

THE MYTH OF HEAVEN:
DEMYTHOLOGIZING AND REMYTHOLOGIZING
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- (1) Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearsing the Gospel as News*. New York: T & T Clark, 2010. x + 148 pp. \$18.77
- (2) John A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God: A Study of the Christian Doctrine and the Last Things—Special Edition*. Edited by Robin Parry. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011. 163 pp. \$23.00

Theology today finds itself compelled to take a fresh look at the problem of heaven. The past decade has seen two striking developments: (1) the development of a more rigorous Pauline apocalyptic theology and (2) the rise of an evangelical universalism. This essay attempts to bring the two into conversation. Central to both is what we might call the problem of heaven. Put differently: what is the hope proper to Christian faith? I will assess this question in conversation with Christopher Morse’s highly acclaimed work, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, and the special edition republication of John A. T. Robinson’s classic work, *In the End, God*. The latter is edited by Robin Parry—who also writes under the pseudonym, Gregory MacDonald—the central figure in the current project of evangelical universalism (hereafter EU). I will advance the following thesis: both works engage in what we might call the “demythologizing” of heaven, but this needs to be augmented by a kind of “remythologizing” of our heaven-talk.

Heaven has to be demythologized in the dual sense of being (a) *deliteralized* as a present existential encounter with and obedience to Christ (in contrast to a post-mortem destination), and (b) *apocalyptically actualized* as the movement of God’s saving action. In carrying out this necessary task of demythologizing heaven, Morse and the apocalyptic theologians need to more directly address themselves to the universalistic implications of their insights, while Robinson—and especially the evangelical universalists who are reading him—need to address the apocalyptic interpretation of scripture. Each in isolation leaves us with only a truncated account of Christian hope in heaven. In the case of the evangelical universalists, the account remains too mythological; that is to say, their account of heaven is not apocalyptic (or demythologized) enough. At the same time, however, there is a need to remythologize heaven, but not by bringing back the ancient myths of a three-

tiered universe. Christian theology needs to appropriate the recent insights of work in the sociology of myth, specifically that of Bruce Lincoln. I will conclude by arguing that Christian talk of heaven has to be simultaneously demythologized (in its ancient metaphysical form) and remythologized (in a modern sociopolitical form). Heaven is a myth that mobilizes the community of God's people as an embodied agent of hope in a disenchanting world.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING HEAVEN I: HEAVEN AS THE COURSE OF GOD'S APOCALYPTIC

Christopher Morse advances the provocative claim that the gospel news of heaven needs to be heard anew. The "literal" or "univocal" understanding of heaven as an actual place where the departed go is a mishearing of the gospel. The univocal approach understands the biblical talk of heaven to be the same as talk about any other occurrence. Heaven in this hearing refers to an actual location, whether an invisible, spiritual home or a coming physical kingdom. A univocal approach is tone-deaf to the multivocality of scripture, and thus it misses the way scripture's apocalyptic witness to the "heavenly forthcoming" of God that is "at hand" but not "in hand" cannot be rightly heard in the same way as reports about other events and realities. "Taking the news of heaven literally," he says, "shows itself . . . not to be trustworthy or in keeping with the Gospel message."¹

In order to redress this problem, he looks at three other hearings of this message. Each of these is closer to the truth than the last. The first is the existentialist hearing of heaven as myth as represented by the work of Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich. Morse deserves thanks for giving Bultmann and Tillich a more charitable interpretation than is often the case in contemporary theology. He understands demythologizing as a "deliteralizing" of our speaking about God and heaven,² and thus it renders a necessary service to theology. But he criticizes Bultmann for dispensing with the mythical language altogether, while Tillich succeeds in giving the mythical language a positive symbolic function in his theology. Morse criticizes both for imposing an "alien framework" upon the hearing of heaven, and thus for missing the narrative and promissory aspects that he privileges.³ The third and fourth hearings present the approaches of Karl Barth and Jürgen

¹ Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 37.

² *Ibid.*, 38.

³ *Ibid.*, 40.

Moltmann in their presentations of heaven as “saga” and “promise.” Barth’s saga is a way of affirming the newsworthy character of heaven as an “actual event” in history, but not a “factual event” that can be measured.⁴ Morse interprets Barth as a proto-postliberal in the order of Hans Frei; he reads Barth’s distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* in terms of Frei’s concept of “realistic narrative.”⁵ But it is Moltmann’s promissory account that receives the most approval for its redefinition of the gospel from news about a past occurrence to news about a present and future advent replete with an eschatological and theopolitical exigency.

