an anecdote told by one of the leading Calvin scholars of our own day, Randall Zachman. He relates how once, while a student at Yale Divinity School, a friend passed him a satirical pamphlet resembling an evangelistic tract. Its cover claimed to summarise Calvin's doctrine. Inside it read in solid block letters: "God hates you and has a horrible plan for your life."

At this point we could begin to play a game of competing portraits, by marshalling all the evidence we could muster in defence of Calvin's character, starting with his own (perhaps wry) self-description as "timid, soft, and cowardly by nature" and building upon what Beza in his 1564 biography called the "wealth of material available to us to testify to his good qualities" and "silence those malicious men who speak ill of him and swamp the people who know no better with false rumours and slanders." But rather than entertain you with this, I want to move from consideration of Calvin's person to his thought. For in the end, it must be upon Calvin's theology rather than upon his personality per se that the question of whether his legacy is humane or misanthropic is decided.

As is well known, Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion was a work permanently in progress. Yet from the very first edition of 1536 Calvin's doctrinal synthesis led with this famous claim: "Nearly the whole of sacred doctrine consists in these two parts: knowledge of God and of ourselves" (I.1.1). With each successive revision and expansion of the work, Calvin was at pains to clarify and amplify this proposition further in both this article and elsewhere. As an initial gloss on the matter of human self-knowledge, he added this to his text in the 1539 printing at the opening of the second book: "With good reason the ancient proverb [‘know thyself’] strongly recommended knowledge of self to man. For if it is considered disgraceful for us not to know all that pertains to the business of human life, even more detestable is our ignorance of ourselves. . . . Yet, there is much disagreement as to how we acquire that knowledge" (I.I.1 and 3 (1539)). This same early revision also brought another admission to the fore, namely, that, as Calvin says, "it is not easy to discern whether it is the knowledge of God or that of ourselves which precedes and brings forth the other" (I.i.1 (1539)). Writing twenty years later, in the greatly expanded introduction to the work as a whole, Calvin reflects at length

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5 William Barry, s.c. ‘Calvin’, Catholic Encyclopedia (1911).


on how the traffic between self-knowledge and knowledge of God runs variously 
and turbulent in both directions (I.1.1–3 (1559)). While this matter, it seems, 
draws the theologian into a real thicket, Calvin never falters in his view that this 
is the right thicket in which to be. Indeed, very few of the structuring elements of 
Calvin’s Institutes persist across the three decades of its unfolding composition as 
so surely does his instance upon the importance, propriety, and difficulty of win-
ning true human self-understanding.

It will already have become clear that human self-understanding is no 
independent theme in Calvin’s thought, being thoroughly entangled with the 
question of God from the outset. But we need to say more than just ‘entangled’ 
here—for Calvin is clearly of the mind that as far as Christian theology goes, the 
knowledge of God and of ourselves are not just interrelated, but are also irrevers-
ibly ordered. This ordering comes to negative expression when he remarks that “it 
is certain than man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first 
looked upon God’s face” (I.1.2 (1539)), and when he observes how a human being “is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness” of her true state until she “has compared [herself] with God’s majesty” (I.1.3 (1559)). The same ordering 
of knowledge finds direct and positive expression in the final French version of the 
Institutes from 1560, where Calvin states plainly that it is only “in knowing God” 
that “each of us also knows himself”.13 True human self-understanding arises out 
of knowledge of God. Thus there is ultimately, in Calvin, a necessary indirection 
to theology’s interest in and view of humanity. The path to such knowing within 
Christian thought must be specifically circuits, if it is to lead us to genuine hu-
man self-knowledge at all.14

For our purposes, it is crucial to note well a further feature of Calvin’s 
thinking here: namely, that the knowledge of ourselves we win by way of the 
knowledge of God is humanizing in its character and effects. In part, this is be-
cause it is in and through a right knowledge of God that we discern the purpose, 
prospects and limits of human existence in the midst of the “the melancholy 
desolation of these days” (IV.1.2) as Calvin has it. This is why Calvin’s programme 
of more narrowly theological inquiry and reform is always closely allied with a 
parallel programme of ethical, social, and even political inquiry and reform. This 
is something one finds nicely displayed in his 1539 treatise on The Necessity of 
Reforming the Church.15 Calvin’s immediate concern in this work is with the proper 
shape of the life and faith of the Christian community in relation to what he calls 
God’s “certain economy” of salvation, i.e., in relation to the formative particu-
larity of what God has done and is doing in the world to remake and to sustain 
properly human life.16

Tellingly, he argues throughout this tract that the “apostasies and heresies” of 
his day are at one and the same time “blasphemous” and “presumptive” as regards 
God, as well as “cruel,” “burdensome,” and “tyrannical” as regards women and men. 
It is important to observe how, seen in this way, reform of the church has a dual 
purpose—both a better honouring of God and the provision of a greater human-
ness. Theological heresy and ecclesiastical apostasy, on Calvin’s view, are always 
simultaneously blasphemous and misanthropic or better, they are misanthropic 
because they are blasphemous. In short, to get God wrong is bad for you, humanly 
speaking. This is why time and time again, Calvin counts amongst the foremost 
goals of church reform the unburdening of consciences, the dispelling of delusions, 
and the rescue of human freedom from illegitimate constraints both spiritual, eccle-
siastical and political, without thereby having ‘changed the subject’ at all.

Theology done in this mode wagers that human interests—interests in 
truth, in justice, in wisdom etc.—are best served when and where our efforts at 
self-understanding are detoured through careful reflection upon divinity. Theol-
ogy done well is always and inevitably a philanthropic endeavour only because and 
in so far as it goes about its proper business of pursuing true knowledge of deity. 
For in concentrating upon God, theology comes to reflect in thought the essential 
philanthropy of the deity itself. Christians can and must ask God “to lead us, 
unfeignedly repentant, to the knowledge of ourselves” since by way of knowledge 
of the gospel we know that “gentleness and sweetness which [God] shows forth 
in his Christ”17 as so also all the humane “benefits” which flow from embracing 
“what is to our advantage to know” of God (I.2.2. (1599)). It is the philanthropy of 
the God of the gospel that underwrites, demands and empowers the humanity of 
Christian theology and the humanism of the Christian theologian.

