Heaven, Then and Now

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I remember, as a small boy, telling my parents that before I was born, I had been in heaven and had chosen them to be my parents. My father laughed heartily at this. In retrospect, it is clear that Platonism was not strong in my family, but it was inevitable that when later I came to do a doctorate I did it on pre-existence language in Christology because Christ had been there too and we had discussed my parentage, at some length, I remember. I have no idea where my childish fantasy came from: it may be a common idea among religious children to think that they were somewhere *before* they are here and that they are going somewhere *after* they have been here.

Theologians will rightly twitch at the words 'before' and 'after' because God, eternity and heaven are neither before nor after time. But no amount of theological flossing can remove 'before', 'after', 'above' and 'below' from our lips: these are the coordinates of the grid that children and theologians use. Heaven will always lie above, before, ahead and after where we are now: the metaphors of time and space are applied to what is not in time or space. Or, as they might say in Star Trek, 'Heaven's in time and space, Jim, but not as we know it'. Why? Because 'Heaven is supernatural *and* natural'[1], and if it's natural, it must be spaced and timed, but differently. On a parallel with that wonderful little phrase describing the transcendent otherness of God – 'God differs differently' – so heaven differs *differently*, because it is what this spaced, timed creation looks like when God's work is finished.

Can we hazard a guess as to what the difference of heaven might be? Well, the flow and sequence of time will unravel into a completed simultaneity of all moments – of which perhaps music is the nearest analogue – and the extension of space will collapse into the immediate omnipresence of all things to one another because every thing will be in deep God.

Please forgive that little phrase, 'deep God': it's meant to say that the mystery of there being anything at all is that God makes non-God be and this foundational self-gift will not come back to God fruitless: the completion, the fruitful autumn, of this divine self-gift is heaven when God's action will permeate the creation with its radiance and

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charity, at last, will flow through with the ease of goodness itself. But just as we cannot specify positively the nature of God's self-gift now – although we result from it and are borne in existence and grace by it, we have no direct grasp of it — *a fortiori* the nature of that self-gift in its final shape is not known to us. The only clue we may have, and significantly we can receive this only as the teaching of the prophetic Church, is the resurrection of Christ: what he is, the creation will be and has begun to be in the person of the Blessed Virgin. The Risen Christ is in 'deep God': that is the prophecy we have of heaven. The Russian proverb, that we are born in an open field and die in a dark wood, should be completed by saying that we will end in the depths of God, flooded by the divine light.

Our imagination - shaped by the grid of before, after, above, below, and images of light, depth, radiance — is also haunted by two archetypal patterns: first that of the end-state of things, towards which everything is moving with the arrow of time. This, of course, is familiar to us in its Hegelian variations, and until 1989 we knew the socialist earthly paradises spawned by a politicised version of this. How strange that we think that time is the mediator of blessings and fullness. All that time will bring us is individual death and cosmic entropy, the cooling of the sun, the extinction of the conditions of life on planet Earth and a cold darkness. Why trust Chronos to be of any help to us? Secondly, there is the circular or elliptical pattern of *exitus-reditus*, the world proceeding from and returning to God and sustained completely in that outward and return journey by God's expressive and unitive action. We exist in the flow of the divine act and the return, when the creation will be fully aligned by God's love, 'like a wheel in perfect balance turning', (*Paradiso*, XXXIII, 143) will be the entry into beatitude of those who love God.

But if this is the map and grid of how we think of heaven, the Christian tradition in general has two tendencies: on the one hand, it wants to say that the condition of heaven is effected by God, and is not an intrinsic property in created nature. Our condition in heaven takes place *per virtutem divinam*, not *per naturam*. But at the same time, it wrestles with the question of how this is grounded in the ontology of the human being. Is there something about us that makes it possible, indeed necessary, for us to be raised? If there is union now, it is purposive and intensive. And you can see how necessary is a doctrine of grace 'now' in order to deal with what we will be 'then'. (By the way, Cyprian advises women not to wear face powder in this life lest God fail to recognize them when they appear without it in the resurrection. A little forewarning may be of some help.)