Morse seeks to take seriously Bultmann’s decisive question to Barth in a letter from 1952, where Bultmann challenges Barth to come clean about his understanding of reality: “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.”⁶ This is a restatement of the same basic challenge posed in his 1950 essay on “The Problem of Hermeneutics”:

The demand to make of Barth is that he give an account of his own conceptuality. He grants my claim, for example, that the resurrection of Jesus is not a historical fact that could be established as such by means of the science of history. But it does not follow from this, he thinks, that the resurrection did not occur . . . I ask, What does Barth understand here by ‘story’ and ‘happened’? What kind of an event is it of which one can say that ‘it far more certainly really happened in time than all the things that the historians as such can establish’? It is perfectly clear that Barth interprets the statements of scripture by means of a conceptuality that he brings with him. But what is the source and meaning of this conceptuality?⁷

⁴ Ibid., 41-42.

⁵ For an interpretation of Barth that contrasts more sharply with that of Frei, see Bruce McCormack’s essay, “Beyond Nonfoundational and Postmodern Readings of Barth,” in Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 109-65.

⁶ Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, *Barth-Bultmann Letters, 1922-1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspert, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 87.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 69-93 (89). Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben*

Unfortunately, Barth never responded to this question directly, though the bulk of *Church Dogmatics IV* is an implicit attempt. To his credit, Morse decides to answer Bultmann's challenge, and he does so with the tools of Pauline apocalypticism, specifically the work of his colleague at Union Seminary in New York, J. Louis Martyn. Apocalyptic here refers to "an incalculable cosmic inbreaking" in which "what is imminent is not immanent."⁸ He then develops this with the help of Barth's often-overlooked concepts of "divinatory imagination" and "faithful disbelief." In agreement with Bultmann, heaven is a reality that cannot be heard literally, but neither, so Morse claims, can it be heard simply as dispensable myth. Instead, it is a reality that "involves poetic sensibility" and "parabolic renderings."⁹ The gospel talk of heaven refers to the apocalyptic *action* and *advent* of God, what he earlier calls the "course of God's forthcoming."¹⁰ It speaks of "nothing less than God taking a new course of action in coming events to make the kind of home with us that will ever prove to be the right home for us."¹¹ Lest we think of this in terms of the literal notion of a "heavenly home" all too often sentimentalized within Christian spirituality, Morse is very careful to also speak of this divine course of action as "a *basileia* at hand."¹² Our home is a new theopolitical community engaged in the work of discerning the direction of God's invasive movement.

The linguistic play between "at hand" and "in hand" is central to the entire argument of the book. The fact that heaven is "at hand" means, for Morse, that it is a happening which is present and real but not under our control; it is an unanticipatable event that is "not of [or from] this world."¹³ The language of "at-handedness" is an apocalyptic version of Barth's dialectical notion of "wholly otherness." The basic point is the same: the reign of God in Christ is not an observable fact in the world—not then, or now, or in the future—but an incalculable divine action that inaugurates a new age in the midst of the old for those with the eyes and ears of faith. Heaven is a "reality" for faith alone, and only those who have what Martyn

und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze, 4 vols. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1933-65), 2:211-35 (234); hereafter *GuV*.

⁸ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

calls the “bifocal vision” of faith are able to encounter it and live according to its provocations. God’s action in the advent of Christ is apocalyptic in the sense that “it is not visible, demonstrable, or provable in the categories and with the means of perception native to ‘everyday’ existence. . . . The inbreak of the new creation is itself revelation, apocalypse.” The invasion of divine grace causes an “epistemological crisis” for those whom it encounters, since the world they inhabit now appears in an entirely new light. The one confronted by the apocalypse sees “both the evil age and the new creation *simultaneously*.”¹⁴

