

***What a Modern Catholic Believes about Heaven and Hell. John Shea. Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1972.***

Introduction

“Heaven and hell touch upon sober truths which the Catholic, although he may not want to look at them can hardly avoid. Heaven and hell may no longer be an obsession but they can never be sluffed off as insignificant.”

Reasons for difficulties with the symbols:

- Personal = contribution to neurosis;
- Historical = contribution to exploitation;
- Scientific = three-tier universe mentality.

“This book. . . is an attempt to *expose the intentionality of the symbols of heaven and hell.*”

Neither a ‘theological undertaker’ nor a ‘theological wonderworker.’

Chapter ONE: The Enduring Hope

HOPE:

- Drives man relentlessly into the future;
- Entices man with possibilities;
- Speaks to man of transcendence;
- Lures man into action.

Man through and through hungers toward something which is not yet.

Ultimately, all man’s hopes run headlong into death; but whatever man is all about, he rebels against oblivion. And so faced with the evidence of the grave he audaciously hopes through death and beyond time. He hopes for a transcendent life.

This hope is symbolized in various ways:

- Biological = living-on in one’s descendents;
- Social = living-on in one’s ‘contributions;’
- Experiential = living so intensely that time is temporarily suspended.

But does not the hope in man dare more than this?

Emerson: “The blazing evidence of immortality is our dissatisfaction with any other solution.”

Hope, *contra* ‘wish’: “Hope is *rooted in the actuality of things*; it discerns the embryonic presence of the possible in the midst of the ordinary and helps bring it to fruition.”

If personal immortality is a true hope and not a mere wish, in some way it must be intimated in the experience of men.

*Symbol-making* ability (necessitated by man's relative lack of genetic instincts) is the distinctive trait of man and is the foundation of culture.

But as soon as man has created a cultural form, his urge to create *calls him to go beyond*.

Because transcendence is built into the very fabric of the human life-style a personal, transcendent fulfillment is not a mere wish but a genuine hope.

"Traditionally the experiences of creative love, the religious experience, and the experience of injustice and suffering have focused man's attention on a transcendent destiny."

- Creative love: to say 'I love you' is to say 'You shall not die' (Marcel).

Is this wish to confer immortality a cruel irony or in it does man touch on a truth and power stronger than death – the power of love?

- Religious experience: in this experience the person comes into contact with the more, the mystery, the whole, the encompassing, the depth dimension of ordinary life.

Religious experience generates the conviction that God will sustain man through death and so heightens and encourages man's hope for a future which will be transcendent and fulfilling (cf. Rom 8.38-39).

- Injustice/suffering: rooted in trust that the goodness of God and the meaningfulness of life must ultimately prevail.

"Man's outrage at the possible extinction of death issues neither from fantasy nor fear but is structured into his healthiest experiences."

## Chapter TWO: The Lord of the Resurrection and the Gift of the Spirit

The Christian vision of reality rises and falls with the *resurrection*.

But what is given in the gospel accounts is the *involved language of faith*, language struggling to express the early church's experience of the continued yet transformed presence of Jesus.

The *Kingdom of God* = the *central organizing motif of Jesus' preaching*.

"The call to faith is a summons to have confidence and *trust* in that last power which holds human life, to give yourself over to the fatherhood of God."

Resurrection:

- Confirmation of Jesus' witness during life;
- Answer to the question posed by his death.

All that is given in the resurrection accounts is the apostolic witness to their experience which is an encounter with the crucified Jesus who is *the same yet different*.

The early church's experience of the continued yet transformed presence of Jesus was *interpreted* in the light of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition whose central tenet is the expectation of the resurrection of the dead.

This metaphor of resurrection crystallized the disciples' experience and makes it communicable to the Hebrew people of that time.

The resurrection looks 'backward' to confirm the witness of the pre-Easter Jesus, and 'forward' to anticipate the resurrection of all men.

"The resurrection of Jesus heralded a new life-style, one fraught with the eschatological tension of being constantly critiqued by the perfection of the coming kingdom."

With the delay of the parousia, a third meaning is elaborated: the resurrected Lord gives to the church his Spirit as a pledge that he will come again (cf. Rom 8.11).

"The union of Christ with the Christian is the theological unraveling of the Christian's hope that he personally is bound up with the salvific destiny of Christ."

"The Spirit yearns for the kingdom; its whole nature is homeward bound; its task is the resurrection of a new humanity."

The Spirit engenders in man a *passion for the absent*.

Symbols: a consuming fire / a driving wind.

"The Spirit of God is the pulling, pushing, prodding reality which seeks to bring about in the individual Christian and the whole race that humanity which has been realized in its risen Lord."

The presence of the Spirit pressures a man into the awareness of his inauthentic existence and calls him to a new authentic existence.

Two movements:

- Negation / creation;
- Criticism / call;
- Repent / believe.

"Wherever the Spirit of God is at work all things human are reappraised and called forward."