III/ Refering to God—Bonhoeffer and the Question of Humanity

Calvin’s view of this matter is distinctive but not idiosyncratic. Let us come 
forward to the first half of the twentieth century, and north from the French 
Cantons of Switzerland to the plains of North-Eastern Germany, more specifically 
to the lecture halls of the University of Berlin, where between 1930 and 1933 we 
could have taken in the lectures of a young theological teacher named Dietrich 
Bonhoeffer. Unlike with Calvin, few, if any, have cast Bonhoeffer as a misan-
thrope, though his unwillingness to play tennis with American amateurs during 
his year at Union Seminary in New York has occasionally drawn accusations of 
‘elitism’.18 But just like Calvin—and in spite of the tennis—the Lutheran Bon-

13 See Calvin, Institutes (1559), p. 36, footnote 3.
Humanism of Calvin (Louisville: John Knox, 1964)—that Calvin turned renaissance humanism “on 
its head” by “making it a consequence of God’s grace”.
15 John Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church”, in Theological Treatises. Library of 
16 Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church”, p. 192.
17 Calvin, Institutes 1536, I.6, p.18.
18 See Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography. Revised edition. (Minneapolis: 
Fortress, 2000), p. 155 citing Paul Lehmann’s own account of Bonhoeffer’s ‘irresistible and unfailing 
sense of humour.’
hoeffer was centrally preoccupied with theme of the knowledge of God and the knowledge of humanity. And like Calvin he too contended that they are thoroughly entangled in a very particular way.

At the end of July 1930 Bonhoeffer delivered his inaugural lecture within the Faculty of Theology, taking as his topic the question of humanity in recent philosophical and theological reflection. 19 It is a detailed piece of work, which scrutinizes a range of important contemporary philosophical accounts of humanity including those offered by Greisbach, Scheler, and Heidegger. For present purposes, what counts are the results of all this philosophical heavy lifting. We human beings, Bonhoeffer argues, seek to understand ourselves either from our possibilities and achievements or from our limitations. In the former case, the question of transcendence is never really broached as the human person is approached as “a self-subsisting world, needing no others (only itself) in order to come into its own essence”; in the latter case, by contrast, it would appear that the question of transcendence is central, because thought from its limitations, human nature rests not “in immanent, quiescent possibilities but in ever-active relating to its own boundaries.” 20 But Bonhoeffer objects that this second case is in fact reducible to the first. This is because “the boundary by which the human being limits himself remains a self-drawn boundary, that is, a boundary the human person essentially has already crossed, a boundary that person much already have stood beyond in the first place in order to draw it.” In this way, “by limiting my own possibilities in thought . . . I demonstrate through the very possibility of limitation the infinity of my possibilities.” 21

It is Bonhoeffer’s contention that question of humanity can never be posed with full seriousness if it is put as question both asked and answered within the scope of human being. While this problem was patent in the philosophy of Bonhoeffer’s day, he charged that a good many attempts to pose the question of humanity on theological soil—including those made by some of his teachers and contemporaries—also succumb to this same lack of seriousness. What is Bonhoeffer’s concern here? What worries him most is the collapse of transcendence into mere human possibility. For if the answer to the question we are to ourselves is always and inevitably “comprised in the question” itself, then, he argues, the whole effort proves viciously solipsistic. Any knowledge of ourselves won along this path will be rooted not in reality, but merely in the reflex of the anxious will, and so will skate dangerously back and forth between the poles of false self-aggrandizement and equally false self-denigration. In either case, such knowledge will prove to be false and misleading, and as such dehumanizing.

Theology has a diagnosis for this loss of genuine transcendence and the concomitant exchange of a world of what is real for a world merely of what is willed or wished, the forfeit of the world genuinely beyond me merely for the world that I myself am. That diagnosis is ‘sin.’ In thinking through the nature of sin, Bonhoeffer enthusiastically adopts Luther’s image of humanity incurvatus in se—of human beings turned in upon themselves, like an arrangement of frightened armadillos. 22 Bonhoeffer, with Luther, could think of no better image with which to capture the situation of humanity in sin that this one of alienated self-imprisonment.

But how is the question of humanity to be asked and answered with requisite seriousness under the conditions of the fall? As Bonhoeffer states this case:

If the question about the human being is to be posed seriously, it can be so only where the human being is before God . . . That is, the human being is torn completely out of himself, drawn as a whole person before God, and here the question about the human being becomes serious precisely because it no longer includes its own answer. Instead, God gives the human being the answer completely freely and completely anew, since it is now God who has placed the human before God himself and instructs the human being to question in this way. That is, the human being experiences his foundation not through himself, but through God. Whoever God summons is in essence a human being. 23

We human beings certainly come to understand ourselves by reflection, Bonhoeffer concedes, but only in the act of being referred to God, i.e., only at the point where we in fact stand before God and are made what we are by virtue of the salutary effects of God’s own dynamic reality. As with Calvin, Bonhoeffer contends that the knowledge of humanity to which we rightly and necessarily aspire is, theologically speaking, only had indirectly, because en route to it human self-reflection is and must be interrupted by God, or else the “human spirit circles perpetually around itself” in sin’s solipsistic spiral. 24 Bonhoeffer has a classical theological vocabulary with which to describe this divine interruption and its effects, deploying terms like ‘judgment,’ ‘forgiveness of sins,’ ‘sanctification,’ and ‘revelation.’ What this idiom makes clear is that when Bonhoeffer talks of our coming to understand ourselves “in the act of being related ourselves to God” he is not talking about something we accomplish, but rather about an act of God, something God and God alone does to forge this determinative relation; an act, in sum, of “judgment and grace.” 25

22 The image of the armadillo is mine, not Luther’s own!
Now Bonhoeffer—again like Calvin—considers this rather good news for humanity. For that “act of relating to God” [Aktbezugs] through whose fire knowledge of ourselves must pass, is the self-same act in which we are graciously given back to the real world, an act in which the world beyond what I would will and wish comes into view once again. Where once there was only an isolated individual—a “master of the world, but only of the world its ego interprets and thinks up, master in its own, self-restricted, violated world”—now there are others, there is the community. For Bonhoeffer, it is only on the other side of being related to God by God that we discover that a genuine human existence is a life lived for others, whose fruit is the kind of human society that can only be had amongst the ‘children of mercy,’ as Luther styled it. The world shattering brush with divinity in Jesus Christ brings in its train decisively humanizing effects because and insofar as it affords a genuine transcendence in the midst of life and for life’s sake.