Morse’s book—which touches on much more than this brief account can possibly do justice to—is a brief but brilliant exercise in what we might call apocalyptic dogmatics. It renders a much-needed service to the church. Even so, it seems to me that the two areas of demythologizing and universal salvation deserve further attention; the book discusses the former repeatedly, but it is largely silent about the latter. First, we must ask, is Morse’s reading of Bultmann a fair one? The situation is complex, and a complete response would go far beyond the bounds of this essay. Several different aspects have to be disentangled, including: (a) the aspect of deliteralizing that Morse affirms as necessary, (b) the claim that Bultmann imposes an “alien framework” and “existential ontology” upon scripture,¹⁵ and (c) the claim that demythologizing interprets heaven “too exclusively in terms of the self in disregard of a wider social and political world.”¹⁶ A full defense of Bultmann would argue that (a) is only a small and potentially misleading aspect of demythologizing, (b) is a common but mistaken criticism, and (c) is a valid complaint but not a strike against the hermeneutic itself, which remains valid in its opposition to the construction of casuistic political worldviews. In lieu of providing such a defense, I will restrict my comments to the problem of myth and the theological meaning of demythologizing. What I hope to show is that the constructive theological position put forward by Morse is an exercise in demythologizing, as Bultmann understands it. To demythologize heaven is to speak of it in a Pauline-apocalyptic mode.

Morse misconstrues Bultmann’s use of myth-talk when he says that it “obviously include[s] all news of the acts of God or of any agency reported

¹⁴ J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 104.

¹⁵ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 40. The word “existential” ought to be “existentialist.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

to derive from heaven.”¹⁷ Accordingly, to demythologize heaven, on Morse’s reading, means to cut off all speech about an apocalyptic divine action, leaving one with the kernel of existentialism. For a more accurate picture of what Bultmann means, we can turn to his 1961 essay “On the Problem of Demythologizing.”¹⁸ He begins by saying that myth speaks about a “reality” (*Wirklichkeit*), but it does so “in an inadequate way.”¹⁹ What becomes clear is that mythological thinking involves talking about God as something “in hand” as opposed to a reality that is only ever “at hand.” According to Bultmann, “mythological thinking . . . naively objectifies what is thus beyond the world as though it were something within the world [*das Jenseits zum Diesseits*].” Such thinking “talk[s] about the action of transcendent powers as something that can be observed and established in the world.”²⁰ In other words, mythology speaks about God as something “in hand,” i.e., as an object that is like any other factual, observable object in the world. Mythology fails to respect the qualitative otherness of God; it tries to speak about God directly, when we can only talk about God’s act in an “analogical”²¹ way in faithful response to the prior initiative of God’s word of address in Jesus Christ.

To demythologize our speech about God means to speak of God as an event that is, at Morse likes to say, only ever “at hand.” It means to let the saving event of Christ determine our theological epistemology. Demythologizing is, to use the phrase of Martyn, an “epistemology at the turn of the ages,”²² with the qualification that this turn takes place in the kerygmatic proclamation of God’s word. The consequence of this epistemological turn is that God is seen as one who is always going ahead of us, who is never within our grasp but is “on the move,” as C. S. Lewis famously describes Aslan. Bultmann stresses this point in the conclusion to his 1955 essay, “Science and Existence”:

God does not stand still and does not put up with being made an object of observation. One cannot *see* God; one can only *hear*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸ Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 155-63. Cf. *GuV*, 4:128-37. Published first in Italy in 1961 and in the German series, *Kerygma und Mythos*, in 1963.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 161, 160.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

²² J. Louis Martyn, “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages,” in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 89-110.

God. God's invisibility is not due to the inadequacy of our organs of perception but is God's being removed in principle from the domain of objectifying thinking. God's revelation is revelation only *in actu* and is never a matter of God's having already been revealed. . . . For God is not to be held fast in faith in the sense that believers can look back on their faith as a decision made once and for all. God always remains beyond what has once been grasped God is 'the guest who always moves on' (Rilke), who cannot be apprehended in any now as one who remains. . . . God ever stands before me as one who is coming, and this constant futurity of God is God's transcendence.²³

It should be clear from such statements that Bultmann has no intention of discarding talk of God's decisive and salvific action in the world. Nor is there any truth to the claim that Bultmann makes language about God merely a symbol for some interior, private, existential experience. He addresses this misunderstanding explicitly in *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. He speaks in the voice of his critics, asking, "does it not follow [from demythologizing] that God's action is deprived of objective reality, that it is reduced to a purely subjective, psychological experience (*Erlebnis*); that God exists only as an inner event in the soul, whereas faith has real meaning only if God exists outside the believer?" In response, Bultmann identifies himself with "Karl Barth and the so-called dialectical theologians" who made "an all-out attack" on this liberal notion of faith as experience.²⁴ His own position is "a totally different one," since on his account "the fact that God cannot be seen or apprehended apart from faith does not mean that He does not exist apart from faith."²⁵ The fact that God is only encountered in the event of revelation leads Bultmann to the notion of "paradoxical identity," which understands divine action to occur *within* worldly occurrences for those who have the eyes of faith. Martyn speaks of precisely the same thing when he describes faith as "see[ing] bifocally," in which there is a *simultaneity* of old age and new age for the believer.²⁶ Morse captures the same paradoxical simultaneity when he borrows Paul Lehmann's concept of

²³ Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 131-44 (144). Cf. *GuV*, 3:107-121 (121).

²⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁶ Martyn, *Galatians*, 104.

“incommensurable juxtapositions.”²⁷ Bultmann’s dialectical-hermeneutical theology, like Pauline apocalyptic theology, affirms a *real* and *invasive* action on the part of God, but an action that is only “at hand” for faith—and so invisibly and paradoxically present within (or juxtaposed to) the visible old age—and never “in hand” as a generally observable occurrence outside of revelation.

The payoff of this rehearing of Bultmann is a surprising convergence between apocalyptic theology and the program of demythologizing, despite claims by Morse, Martyn, and others to the contrary.²⁸ This convergence requires us to recognize the way even the best interpretations—and here I agree that a generally apocalyptic reading is the most appropriate—are based on contemporary theological presuppositions. No reading can claim to be the “original” meaning of the text, nor should any reading aspire to achieve such a result. Liberal historicism and evangelical originalism are not only hermeneutically naïve, but also theologically hazardous. Rejecting these, there is no reason to fear a demythologizing hermeneutic. Any hermeneutical approach that seeks to speak of God in the present context as one who is known and encountered by grace through faith alone—and this certainly includes Pauline apocalyptic theology—necessarily demythologizes scripture.

A further benefit of this convergence is that it opens up new possibilities for understanding both Bultmann and Pauline apocalypticism. I would argue that Bultmann is an apocalyptic thinker (of a certain Pauline variety), while Pauline apocalypticism is an existentializing (i.e., demythologizing) interpretation of the gospel. This means that we should expect to find resources in Bultmann for understanding the genuine theological significance of heaven-talk, and in fact there is already ground-

²⁷ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 108-11.

²⁸ Obviously, there are many more aspects to apocalyptic theology than simply the “in hand”/“at hand” distinction. That in itself would not properly qualify as apocalyptic. Unfortunately, I am unable in this paper to explore the problems associated with the language of God’s “cosmic” action, or to show how Bultmann addressed this issue in his 1964 response to Ernst Käsemann. And the whole topic of the sociopolitical dimension of heaven that is clearly central to Morse’s account will have to await a future engagement. Yet on each of these points I would argue that there is no impasse or contradiction between Bultmann and contemporary apocalyptic theology, only a change in terminology and location of emphasis. If there is an impasse, then it is based on additional demands or presuppositions that are not proper to Pauline apocalyptic as such.

breaking research on that very topic.²⁹ But it likewise means that we should expect to see demythologizing at work in apocalyptic theology, and Morse's *Difference* is a testament to this fact. His rejection of the univocal approach is, as he admits, a demythologizing (or deliteralizing) move, and the distinction between "at hand" and "in hand" is a restatement of Bultmann's own theological concern. But it goes beyond this point. The closing chapter on the "hope of heaven" is a thorough demythologizing of Christian expectations. That which is "coming to pass" is not some future spiritual home but a divine forthcoming here and now:

Being faced by what is coming to pass, there is no fear of death, for the arrival on the scene is of a 'perfect love that casts out all fear' (1 Jn 4.18). The promise to come is never witnessed as a deferral of grace. The 'last day' is the day 'at hand.' The *there*, once again, is proclaimed to be *here* on the scene of greatest loss without ceasing to be *there* at the last when the last enemy is destroyed. . . . What then is the hope of heaven, if any, expressed in these parameters? At the least this much we can acknowledge, to sum up from the foregoing observations: The 'real world' is proclaimed to be one in which there is life currently arriving on the scene, in whatever situation we are facing, that is stronger than any undeniable loss threatening us, including death.³⁰

Some of these words could have been stated by Bultmann himself. The notion that the "last day" occurs in every today, *hic et nunc*, is one of the key arguments that he advances, in light of the Fourth Gospel, as part of his program of demythologizing. The idea that God's promise is fulfilled in its *proclamation* in the present *now*, and is not to be deferred to the chronological future, is characteristically Bultmannian. More similar still is the highly existential tension between love and fear that Morse describes as the content of this hope. The gospel frees us from fear and, as Bultmann would say, opens us for the coming future of God. On all these points, I am in full agreement with Morse's conclusions, but it is important not to cover up or ignore the way these represent a *fulfillment* of Bultmann's hermeneutical insights and not their rejection. Some will no doubt take this

²⁹ See Michael Dorhs, *Über den Tod hinaus: Grundzüge einer Individualeschatologie in der Theologie Rudolf Bultmanns* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1999).