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The difficulties, of course, centre on the second of these points — not the one about face powder, but the one about the nature of the self. From the earliest centuries, Christian thought is in a field of binary tension caused by two approaches:

The first, associated with Origen, comes from Paul's treatment of the spiritual body in 1 Corinthians 15.42ff: 'it is sown a physical (or psychical) body (*soma psuchikon*), it is raised a spiritual body (*soma pneumatikon*) If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body... flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable'. The analogy with seed suggests, as Caroline Walker Bynum puts it, 'a sense of body as an unfolding internal principle that might flower in an expression of self utterly different from the self of earth'.[2] The physical body's principle of unity is maintained as it becomes a spiritual body: the earthly qualities of the self, changeable and in constant flux even now, will be put away when a new body emerges. In Origen's words, 'the very thing which was once being characterised in the flesh will be characterised in the spiritual body'.[3] The question, of course, is the nature of 'the very thing'. In the heavenly condition, the soul, the self, that now informs carbon and hydrogen and oxygen will then inform a different form of material body. And you can see black holes appearing in the galaxy of this discourse, into which light, language and comprehension disappear. You can also see why Origen's commitment to the resurrection of our present flesh has been constantly doubted.

The second approach says that in heaven we will be a 'flesh and blood' body that will be a re-assemblage of what we are now. Hence all those Patristic and early medieval discussions about how severed limbs, mutilated fragments, bits devoured by animals and cannibals, hair, foreskins and nail-clippings will be put together again, but in the condition of agility, clarity, subtlety and impassibility (the qualities of light itself). And you have Aquinas, very properly, considering whether our digestive system and sexual organs will operate in the transformed physical condition of heaven, and to what purpose? (*Contra Gentes*, IV, 83) This approach feels the need to affirm a continuity of personal matter in the risen, heavenly state. Just as every particle of Christ's body ascends and is glorified, so it will be with us. Unlike Origen, this approach holds firmly to a material continuity in the bodies of heaven (and hell).

The tension between these two approaches is never resolved because they correspond to the need we have to say that in heaven, our condition will be *different* but it will still be *our* condition and

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therefore the self will have in heaven an embodied expressiveness. Souls need bodies because only in that way can they be personal and social; only as embodied souls can we love 'now' and 'then'. Solomon tells Dante in Canto XIV of the *Paradiso* that souls in heaven yearn to welcome back the body of earth: like white-burning coal, whose radiance is visible in its outer flames,

> so this effulgence that contains us now
> will be surpassed in brilliance by the flesh
> that for so long has laid beneath the ground;
>
> nor will such light be difficult to bear,
> the organs of our bodies will be strengthened
> and ready for whatever gives us joy.'
>
> So quick and eager to cry out "Amen!"
> were both those choirs that it was very clear
> how much they yearned to have their bodies back –
>
> not for themselves as much as for their mothers,
> their fathers, and for all those they held dear
> before they turned into eternal flame. (*Paradiso*, XIV, 55-66)

You will notice that much of this discussion thinks of heaven as ahead of us, a future condition towards which we are going but to which we do not yet have access. But there is another important tradition that thinks of heaven as accessible to human beings now, a tradition of spiritual experience of heaven, in its earliest form an ascending visionary experience of the throne of God, such as you find in the *Merkabah* tradition of Isaiah 6, Ezechiel 1, Daniel 7, Enoch 14 and the New Testament book of Revelation. This throne mysticism is, of course, drawn from the worship in the Jerusalem Temple in which the High Priest enters behind the veil into the presence of God, and participates in the angelic worship of God. This is the principal root of Judaism that flows into Christianity and makes possible the rapid development of Christology, a root that may have fed Jesus' own sense of himself as the companion of God's throne who is to perform the great and final atonement of the world's sins. But our concern here is not Christology, but the view of heaven as present and accessible.

If I were to identify the most profound visual portrayal of heaven, it would be the great Throne of Grace images of the Trinity, such as van der Goes' painting in the National Gallery of Scotland or the great painting by El Greco, in which the Father bears the body of the crucified Son on his lap and breathes the Spirit of love upon him.

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This is the heart of the distinctively Christian interpretation of heaven, that in the mystery of God there is a dynamic movement of kenotic self-gift that is decisive for the condition of the creation. Because of the self-offering of the Son of God in the barren wilderness outside of God, we have come to 'Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven and to God the judge of all' (Heb 12.22f).[4]

Could it be that Christian thought about heaven is at its best when it stays close to this tradition of heaven as a present reality, accessible through prayer, worship and grace, and that it becomes strangely sterile when it loses touch with this current and projects heaven into the future? Our liturgy at present is very unheavenly, yet part of the power of the Roman Canon is that it depends upon our having present contact with heaven in the act of making this solemn prayer. I have felt no devotion, not even a flicker of piety, when the fourth Eucharistic Prayer is used, but the Roman Canon's petition to God to 'take this sacrifice to your altar in heaven' is something I pray with increasing devotion.