Bonhoeffer, as a thinker, was at once restless and unrelenting. In the summer of 1933 he delivered what would be his final course at the University of Berlin, and chose Christology for his theme. In these lectures he revisits and presses further of 1933 he delivered what would be his final course at the University of Berlin, and chose Christology for his theme. In these lectures he revisits and presses further the line of thinking we have been tracing. In terms redolent of all we have just chosen Christology for his theme. In these lectures he revisits and presses further of 1933 he delivered what would be his final course at the University of Berlin, and chose Christology for his theme. In these lectures he revisits and presses further the line of thinking we have been tracing. In terms redolent of all we have just been considering he ventured this claim:

Christology is doctrine, speaking, the word about the Word of God. . . . it is knowledge par excellence. From outside, Christology becomes the center of knowledge. . . . Only scholarship that knows itself to be within the realm of the Christian church could agree here that Christology is the center of the realm of scholarship itself. That means that Christology is the invisible, unrecognized, hidden center of scholarship, of the universitas litterarum."

This is an extraordinary set of remarks, yet entirely in keeping with what has already been advanced with respect to theological anthropology. Now, the peculiar reality of God is understood to be the source not only of true humanity, but also of the ultimate truth of the humanities—theology’s object stands as the condition of possibility for the whole endeavour of humane learning—Geistwissenschaft—in the ‘republic of letters.’ The decisive issue once again is the question of the reality of transcendence: Bonhoeffer considers it to be axiomatic that “the transcendent”—here concretely the Word become flesh—“is always only the prerequisite for our thinking, never the proof.” At issue is the effect of this transcendent reality upon human self-understanding as worked out in humane scholarship, i.e., what happens when the closed circle of human rationation and discourse is invaded and so transcended by another ‘reason’ by another ‘discourse,’ another ‘logos,’ around which everything now truly orbits even when this remains ‘unknown’ and ‘hidden.’ The God on whom Bonhoeffer thinks, is a deity whose philanthropic acts are nothing less than world making, and so inescapably pertinent for any and all attempts to investigate the whole human world as it really is.

Bonhoeffer left the University after the summer of 1933, drawn away to a London pastorate for a time, but more comprehensively, entering into an all-consuming involvement with the German Church Struggle. When, years later and courtesy of a Gestapo gag-order, Bonhoeffer found time to write again he set to work upon large scale study of Christian moral theology. His Ethics was to be his most important work, the culmination of all his theological endeavours to date. At its heart stands a claim whose audacity is not lessened by its being well-known: ‘In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world . . . . All concepts of reality that ignore Jesus Christ are abstractions.’ The upshot of this for human self-knowledge is that, “to be taken up by God, to be judged and reconciled by God on the cross—that is the reality of humanity.” In this late idiom, Bonhoeffer describes the effect of God’s judgment and reconciliation as the salutary provision of a much needed ‘genuine worldliness’ to women and men who, in sin, have been in flight from themselves, from each other and from the real world. To be taken up by God is to be taken out of solipsistic captivity and to be put back firmly on the earth, set into lives now liveable for others. For Bonhoeffer finally, it is the peculiar philanthropy of deity that underwrites, demands and empowers the peculiar humanity of divinity. Humane existence is the gift and task of the Gospel of the God of Jesus Christ.

IV/ Concluding Remarks

Walt Whitman, the incomparable American humanist and poet once wrote, “I say to mankind, be not curious about God. For I, who am curious about each, am not curious about God.” By contrast, when the Psalmist asks “what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals, that you care for them?” we overhear the voice of one whose passionate curiosity about humanity is inescapably bound up with an equally curious passion for God. Indeed, it is because the Psalmist is curious about God that he is curious about and deeply interested in ‘each.’ In this essay I have ventured to reflect a little upon something of what theologians of the calibre of Calvin and Bonhoeffer have made of this dual curiosity, and upon particular ways in which they understood the questions of God and humanity, the knowledge of God and humanity, and indeed finally the reality of God and humanity, to be peculiarly entangled with one another by virtue of the Christian gospel. For both, theology is inevitably led to humanity as a theme precisely as it labours to track the course and discern the contours of God’s mindfulness of and
care for human beings. Both Calvin and Bonhoeffer see humanity and the struggle for humane self-understanding to be profoundly implicated in “the total relevance of the person, Jesus” as the Canadian poet, Margaret Avison has characterised it.  

To think upon the God of our salvation is to be led to contemplate the reality and lives of those women and men whom God saves.

Questions of course, remain—what are we to understand by ‘act of God’? Just what kind of knowledge is the knowledge of God? When and where does such knowledge arise, from what sources, and how is its legitimacy and truth discerned? And what happens to human language when it traffics in talk of God? What does this kind of theological description have to do with all manner of other sorts of descriptions we humans offer of ourselves and our world? And just how might the kinds of claims Calvin or Bonhoeffer make be driven effectively into concrete life and their significance drawn out for this or for that particular circumstance? In his calling as a Christian theologian, Christopher Morse has for many years devoted his considerable energies to stirring up and reflecting theologically upon just such questions, always refusing to believe that “human identity is self-referential” or that “who we are consists ultimately in our own decisions.” 33 In no small measure thanks to the gift of Morse’s own theological existence many of us still—Whitman notwithstanding—remain desperately and faithfully curious to discern afresh how it is that “God and the dawning of our own reality belong together” for the sake of our common benediction. 34 

Approaching Calvin Today in “The Spirit of the Explorer”

Christopher Morse

An address delivered at the Stated Meeting of the Salem Presbytery, High Point, North Carolina on the 500th Anniversary of John Calvin’s Birth, October 20, 2009.