³⁰ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 117.

as a pretext for criticizing Morse's very fine work ("Oh, so it's Bultmannian; we can ignore it then"), but this is quite the opposite of my intention, which is to recover Bultmann's genuine contributions to Christian theology.³¹

Turning now briefly to the second area of interest, what about the question of universalism? Directly following the quote above, Morse writes: "I say 'we' in a nonrestrictive sense, for this coming of life we hear of at the tomb of Lazarus is as unbounded in its embrace as the love it embodies, a love without exception, inbreaking at hand in the situation of each and all. This life is not conditional upon the state of affairs prior to its coming, nor is it subject to prior approximations."³² This is about as close as he comes to affirming a universal salvation. There are any number of possible reasons for not making the position more explicit. I will try to spell out what I think are the most likely and relevant. First, of course, is the unwillingness to state dogmatically a position about soteriology and eschatology as it pertains to human beings. The approach throughout Morse's book is to lay all the stress on what *God* is doing and has done, while leaving open the question of who (and how many) will participate in this heavenly reality. Second, in implicit agreement with Bultmann, there is a noticeable emphasis on the radical particularity and promeity of God's heavenly forthcoming: "the precise name of the one whom he is said to love is spoken, 'Lazarus, come forth!'"³³ This does not preclude a universalistic soteriology,³⁴ but it certainly qualifies it—and may lead one to resist such statements.

³¹ Looking back over the whole of the book, the basic disagreement that Morse has with Bultmann concerns the latter's apparently apolitical conception of the gospel. It would not be inaccurate to say that Morse's understanding of apocalyptic interpretation differs from demythologizing only in its explicitly theopolitical articulation of Christian faith. The question, then, is whether demythologizing is *necessarily* opposed to a sociopolitical rendering of the gospel kerygma. I would strongly argue that such is not the case. Bultmann is only concerned about attempts to turn the gospel into a political program or worldview, such that God is used to legitimate a particular social ideology. If Bultmann fails to develop the politically charged character of the gospel, this is only because of his concern to preclude this abuse of Christian theology. Barth does the exact same thing with respect to pneumatology, human agency, religious experience, and other perceived "liberal" concerns. Barth scholars have repeatedly shown how Barth's theology does not reject these but simply reorders or redefines them. Should we do any less for Bultmann? Opposing him because he is overly careful about avoiding a political manipulation of the kerygma is unjustifiable.

³² Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 117-18.

³³ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁴ Tom Greggs has argued for this at length, even demonstrating the way a Christian universalism must have its starting-point in particularity. See Tom Greggs, *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation: Restoring Particularity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Third, if heaven is not a literal place for souls to commune beyond death, it makes sense for Morse (and here I am in agreement with him) to emphasize the ethics of heaven (chap. 4) and to existentialize the eschatological hope of heaven (chap. 5). Morse has very little to say about the apocalyptic meaning of salvation, but it would seem to follow that “to be saved” means to hear and respond to the gospel news that God is “at hand.” What this means is that, while the love of God is certainly unbounded, it is nevertheless evidently the case that not everyone actively participates in it. Morse alludes at times, as in the block quote above, to the Pauline statement that the “last enemy” will “at the last” be destroyed, but it is never really clear what this might mean.³⁵ If the “last day” is the day “at hand,” then is not the “last enemy” precisely the hellish fear of death that God’s word destroys with the news of God’s forthcoming? But if there is still an outstanding redemption of the cosmos, would this then entail an observable change in the world itself? Can one reject a univocal fundamentalism and still retain the notion of a future “new heavens and new earth” that is in some sense an extension of our present bodily existence? One wishes that Morse had stated his views on these matters directly, since these are no doubt some of the pressing questions his readers will want to have answered.