### Chapter THREE: Symbols of Transformation

Our age is, at the same time, deeply religious and *symbolically illiterate*.

Literal language and science are established as the criteria of all language and truth.

But 'religious language' is *imaginal* and poetic; it does not point to exterior objects but expresses and explores the depths of human existence.

Tillich: religious language is incurably symbolic and when used literally, even in good faith, it discredits itself.

*“Religious language functions symbolically when it expresses, interprets, orders and illuminates experience.”*

The ‘truth’ of a religious symbol is in terms of *adequacy*: does it faithfully and as completely as possible convey the faith experience and its implications?

The symbolization of (Western) man’s hope for future life has taken two dominant expressions:

1. ‘*immortality of the soul*’;
2. ‘*resurrection of the dead*’.

These symbols are appraised by whether or not they correspond and make plausible the hope for a future life which man experiences.

Popular Catholic thought has often engaged in a *dualism* in which death is viewed as the ‘friend of the soul’ and the ‘enemy of the body’.

This idea does not correspond with either modern or biblical anthropology.

*Man is a psychosomatic unity, an indivisible whole.*

Biblical: “Body is man as a concrete existing being; soul is man as alive and human; spirit is man as having his source in God; heart is man as active and engaged.”

“unitary actuality.”

Ergo, if Christian hope for a future life is to be realistically symbolized, it should not be imagined as an independent, separated soul which at a future date will be united to a resurrected body but as the *emergence of the whole man into the fullness of life*.

Death, accordingly, affects the whole person – it is, therefore, an *ultimate threat* to man’s existence.

Jesus ‘trembles and is agonized’ (Mk 14.36).

This contrasts the calmness with which the dualist (e.g., Socrates) approaches death.

“Unitary man, to the marrow, is mortal. His hope for future life does not stem from his inherently immortal soul but from an enduring relationship with God. It is God, present to him in life, who sustains him in death. Unitary man hopes for a future life not because of a private core of indestructibility but because of the graciousness of God.”

‘Personal resurrection’ emphasizes the *transformation of the self*; the ‘Resurrection of Man’ is the *final God-shaped consummation of race and cosmos*.

These intertwined symbols hold in view the relationship of one man to all men; they express and seek out each man’s real identity in community.

A transcendent future worth hoping for: men finding fullness in communion with each other and union with God.

We may speak of such matters only with great *humility*: "God's reality runs in, through, under, but mostly beyond mans' vision."

#### Chapter FOUR: The Impact of the Future Life

The nagging American mind forever asks the pragmatic consequences of belief – So what?

The question forces an exploration of the relationship between how a man believes and how he acts.

- Belief without behavior = hypocrisy.
- Behavior without belief = legalism.

In a properly reciprocal relationship, belief legitimates behavior, and behavior reinforces belief.

"Religious beliefs are symbols which relate man to the deepest dimension of his existence, to its wholeness and ultimacy, and direct him to understand all his relationships in the light of this ultimate relationship."

"The structure of Christian ethics begins by living within the symbols of belief, communing with them, and so coming to a new vision from which new action will blow."

In the Marxist critique, 'heaven' is considered to be an opiate, a narcotic which lulls man into acceptance of his present misery by promising him future happiness.

Marx viewed the psychological effects of belief in a future life as being apathy and resignation.

From this critique, Christians must learn that any notion of heaven or hell or kingdom of God must not imply a devaluation of the present world.

In popular Catholic tradition, heaven became the reward for good deeds and hell the punishment for evil deeds: 'sanctions'.

This extrinsicist motivation for ethical behavior serves to keep many from attaining truly internalized moral development.

"This life and the future life are not two unbridgeable, self-contained worlds but interlocking realities."

When heaven and hell are understood to be embryonically present here and now, they will aid man in accepting responsibility for the earth and insure the internal worth of moral action.

"Heaven and hell is 'language' about the future consequences of present decisions."

"Talk of the future encourages human freedom and demands human responsibility. In this context, heaven and hell do not direct man to a separated other-world, but reveal the depth of

this world. They locate the forces of creation and destruction and ask the Marxist question – by your actions are you creating a heaven or forging a hell?”

“Heaven and hell are the consistent outgrowth of creative or destructive life-styles.”

“if we are willing to learn from past history, heaven and hell will not be used as instruments of fear and desire, tools of manipulation, or places of escape. Heaven and hell might become cultic symbols of the stark possibilities of man’s future and the cosmic significance of his ethical decisions.

#### Chapter FIVE: The Possibility of Loss

“Hell breaks through naïve optimism with the possibility of destruction. *Man is responsible*. His life is a project and his future is open. Hell is the discomforting reminder that man *freely collaborates with his destiny*.”

Hell refuses to allow man the self-pity of determinism. It forever pushes the radical outlook of Jesus: ‘My friend, this day God calls you. Are you responding?’

There is massive *confusion* in Catholic circles concerning sin and confession; with this confusion, the once secure place of hell in the Catholic consciousness is shaken.