A century ago at Union Seminary where I teach in Manhattan a public celebration was held in honor of the four hundredth anniversary of John Calvin’s birth. The speaker on that occasion in 1909, a distinguished theologian of the day, began his address by apologizing for the difficulty of saying anything original or new about Calvin. “There are,” he remarked, “certain great thinkers whose systems it is possible to approach in the spirit of the explorer, conscious as one turns each page of the chance of some new discovery; but with Calvin it is not so.”

I am happy to have this opportunity to be with you today because I have found this judgment not to be true. For some years it has been my privilege to offer a seminar on Calvin’s theology for graduate students. Most, but not all, are Presbyterians or members of the Reformed Church in America, and they enroll in the course not because they especially want to, but because they are trying to meet ordination requirements. They often begin the course with a sense of apprehension, sometimes even dread, because of the negative associations that have come to surround the mention of Calvin.

A typical example in my files is an editorial in The New York Times that once described the faltering prospects of a political candidate by saying that he sounded “buttoned-up, moral, serious to the point of sour,” in short, “like the model Calvinist” (NYT, 10/9/84).

One very bright and committed student a couple years ago may serve as an illustration of what I mean by beginning the study of Calvin with a sense of apprehension. Ian and his wife had just had their first child a few months before and were overjoyed at this birth of a beautiful little boy. When he agreed to give one of the first reports on the reading early in the course he did a power point presentation in which he showed the class pictures of this endearing child. And then flashing beneath them on the screen lines from Calvin that speak of “the whole human race delivered to the curse and degenerated, bound over to miser-

able servitude in which only damnable things come forth from its corrupt nature,” Ian said to us earnestly and with deep conviction: “I don’t care whether it is John Calvin or anyone else, no one is going to talk about my little boy like that!” We honored that reaction, knowing that he had not shirked his duty in reading the assigned material and preparing his presentation. I simply asked him not to suppress his anger but to try to keep open to the possibility of being surprised as we continued to read on.

Now without trying to paint too simple a picture, I know that Ian would not mind if I told you that by the end of the twelve weeks of the semester, he had indeed been overtaken by fresh discoveries. So much so that he wanted to share them with his local Presbyterian church in New Haven, Connecticut. He wrote for their Lenten booklet what he called A Journey Through John Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion in which he selected brief passages for his parish’s daily meditation during Lent. In the preface he wrote these words: “This past fall, I took a course on John Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion, expecting to be somewhat bored and maybe even a little offended by Calvin…Calvin’s language of sin isn’t what we are used to as Presbyterians in the twenty-first century, and there are still passages in Calvin that are deeply troubling for even the most traditional theologian...but I was surprised to discover that Calvin has much to say—and much of it beautiful—about God, Jesus, Christianity, and so on. With my delighted surprise, the idea of this booklet was formed. May we all have a deep, contemplative, and blessed Lent.”

While it is undoubtedly the case that volumes have been written on almost every aspect of Calvin’s thought, it is false to assume that Calvin’s theology does not lend itself to a spirit of exploration and discovery. What gives the theological study of any text its originality and freshness is the quality of provocation which that text provides. Each new generation comes with the urgency of its questions seeking some response from a text. And to each generation a text poses certain questions of its own which offer a perspective not merely on the past, but on the present. The reason that some theological writings from the past continue to be read and others do not has to do with the extent to which these writings provoke us, and the quality of provocation they afford. Love them or hate them, they persist in confronting the explorer with a sort of impertinent pertinence. Thus the topic I have chosen for our time together this morning takes the words of this speaker from a hundred years ago and turns them around. I would like to reflect with you on “Approaching Calvin Today in The Spirit of the Explorer.”

I will refer primarily to John Calvin’s life-work titled Institutes of the Christian Religion. There are numerous other writings, most notably his commentaries on the Old and New Testaments, but the Institutes is his major theological work, one that he continued to develop through a number of editions in Latin and French for almost a quarter century, from 1536 to 1560. The final work was expanded to four books, the first two are about our knowledge of God (1) as Creator, and (2) as Redeemer. This is followed in Book 3 by a discussion of what is meant by grace and the effect it has on us, (the great theme of the Reformation), and concludes in Book 4 with practical matters that Calvin calls the “external means” by which God invites us into the society of Christ and keeps us therein,” namely, questions about the church and civil government.

Knowledge of God, grace, and practical governance—three areas that I would like to select from briefly in a spirit of the explorer and ask you how you think these matters sound today. The point is not whether we find ourselves in agreement or disagreement with Calvin on a particular issue, but whether we have actually engaged his thinking and allowed his thinking in turn to engage our own.

But first, a word about the individual. Who was this man, John Calvin, whose influence to some extent has affected us all, and indeed the course of our civilization? His dates are from 1509–1564, a lifetime of fifty-five years.

He was born about fifty miles north of Paris, in the region known as Picardy, in the town of Noyon. The atmosphere was primarily ecclesiastical. Life was lived in the shadow of the Cathedral, where Calvin’s father was an administrative officer, and the Bishop, who was of the nobility, ruled the city. Here Calvin lived until he was fourteen when he went off to study at the University of Paris. His mother had died when he was quite young, most likely when he was only four or five. A brother died at a young age, and a sister died in infancy, but three remaining siblings, Charles, Antoine, and Marie lived to adulthood. The latter two, his brother Antoine and sister Marie, in later life moved in with Calvin in his home in Geneva.

His father first had John study for the priesthood, then switch to law because it offered greater material benefits. For ten years from the time he is fourteen Calvin studied law and the classics, mainly at the University of Paris. His father lived to see Calvin earn his law degree in 1530, when he was twenty-two, but died the following year.