Such silence is not unexpected; it is, in fact, the norm. Modern theology is caught in a difficult place. On the one hand, it rightly refuses to make theology competitive with science. While this is easy with respect to Genesis and the origins of life, it is far more controversial and unsettling when applied to eschatology and the end of history. On the other hand, it also rightly affirms a genuine hope grounded in a love that is wholly unbounded. But this runs up against the manifest suffering in the world that is equally unbounded. In the scales of history, suffering and death are ostensibly the victors over any claims to hope and new life. It would thus seem necessary to posit either a quasi-gnostic existence in the spirit beyond death, or a literal coming of God’s kingdom upon the earth in some indeterminate future. The former is theologically problematic, while the latter requires the belief in supernatural wonders that has myriad theological problems of its own, in addition to conflicting with scientific forecasts. It’s no wonder that most theologians opt for ambiguity and silence, preferring to speak about *who* God is rather than *what* will happen at the end of time, since no one can say. Unfortunately, all of this means that even the best rehearing of heaven leaves

³⁵ Perhaps this lack of clarity is perfectly appropriate, since the biblical witness itself is unclear and ambiguous, even contradictory, on this very point.

us with many unanswered questions.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING MYTH 2: HEAVEN AS THE MOMENT OF PERSONAL DECISION

The foregoing assessment of Morse's *Difference* provides a framework for looking at the rise of EU. My primary purpose in bringing this recent development into conversation with Morse's work is that much of this new universalism labors under what I take to be an overly mythological conception of heaven. More on that later. First, I want to look at the special edition publication of Robinson's first book, *In the End, God*,³⁶ excellently edited by Parry, the author of *The Evangelical Universalist*.³⁷ As in *The Difference Heaven Makes*, a central theme running throughout this book is the question of myth and the task of demythologizing heaven. It becomes clear that Robinson's more explicitly Bultmannian approach helps to answer some of the questions that Morse leaves unaddressed, though Morse's social and ethical concerns are much-needed supplements.

The first edition of Robinson's *In the End* was published in 1950 (the second impression of 1958 is the one used by Parry). A second edition appeared in 1968, following the explosive 1963 publication of *Honest to God*, with numerous small changes and new prefaces to account for the differences in his theology and the wider theological landscape. The first thing to note is that Robinson's book was written before Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* appeared in 1964 (ET 1967). It also predates the rise of Pauline apocalypticism, which really began with the work of Ernst Käsemann in the late 1950s and early 1960s. One has to keep this historical context in mind when reading the opening introduction, where Robinson explains the eschatological lacuna in modern theology.³⁸ Today it's hard to imagine such a situation. We are inundated by works on eschatology, both popular (from *Left Behind* to *Love Wins*) and academic. Despite this dated

³⁶ John A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God: A Study of the Christian Doctrine and the Last Things—Special Edition*, ed. Robin Parry (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011). The special edition includes a superb introductory essay by Trevor Hart, a shorter version of which appears in the edited volume, *All Shall Be Well*.

³⁷ Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006). Cf. Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, eds., *Universal Salvation?: The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003).

³⁸ The lacuna, he notes, is particular to English-language theology. Most of his citations are from Paul Althaus's *Die letzten Dinge* and Oscar Cullmann's *Christ et le Temps*. Cullmann's book was translated in 1951; Althaus's work on eschatology has never been translated.

context, much of the work remains surprisingly relevant and worthwhile.

In the End was written as a response to a debate with T. F. Torrance in the pages of *Scottish Journal of Theology* regarding universalism.³⁹ Robinson's goal in the book is to address Torrance's criticisms and provide a more robust account of his position. Part of this involves a discussion of theological method. In the second chapter, Robinson describes a rather unique version of theological science, influenced by the Christian apologetics of Canon Alan Richardson. The essence of his position is that theology is the conceptual articulation of the present "data" of revelation. Theology is not metaphysical speculation, but rather restricts itself, in the case of eschatology, to the task of "formulat[ing] what doctrines of the end are involved in the understanding of God and the world necessary to explain and account for the existence of the Christian church. These doctrines will be reached by the strict application of scientifically controlled induction from the historical data, and will be as valid as similar conclusions of economics or physics within its own sphere."⁴⁰ The details of Robinson's method are not important. What *is* important is the fact that Robinson defines revelation as the present-tense "encounter with the living God, who discloses himself for what he is in the act of answering man's need and demanding his obedience in the here and now of his personal and social existence. . . . All revelation is of a now and for a now. It is not in itself information about the past or the future."⁴¹ Revelation is God speaking to us today (*deus dicit*), and theology is the conceptual explication of what *must* be true given this present starting-