(“Perhaps it is because in this century of concentration camps and mindless slaughter man knows too much of hell to prolong it into an everlasting afterlife.”)

There is a strong ‘conservative’ strain in the Catholic tradition. The Christian is an incurable ‘saver.’ He drags his whole past with him into the future. He would move quicker if he scrapped many of the things he carried but he cannot bear to lose an alternate perspective or a possible truth. An ancient religious practice or a dusty doctrine may capture and communicate an undying aspect of the human situation. At the present moment its meaning may be obscure but that does not mean its truth is dead. The Christian hoards wisdom; he is reluctant to part with anything.

There are two common reinterpretations of ‘hell’ currently:

- *Conditional immortality*: hell is nothingness, a ‘falling out of existence’.

“Man is immortal on the condition that he freely accepts God’s power which brings him into the fullness of life.”

This merges with the idea of hell as the outgrowth of sin, which is basically the dehumanization of man, turning him inward, backward, and toward death.

- *Universalism*: all are ‘eventually saved’.

“Since God is love, he saves man; since God is omnipotent love, he will save all men. Universalism is a logical conclusion from the omnipotent love of God. Hell is interpreted as a temporary form of God’s love and man’s disobedience. It will last just as long as men are disobedient. But God’s sovereign love will eventually bring all men to salvation, for God’s love is stronger than man’s disobedience.”

A significant critique of 'universalism' is that it *does not take man's freedom seriously*; man is virtually dragged into salvation.

The universalist replies that this criticism rests on a faulty notion of freedom; true freedom is not the ability to choose between salvation and damnation, but is rather the assurance of being free to act in the world which comes from being ultimately accepted in love.

But this position does seem to *trivialize* evil.

God's acceptance is 'paradoxical': His initial acceptance frees man to hear the word of critique and respond to the call forward, but man's response is a definite, determining factor in whether this relationship grows or atrophies.

"Salvation is involved in man's free, fundamental response to the invitation from the sacred."

Tillich: man can refuse "to accept his own acceptance."

"The terror in man's freedom is that he can pervert it."

"A stubborn, realistic view of human freedom forces (the Christian) to argue that hell is always a possibility; yet at the same time he hopes and prays that the kingdom of God will embrace every man who ever lived."

#### Chapter EIGHT: The Pearly Gates and the Fiery Furnace

"Man is a storyteller, a spinner of tales, a weaver of worlds."

Despite man's meager knowledge about death, accordingly, his hopes and fears urge him to talk of what is beyond.

The modern Catholic must cultivate a certain agnosticism and at the same time understand the projective language of his hope.

Man *imagines* heaven and hell in order to secure them in his *memory* and be able to *communicate* their truth to succeeding generations.

Danger arises when the literal mind moves in to mistake *poetry* for science, *metaphor* for geography.

Heaven and hell, like all Christian symbols, must be accompanied by *interpretation*.

Two principles of interpretation:

1. Discontinuity: the future life is radically different from this life.

Wittgenstein: "Whereupon one cannot speak, thereon must be silent."

2. Continuity: a certain sameness arises from the fact that the future life is a fulfillment.

Ergo, a man's descriptions of heaven and hell are primarily statements of his hopes and fears, his values and anxieties.

There is a strong cultural base to these conceptions; e.g.,  
"Dante's heaven and hell is a complete guide to medieval morality."

Every conception of heaven and hell reflects cultural values.

E.g., "When time and history are viewed not as terrors (classical) but as mediums of human development (modern), heaven will not be viewed as eternal and static perfection. Heaven will be a time of continued growth and moral progress."

Heaven conceived as 'eternal' reflects the cultural ideal of static perfection.

Heaven conceived as 'temporal' reflects the cultural ideal of human development.

Where interpersonal relationships and family ties are highly valued, heaven is a family and friend reunion.

"The future life must be the continued existence of intelligence, memory, and experience."

Cf. the Christian notion of the 'fellowship of the saints'.

"Heaven is not the elimination of the earthly community for the sterile and sole companionship of *ens perfectissimum*."

The MESSIANIC BANQUET: "... where human friendship and love are highly praised, heaven will always have the 'loaf of bread, jug of wine, and thou' aspect."

For the man of learning, heaven is the time when his finite capacity for truth will be filled to overflowing.

'Rest' became a metaphor for future life in an age when the majority of men worked the soil from dawn to dusk and barely survived.

"In a world of moral ambiguity, where wrong prospers and right goes unrewarded, heaven and hell introduce clarity and order."

"If heaven is described as everything man desires and the fulfillment of his true nature, hell is everything he fears and the destruction of his true nature."

"The truth of the symbolic representations of heaven and hell lies in their ability to express and make real the true nature of man's hopes and fears. As for that death which all move toward hesitantly, PERHAPS THE MOST USEFUL VIRTUE MAN CAN TAKE WITH HIM IS A CAPACITY FOR SURPRISE."