Paris was preeminent as a conservative stronghold at the time. But the influence of the Renaissance and the more radical ideas of German Lutheranism, though viewed with suspicion, were beginning to be felt. Many sought reforms in the church, but Lutheranism was seen as bringing political unrest into the French society of the time and was generally considered by the majority to be subversive. To call someone a “Lutheran” in Paris in Calvin’s day carried some of the same overtones as calling someone an “Islamic militant” today, or even a “terrorist.” There was a growing danger of warfare between the Lutheran territories and the Catholic princes.

Two important events in Paris while Calvin was at the university show the tension of the times that influenced the course of his life.

One event was an uproar that arose at the installation of a new rector of the university in 1533, a man by the name of Nicolas Cop. In his inaugural address the new rector seemed to be defending Lutheran ideas by charging that many teachers at the university did nothing but “argue interminably...quarrel,...dispute...
(and) discuss, but nothing about faith, nothing about the love of God, nothing about forgiveness of sins, nothing about grace, nothing about justification, (and) nothing about true works.” “I beg all of you here present,” Cop called forth, “never to sit back and accept these heresies, these insults against God.” The crowds became so infuriated by what they heard to be the “Lutheran” tone of this address that Cop was forced to flee for his life, as was Calvin, because Calvin not only was known to be Cop’s good friend, but it was widely thought, and may have been the case, that Calvin had in fact collaborated in the writing of the address. At any rate, warrants were issued by the ruling authorities of the Sorbonne and Parliament against Cop and Calvin, for whom the charge was that of accomplice, viz., “familiarity with the Rector.” They were accused of spreading Lutheran subversion and were forced to go underground into hiding for the year 1534.

Then also in 1534 the second event known as the incident of the Placards occurred which further raised the specter of terrorism in Paris. Overnight on October 18, 1534 handbills were secretly posted under the cover of darkness on public walls all around the city which called for a virtual uprising of the people against the clerical leaders and the order of the Mass. The Mass was attacked as a “pompous and proud” deception of the people led by thieving “fornicators” by which “the Lord is so outrageously blasphemed, and the people seduced and blinded” that “the world (if God does not soon provide a remedy)...will be totally desolated, ruined, lost, and laid low...” A severe crack-down by the authorities followed.

For almost a year, it seems, Calvin lived in hiding. During this period, in 1534 when he was twenty-five, he apparently broke his ties with the Roman Church. “...By a sudden conversion,” he later wrote, “(God) brought my mind to submission (and) I was...inspired by a taste of true religion...In less than a year, all who were looking for a purer doctrine began to come to learn from me, although I was a novice and a beginner.”

Calvin then fled from his native France, as did other refugees, thinking at first to make his way to Germany. But when he arrived in Switzerland he was sought out to lead a Reformed community in Geneva. Here he began the work on his Institutes, for the twofold and practical purpose—so he wrote in his dedicatory preface to the French king—to help provide instruction to those who were hungering and thirsting after Christ and also to defend the integrity of the witness of the protesting martyrs whose names were being slandered by those opposed to reform throughout France.

Calvin’s first stay in Geneva lasted only a couple years before the turmoil there drove him out. He moved to Strasbourg where he found the coveted leisure he had long sought to read and to study. Here he happily remains from 1538–1541, during which time he marries Idelette, a widow with two children, to whom he always referred with deep respect and affection: “The best companion of my life...” he wrote, “From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance.” She died nine years after they were married, their offspring (one son or more, it is disputed) not having survived infancy. Calvin later announces publicly in a sermon that he has resolved never to remarry because of the time consuming difficulty of his ministerial responsibilities.

Much against his own inclinations in 1541 Calvin is called back to Geneva, “dragged back,” he describes it, after being terrified with the image of Jonah resisting God’s call to go to Nineveh. There he remains the virtual leader in active ministry for over twenty years, from 1541 until his death at fifty-five in 1564. By his instructions he was buried in an unmarked grave so that no veneration could be made of his remains and his enemies could not say that he had sought his own glory.

Two things particularly should be remembered when we consider Calvin’s theology against the background of his life. First, he is an individual who found his life directed in ways he never could have imagined, or planned for himself. Second, he remained always, in a sense, a fugitive and refugee amid civil unrest and insecurity, even in Geneva when thrust against his own desire into a public position of responsibility. From his Preface to his Commentary on the Psalms, one of the few places where he provides us with an autobiographical sketch, we read:

Then I, who was by nature a man of the country and a lover of shade and leisure, wished to find for myself a quiet hiding place—a wish which has never yet been granted me; for every retreat I found became a public lecture room. When the one thing I craved was obscurity and leisure, God fastened upon me so many cords of various kinds that he never allowed me to remain quiet, and in spite of my reluctance dragged me into the limelight.

For many of his teachings Calvin is indebted to the German Lutherans and earlier reformers, though he never met Martin Luther (1483–1546) personally, who was a generation older. Yet his theological writings were more orderly and comprehensive than any of the other Reformers, trained as he was in law and in the methods of the Renaissance humanists. As he continued to develop his Institutes, so did his knowledge develop of the theological writings in the earlier history of the church, especially those of Augustine.

What then is some of the provocation in his thought that can elicit fresh discoveries for those who may approach Calvin today in “the spirit of the explorer”?

(1) First, there is the question of how we know God. Here Calvin gives us so much to consider in light of the questions of our time.

“...To know God,” Calvin writes, is our chief end. “Even if a hundred lives were ours, this one aim would be sufficient for them all” (Com. on Jer. 9:24). We do not know ourselves, Calvin argues, until we know who God is. To know who God is, is to know who we are. Thus the knowing of God and the knowing of ourselves is inseparably related.
There is, in one respect, a knowing of God which is given simply with the fact that God has created us. There is a sense for deity which is part of our makeup as human beings. There is some acknowledgement in the human conscience of a power other than our own. The universal human tendency is to have a god. And God the creator of all things, Calvin holds, is presented to us in all of nature around us and in events which are taking place.