³⁹ The essays from this debate are included as appendices in the new special edition.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *In the End, God*, 21. What makes this section on method so confusing for people today is that it reads like a mash-up of liberal theology, dialectical theology, and postliberalism. From liberal theology Robinson gets the notion that theology starts with "the basis 'stuff' of experience" (*ibid.*, 20), and the whole conception of theology as a science (*Wissenschaft*) on par with the natural sciences is a tenet of Protestant liberalism going back to Schleiermacher. From dialectical theology, however, we get the emphasis (one that is stronger in the later chapters of the book) on theology as a science grounded on God's *revelation* in Jesus Christ: "The datum from which a scientific theology begins is . . . a community of faith grounded in a certain revelation of God" (*ibid.*, 21). Finally, the anticipatory specter of Lindbeckian postliberalism hangs over this chapter in its understanding of theology as a descriptive task that takes as a given "a certain complex of beliefs and practices embodied in the historic community of the Christian church" (*ibid.*). If I had to characterize Robinson's method, I would say that it belongs in the liberal camp of those who ground faith and theology in the *fides qua creditur* ("the faith *by which* it is believed"). Thankfully, Robinson is better in the rest of the book than his opening chapter on method would lead one to expect.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

point.⁴²

It is in this methodological context that Robinson puts forward the claim that myth is the *form* of all eschatology. Despite the generally Bultmannian flavor of Robinson's book, it would be a mistake at this point to assume that myth functions for him the way it does for Bultmann. Whereas Bultmann uses "myth" to refer to a naïve objectification of God as something "in hand," Robinson uses the word in a strikingly different way:

Myth of some kind is employed in many sciences when description is required where direct evidence is unobtainable. Physics, for instance, produces a "myth" or model to explain the basic constitution of matter, for the purposes of translating into some concrete imaginable picture what can accurately be stated only in formulae. The "truth" of the formulae does not depend on the later verification by sense-experience, if that were possible, of the mythical picture. . . . Theology too employs myth in the same way. It uses it for the purpose of translating its fundamental understanding of God, given and verified in present experience, into terms of the primal and ultimate, where it *must* apply and yet where direct evidence is, in the nature of the case, unobtainable. . . . Their truth does not depend on the mythical representations themselves being scientifically or historically accurate. Neither the myths of Genesis nor of Revelation set out to be *historical* reconstructions, i.e., literal accounts of what did, or what will, happen. As history they may be entirely imaginary, and yet remain theologically true. The only test of a myth is whether it adequately represents the scientific facts to be translated.⁴³

Robinson uses the word "myth" to mean what scientists calls a model, theory, or hypothesis—an extrapolation (or "translation") from the evidence to account for realities that are beyond empirical experience. It has nothing to do with the research of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, nor can it be conflated with Bultmann's program, even though they share a

⁴² Eschatology, he says, "is the formulation of statements about the final sovereignty of God as it must be understood if the data of Christian existence are to be scientifically explained. It is the explication of what must be true of the end, both of history and of the individual, if God is to be the God of the biblical faith" (ibid., 23).

⁴³ Robinson, *In the End, God*, 27.

similar emphasis on the existential present-tense as the locus of myth's meaningfulness.⁴⁴ Myth is a necessary aspect of our speech about God, since it is only through myth—that is, through theological theories—that we can speak about what the past or the future of God's relation with humanity. In this respect, Robinson and Morse are in agreement: one cannot dispense with myth without undercutting the ability of faith to speak truthfully about God.⁴⁵

Robinson employs this understanding of myth to account for both protology and eschatology. Regarding protology, he takes for granted the deliteralization of the Genesis myths as being the clear intention of these texts. The "real interest" of the author of Genesis 3 "is not in people who lived thousands of years ago, but in the humanity of his and every age."⁴⁶ These "myths of the first things" are written to represent the present and universal situation of humanity in terms of the primal past. The same holds true for the "myths of the last things."

The point of reference from which they start is the present. All the elements in the myth are first and foremost descriptions of *present* realities within the life of the new age. The second coming has happened in the return of Christ in the Spirit; the resurrection of the body has occurred in the putting on of the new man in the body of Christ; the millennium has been inaugurated in the reign of Christ in his church on earth; the Antichrist is a present reality wherever final refusal meets the gospel preaching; the

⁴⁴ Bultmann would not accept the liberal-scientific presupposition of empirical experience as the starting-point of Christian theological reflection.