Let me return to an earlier remark that if we want to know how to think about heaven we need to focus on our doctrine of grace, and in particular on the yearning in us that grace brings about, a yearning that is already a possession of heaven because it is God eliciting from us a desire that is already union. Joy generates more desire, and erotic desire and pleasure is the physical correlate of union with God. (Sex is important to us because we desire God, but most sexually active people do not know this.) Caroline Walker Bynum points to fascinating currents in medieval women's writings about heaven, centring on their sense of the body as the locus of yearning for God, speaking 'over and over again of "soul and body," profoundly anxious for the comfort of both' by God. 'The embodied self Marguerite of Oingt or Mechtild of Magdeburg imagined before God's throne found its deepest expression not (as Tertullian and Jerome had done) in incorruptible or impartible matter but in hungry and impassible love.'[5] Marguerite speaks of a vision of a sweetness flowing from God in rivers that induce and quench, and induce further desire:

> The saints will be completely within their Creator as fish within the sea; they will drink to satiety, without getting tired and without in any way diminishing the water.... They will drink and eat the great sweetness of God. And the more they eat, the more their hunger will grow. And this sweetness cannot decrease any more or any less than can the water of the sea.[6]

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When Marguerite sees Christ, she sees a body that is so transparent that Christ's soul can be seen within it; not only his soul, but the angels and saints are on or in his body; and she sees herself in that body as though it were a mirror. Speaking in the third person, she writes:

> She seemed to see Jesus Christ, so glorious that no human heart could conceive of him. He was clothed in the glorious garment which he took from the noble body of Our Lady.... From his glorious wounds poured forth a clarity so bright that one was astonished by it.... This glorious body was so noble and so transparent that one saw very clearly the soul inside of it. This body was so noble that one could see oneself there more clearly than in a mirror...so beautiful that one saw the angels and the saints, as if they were painted on it.
>
> Now imagine His great beauty, so great that He has granted to all the angels and all the saints who are his members, that they may be as clear as the sun.... He has given to his friends an agility so great that in an instant they can go wherever they wish.... He has made them so free, subtle and immaterial that they can enter and depart through closed doors, without any impediment, as Jesus Christ did after the resurrection.... They can never be sick, nor burdened, nor suffering, neither in soul nor in body.... He has made his friends of such noble matter that they can no longer corrupt nor grow old, but they will live with him forever. [7]

This is a remarkable vision of the body of Christ, the risen and ecclesial body, as the locus of heaven; perhaps the 'heavenly man' of 1 Corinthians 15.49, in whom all are, what shall we say? 'elected', 'raised', 'fulfilled', 'transformed', 'carried'; a still wounded body because it bears the marks of atonement, but from its wounds light, not blood, now flows; a body that is translucent, reflective, radiant, and that is filled with the darting presence of angels and saints. With writings like this, you can't tell whether what is spoken about is present or future – indeed the question becomes a silly one because this simply is the body of Christ, bearing all and sanctifying all, the locus of union with God and therefore of fulfilment. What is seen by Marguerite is the only heaven there is, because if God makes all things in the expressiveness of his Word, then the embodied Word bears the creation in its union with God. Being in Christ is heaven, and Marguerite and we her readers are already there.

It may be the case that, as I imagined as a small boy, my first and last contact with heaven was before I was born, but I no longer hold that fantasy. Perhaps I have been in heaven because whenever God

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has acted in my soul, that has been heaven; when in the Mass I have felt supported by saints around me, that has been heaven; when I have seen grace work in others, that too has been heaven; when charity has flowed through me, that has been heaven; when I have desired God, when I have been drawn into Christ's offering of himself that has been heaven and will be heaven because that is the life of God enfolding me. The difficulty is not that we can't see what it will be like after death; it's that we now only haltingly know what is going on now. We are perhaps already in 'deep God'.

1 J.B.Russell, *A History of Heaven*, (Princeton University Press, 1997), 187.
2 Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity 200–1336* (Columbia University Press, 1995), 238. I am indebted throughout this paper to Bynum's superb study.
3 Origen, Fragment on Psalm 1. 5, in Methodius, *De resurrectione*, bk 1, chaps 22–3; quoted in Bynum, 66.
4 I refer here to Gerard Manley Hopkins' Retreat notes of 1881: 'Why did the Son of God go forth from the Father not only in the eternal and intrinsic procession of the Trinity but also by an extrinsic and less than eternal, let us say aeonian one? To give God glory and that by sacrifice, sacrifice offered in the barren wilderness outside of God, as the children of Israel were led into the wilderness to offer sacrifice. This sacrifice and this outward procession is a consequence and shadow of the procession of the Trinity, from which mystery sacrifice takes its rise,' C. Phillips (ed.), *The Oxford Authors: Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 288–9.
5 Bynum, 329, 334.
6 335.
7 336.

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