But this kind of knowing, this knowability if we may call it that, when viewed in light of faith in God shows itself to be a knowing that is frustrated and suppressed. This is a point at which Calvin’s view becomes controversial. When God speaks to us through what the Old and New Testaments call the “Word of God,” or in Calvin’s terms, “the covenant of life,” then whatever sense of the divine we may previously have had is shown to have been our way of avoiding God and suppressing the truth. Our religiousness becomes, in Calvin’s words, a “factory manufacturing idols.” In his French edition he refers to this factory of idols as a “boutique of idols.” Being religious, therefore, is not necessarily the same as being faithful.

In Calvin’s perspective God is everywhere before our very eyes, but we have exercised our natural religious tendencies to focus our attention in such a way as to blind ourselves to God’s presence. “It is therefore in vain for us,” Calvin writes, (Ergo frustra nobis) “that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author.” (I,5,14). We are not aware of this until we hear what God’s Word through Scripture is speaking to us of Jesus Christ.

Calvin’s famous metaphor for how Scripture refocuses our religious sense for God is that of a pair of eyeglasses or corrective lenses. Looking through them we are able to see the world in focus, able, so to speak, to see God’s work in all things, not just religion, able to see how deliberately blind to this work we have previously been. Our vision is corrected. We see what is going on all around us in current events very differently. When the focus of a camera is properly set to gauge the proper distance and proximity of a landscape, the picture we get is clear though there may be many details in it. But if the focus is off, the same camera can be held before the very same landscape, and the picture taken remains only a blur. Thus, the calling of the church is not to focus upon being religious as such, or even upon spirituality as such, but to focus upon the Word of God who is made known to us in what happens with Jesus.

When we hear what happens with Jesus as God’s own Word speaking to us we come to know not simply that there is a God, or that there is something more ultimate than ourselves, we come to know ourselves as loved. This is what Calvin calls the knowledge of God the Redeemer. This is a remarkable part of his teaching that is often misrepresented. There are those, as we have mentioned, who associate Calvinism with a preoccupation with sin and evil, and there are passages in Calvin’s Institutes, as my student Ian rightly pointed out, that lend themselves to this opinion. Talk of human degeneracy, damnable corruption of human nature, miserable bondage, obviously sounds like a morbid obsession with condemnation, and Calvin is heard by many accordingly. The self-understanding which results from such morbidity, some have objected, amounts finally to self-hatred.

Yet to explore what Calvin actually says can lead to hearing a very different message. For just as we only know that the picture we draw of God from creation is blurred after the focus provided by Christ in God’s Word as eyeglasses enables us to recognize the true picture, so Calvin makes a similar interpretation of our knowledge of ourselves. That is to say, we only know our sin from knowing its forgiveness. We only can speak of our silkiness from the standpoint of the remedy Christ brings. In Calvin the negative is always seen from the standpoint of the positive, and not vice versa. Calvin writes, “Since the Lord in coming to our aid bestows upon us what we lack, when the nature of his work in us appears, our destitution will, on the other hand, at once be manifest” (II,3,6). There is no danger, he argues, of one being too cast down and aware of one’s failing so long as—and this is the crucial point—it is remembered that whatever is lacking is to be “recouped” in God (II,2,10). It is only in knowing God as our Redeemer, only in knowing how much we are loved, that we can realize how resistant we have been to being loved and how fallen away from that mercy our ways have been. Such a discovery, I suggest, is the opposite of morbidity or self-hatred.

2. SECOND, A WORD ABOUT HOW GOD’S GRACE TAKES EFFECT ON US. AND HERE CALVIN SPEAKS OF MATTERS THAT HAVE COME TO BE LINKED WITH HIS NAME, PROVIDENCE, ELECTION OR PREDESTINATION, AND OUR HUMAN WILL.

There are many issues that have been debated on these points. I once attended a university lecture in another school where the speaker said, “We must not think of God as some despot in the sky, an ego-maniac controlling all things and reducing human beings to robots or puppets. Such may be the god of John Calvin, but it need not be ours.” It is the case that when we come to Calvin’s teachings on the subject did not originate with him, but can be found in traditions of theology that preceded him, the single-minded emphasis which he gave to this subject has identified his name with it.

To cut to the bottom line of the matter, what Calvin wants most to affirm, when all is said and done, is that no part of God’s creation is ever left merely to chance. Calvin’s hearing of the Word of God is that God’s knowing providence governs all things. Without trying to defend Calvin where his views become indefensible, we can note the train of thought which he develops. He is not unaware that the idea of God’s providential will governing all things raises many questions. If all events somehow are governed by the will of God, then how does one avoid the conclusion that God is a despot in the sky and we are all manipulated puppets or pre-programmed robots mechanically carrying out our assigned functions?

Calvin’s answers, which may or may not satisfy us, go as follows. The Scriptures speak of a God who rules over all the works of creation. This governance is in sharp contrast to the classical pagan myths of fortune, whose eyes are blind, of fate, or luck. To deny God’s providence, in which a loving God provides as God
sees best, is to say that some things escape God’s governing will and are subject to blind misfortune or fate. This Calvin will not accept. Among other things, it would make the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done on earth,” meaningless.

Yet Calvin insists that the providence which governs the world and all the events of our lives is often hidden to us. We simply cannot explain suffering or why tragedies happen as they do. What faith does confess is that nothing befalls us which is outside the will of God who works for good in all things. As Calvin sees it, this does not make us puppets because, following St. Augustine here, it is God’s nature to work through us in such a way that God’s working does not destroy our freedom but constitutes it. If we try to enforce our wills upon another, their freedom, to be sure, is violated and curtailed. But when it is God’s love and freedom that is motivating us we are never more free than when we will what God wills. The human will is never violated by grace, but rather established in its integrity. Grace works through us in such a way that are made free to love and work. God loves us into loving and frees us into freedom.

In addition to speaking of the grace of God’s providence over all things, Calvin also discusses the will of God in electing those who are destined for salvation. Salvation comes not from any merit or capacity we possess, but is a sheer gift of God’s grace. This is familiar church teaching, emphasized in the Reformation and developed by Augustine in the 5th Century. God elects people. People do not elect God. In developing his teaching on predestination and election Calvin is attentive to Paul’s words in Romans and to these words from Ephesians: “He destined us in love to be his own through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (1:5–6).

In introducing the discussion of election Calvin simply begins with obvious facts. He observes that not all people have the “covenant of life” preached equally to them, and to those to whom the Gospel is preached, not all hear it as God speaking to them or respond with acceptance. That is simply a fact. Why this is, why some hear and others do not, why some respond to what they hear and others do not, Calvin makes it plain, we simply are not given to know. At this point many who otherwise tend to agree with Calvin’s hearing of the Word of God wish he had stopped.

But, as Calvin expresses the matter, “We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God’s free mercy until we come to know God’s eternal election, which illumines God’s grace by this contrast: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all in the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others” (III,21,1). Later Calvinists, such as Karl Barth, have criticized Calvin’s understanding at this point in his positing of a “double decree,” that is, that God wills the salvation of some to reveal grace and also wills the rejection of others to reveal God’s righteous judgment against sin. Barth points instead to the words of the Apostle Paul, “As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive” (I Cor. 15:22), and “God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy upon all” (Rom. 11:32).

3. Finally, a third point of Calvin that has arisen as a new discovery for some in our day comes from Bk. 4 of the Institutes where Calvin deals with the practical matters of Church and State governance.

In a sometimes previously overlooked discussion, Calvin raises the question of what kind of sexual requirements the Church should impose upon those seeking ordination as ministers. In his day the issue centered on the requirement of the Papal Church that to be ordained a priest one had to be celibate. But this general mandate stood in tension with a longer standing early church teaching that, according to the Gospel, celibacy is a gift of grace, just as covenants of marriage are a gift of grace. You can’t coerce a gift. You can only accept it with thanksgiving or reject it. To reject God’s gifts is, in the words of the Old and New Testaments, “to tempt the Lord your God” (Deut. 6:16; Matt. 4:7). In explicitly discussing sexuality in relation to ordination, Calvin writes, “But this is to tempt God: to strive against the nature imparted by him, and to despise his present gifts as if they did not belong to us at all” (IV,13,3).

It is an act of unfaithfulness, of infidelity, in the view of Calvin here articulated, for anyone to despise God’s present gifts of the nature imparted by God of one’s sexuality as if these gifts did not belong to one at all. This is a word from Calvin that is provoking discussion today as churches across denominations are being challenged as to whether they are “tempting God” by coercing people to strive against the nature imparted to them by God and to despise God’s present gifts as if they did not belong to them at all.

On these three points regarding (1) our knowing of God, (2) God’s providential and electing grace, and (3) the practical matter of ordination requirements, as well as on many others, Calvin after five hundred years continues to provoke the thinking of the Christian Church, in agreement and disagreement, but in ever fresh exploration and new discovery.

Contrary to the press he often receives, Calvin the refugee, whether consistently or inconsistently, is first and foremost, a theologian seeking to bear witness to a love of God so incredible in embracing all creation that it is, finally, “beyond all we can ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20). This is the word he leaves us:

We ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves (II,8,55).
Chapel Reflections on the Start of the Iraq War

Christopher Morse, March 25, 2003

This is an occasion, I am sure, that all of us have hoped would never come. With every effort to prevent a military invasion of Iraq now having failed, we find ourselves meeting with a full scale war underway and the misery that it brings. For those who will most bear the brunt of the misery there is, of course, no time for reality television or academic discussion such as this. For the people on the ground in Iraq, the Iraqi population and the men and women of the Allied forces ordered there into battle—whose average age is younger than that of most graduate students—the demands of this hour are more immediate and in many ways, no doubt, beyond our comprehension. We must mean more than a platitude to say, in the first instance, that our prayers are for all who at this moment are suffering and dying and directly threatened—and for those who are trying to end the carnage and to care for them.

The ten minutes that Dean Keller has invited us to speak set a useful limit that forces us to concentrate our attention on what each of us sees as most crucial to our vocational situation. The assignment has led me to question my own theological responsibility and what this task calls for at the present time.

I confess that I have a very low tolerance for talk as rationalization about suffering, especially my own talk. Day and night finds no lack of “talking heads” on television delivering their opinions. Preachers exchange their sermons, retired generals boast of our latest weapons, academics rush into publication, politicians do their photo-ops. It all strikes me sometimes as exploitation—using the pain of others to increase our own particular network ratings. The most important witness to me after Nine Eleven came not so much from speeches or learned articles but from two business friends of mine whose task it was to determine who was alive and who was missing among the hundreds of employees in their firm at the World Trade Center. For days and many nights they worked over employee lists, calling families, checking and rechecking, with no time for talk about their agonizing or the “much speaking” (Mt. 6:7) going on around them. They simply turned to the immediate task at hand.

There comes a time and place when faithful witness does call for speaking, and then we pray that it will not be idle chatter but a word that is needful, a word that conveys more power than our own. A statement from the book of Acts regarding Paul before King Agrippa has often seemed to me to epitomize such crisis situations. As Luke recounts the scene, Paul says, “And now I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors” (Acts 26:6). I call this verse to mind as one brief way of noting what strikes me as several of the most crucial points of a faithful calling.

1. “And now I stand here.”

Each of us is called to faithful witness in the unique set of circumstances that comprise our particular gifts and time and space. A faithful stance requires watchful waiting, but it is never apathy or simply standing still. Some of us have been active in protests. Some have spoken and written and lobbied. Some crisis situations lead to civil disobedience, or in Bonhoeffer’s words, to “jamming the spoke in the wheel.” Some are called to stand in positions of government policy making and influence. Some stand in the military and others in opposition to military force. All of us who confess biblical faith confess that wherever we find our unique opportunity we stand under the grace and judgment of God.

One responsibility of theology at the present time is to make us more aware of the history of moral reflection in Christianity concerning war. This history contains a variety of positions. One is the rejection of all military force. Some groups argue that war is the natural state of things in a fallen world and will only cease at the end of time when Christ returns. Military force in defense of just causes, the so-called “just war theory,” has been the majority Christian position. Stipulations are drawn to define what is just and what isn’t. With the coming of the three great periods of the Crusades in the late 11th through the 15th Centuries (1095–1464), a new rationale was given for warfare in that merit was said to accrue for military death. The allowance of conscientious objection on specific grounds represents another stance, and in modern times with Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others the issue of non-violent against violent resistance has received much attention. The stance of so-called “Christian realism,” that is associated with the name of Reinhold Niebuhr in this place, accommodates the love ethic to what the approximation of justice in a social situation allows. But all of these historical stances now have their critics and may be said to be on trial.

2. “And now I stand here on trial.”

My own work has been influenced by the question raised by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1933 when the Nazi movement came to power. “What should the student of theology do today?” Bonhoeffer answered that the student “should prepare through study to test the spirits in the Church of Christ.” Christian claims are called to testing, called to trial. The current situation reminds us of the urgency of testing all God-talk and the uses to which piety, especially professions of Christian piety, are being put by the churches, but also by secular society. From ancient times the relation of a peoples’ worship with their patriotism has been recognized by governing authorities in preparing their populations for war. For months we have witnessed the altering of public consciousness and sensibility to accept as inevitable the government’s policies. Testing the spirits takes on much greater urgency in an internet culture where the grasp of reality is increasingly subject to media manipulation. Theological responsibility at the present time
requires testing the spirits in the church, but it also calls for bringing all propaganda to trial as well.

A specific responsibility of theological work at this time, it seems to me, is a deeper and more critical awareness of the uses being made of the Bible in our churches, our academic studies, and in our public discourse. Liberals are no less in need of this critical awareness than are conservatives. We all have our vested interests, our blind spots, and our sacred cows. There are, I venture to say, more theological themes being raised in our newspapers, television, and social media these days than in many of our churches. What constitutes a faithful hearing and discernment of this talk? Who is to say, we ask, what word, if any, God is speaking?

Much has been made since Nine Eleven of passages in the Koran that are alleged to call for warfare against outsiders, the infidels. What, we Christians must ask ourselves, shall we say of our biblical Psalm 137, “O daughter Babylon, you devastator. Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” (Ps. 137:8–9)

The footnote to this passage in our New Oxford Annotated Bible informs us that the term “daughter Babylon” is to be understood as a reference to “the Babylonian people”. Theology is responsible for bringing itself continually to trial, or better, for recognizing that it is continually under judgment and being tested and brought to trial.

3. “And now I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors.”

If the message of the Gospel calls us to oppose credulity—simply believing without testing everything that claims to be of God—it must also be said just as emphatically to oppose cynicism—simply denying as unrealistic any claim of a trustworthy hope currently coming from God. And cynicism may be an even greater temptation to some of us in this place than credulity in our present situation. Any protest that is not grounded in a trustworthy hope is not only self-defeating, it is self-destructive and a betrayal of others as well.

My e-mails, like some of yours I am sure, in recent days have been full of messages from pastors in various places sharing information for the worship services being held all over this country. Some recommend materials for condemning the war policies of the government. Some carry reports from missionaries, and church groups, and others in the Middle East. Some denominations are calling upon all local churches to undertake joint meetings with Jews and Muslims at this time. Some churches providing pastoral care to military families are distributing names of the troops so that they can be prayed for specifically one by one.

The most crucial word in all this activity and in the activity of this seminary as well, it seems to me, is one that may come through us, but will not come from us. We have no power of our own to raise the dead. In the real world we have no strength in ourselves to give hope to Rachel in her refusal to be consoled. Rather, we have been given an unlikely promise to signify; as the prophet Jeremiah hears it coming to Rachel, “There is hope for your future,” says the Lord.” (Jer. 31:17)

The call to stand here and now “on trial for hope in the promise” in whatever may be the “terror of the night…and the destruction that wastes at noonday” (Ps. 91:5–6) when all is said and done, it seems to me, is the one word that is most needful.
Christopher Morse is a native Virginian with ties both to the Tidewater area of coastal Virginia and the Blue Ridge Mountains of the Shenandoah Valley where his family spent the summers when he was growing up. Most of his adult life he has lived in Manhattan.

He received his BA in philosophy from Randolph-Macon College and his BD (now M.Div.) degree from Yale Divinity School. Following his ordination in the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church he was appointed as pastor from 1962-67 of St. Mark’s United Methodist Church in Hampton, during which time he also served as the first civic chair of the newly formed interracial Hampton Community Action Agency, part of the Johnson Administration’s War on Poverty.

In 1967 he was awarded a Masland Fellowship by Union in order to complete an STM degree in philosophical theology. Encouraged to remain on for his Ph.D., Morse subsequently taught his first year at Duke Divinity School in 1970-71 and then returned to Union where he became part of the UTS faculty in Systematic Theology in 1974. In 1994 he was named the first recipient of the newly endowed Dietrich Bonhoeffer Chair in Theology and Ethics, a position he held until his recent retirement in June 2013 when he became emeritus.

As expected of Union faculty, his speaking engagements in both academic and church settings have been numerous and international. He is active in scholarly associations, including a past presidency of the American Theological Society and a Co-Convenership of the New Haven Theological Discussion Group. In addition to published articles and book chapters Morse is the author of *The Logic of Promise in Moltmann’s Theology*, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, and *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News*. 
ST Courses Offered in Theology and Ethics as Curriculum of *The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Chair in Theology and Ethics* by Christopher Morse

ST 104 Foundations in Christian Theology II (Major doctrines of ecumenical Christianity, offered annually)

ST 316 Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theological Legacy

ST 330 Slavery and Race in American Theology

ST 341 The Bible and Theology

ST 359 Karl Barth: The Early Writings

ST 361 Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*

ST 371 Christian Dogmatics and American Politics

ST 415 Thomas Aquinas

ST 422 Friedrich Schleiermacher’s Dogmatics

ST 441 John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

ST 451 Apocalyptic and Dogmatics

ST 458 Heaven and Hell in Christian Testimony

ST 470 Dogmatics and Ethics

ST 493 Dogmatics as a Discipline
A Selective Bibliography

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