⁴⁵ It is often forgotten, but Bultmann would agree, at least in part, with this claim regarding the necessity of mythical language. In *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, he clarifies this matter: "It is often asserted that the language of the Christian faith must of necessity be mythological language. This assertion must be examined carefully. First, even if we concede that the language of faith is really the language of myth, we must ask how this fact affects the program of de-mythologizing. This concession is by no means a valid argument against de-mythologizing, for the language of myth, when it serves as the language of faith, loses its mythological sense. To speak, for example, of God as creator, no longer involves speaking of His creatorship in the sense of the old myth. Mythological conceptions can be used as symbols or images which are perhaps necessary to the language of religion and therefore also of the Christian faith. Thus it becomes evident that the use of mythological language, far from being an objection to de-mythologizing, positively demands it" (Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 67). It should be clear from this statement that Bultmann's concern is not with mythical language *per se*, but rather with "mythological thinking," i.e., the "mythological sense" of myth. Here I would argue that this sense is precisely the metaphysical-objectifying conception of God as a reality "in hand." Myth as faithful translation of the present encounter with Christ "into terms of the primal and ultimate" (Robinson) would fall under Bultmann's notion of myth as "symbol" or "image."

⁴⁶ Robinson, *In the End, God*, 57.

messianic banquet is celebrated whenever the wine is drunk new in the kingdom of God; Satan falls from heaven as each man decides for the gospel, and in the finished work of Christ the prince of this world has been judged; the last assize is being wrought out in every moment of choice and decision; Christ is all in all, since all things *have been* reconciled in him.⁴⁷

The purpose of the eschatological myth is to describe “what *is*,” not “what *will be*.”⁴⁸ Eschatological myths “are necessary transpositions into the key of the hereafter of knowledge of God and his relation to men given in the revelatory encounter of present historical event.”⁴⁹

Like Morse, Robinson translates the NT language of heaven into the present tense, though he does so far more straightforwardly. Morse’s ambiguity and indirectness serves to unsettle the reader of his book in a way that corresponds to the unsettling effect of the apocalyptic event in Christ, but this ends up leaving the reader with many burning questions. For this reason, Robinson’s directness, though potentially disturbing to some readers, aids in the ongoing discussion of his claims. At the same time, like Morse, Robinson does not seem to recognize that this translation is a *demythologizing* of the biblical myths of heaven. Both of them seem to assume that their apocalyptic and existential interpretations of heaven-talk capture the original meanings of these texts. But this is an unsustainable position. The original expectation of a chronologically imminent *parousia* and the literal-historical establishment of God’s messianic reign is an undeniable feature of primitive Christian worship,⁵⁰ even if Morse and Robinson (with Bultmann) are right to argue that such an expectation is not itself ingredient in the gospel itself, and is thus dispensable or “deliteralizable.” The fact that mythical language is necessary to narrate the content of our faith does not mean that the ancient metaphysical and mythological *meaning* of such language is necessary. Bultmann remains correct in his judgment that “the use of mythological language, far from being an objection to de-mythologizing, positively demands it.”⁵¹

Unlike Morse, however, Robinson’s book addresses issues about which the former remains mostly silent: the future of the earth and the extent

⁴⁷ Ibid., 58-59.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁰ Robinson seems to acknowledge as much when he later describes the difference between Paul’s understanding of two resurrections in contrast to the modern hope in a single general resurrection. See *ibid.*, 86-88.

⁵¹ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 67.

of God's saving purposes. Regarding the first, Robinson states the following:

If this understanding of the *mythical* character of the eschatological statement is accepted, it will become clear that the Christian has no more knowledge of or interest in the final state of this planet than he has of its first. . . . Of course, the Christian cannot say that the "events" of the end will *not* literally take place, any more than one can assert that an Adam and an Eve did *not* live in a garden in Mesopotamia. He can only declare that, as a Christian, he has no interest in these matters. He is concerned, alike in the myths of the beginning and of the end, with the present.⁵²

A statement along these lines is a sign of the author's respect for the reader and the willingness to state clearly one's position on contentious matters. Morse's book strongly implies the same basic stance, but he leaves the matter ambiguous. The second issue is the question of universalism. This is, of course, the driving concern of Robinson's entire study. I do not have time in this essay to develop his argument in any detail, since my concern is primarily with how these authors approach the biblical language of heaven. Suffice it to say that Robinson takes a "Barthian" approach in that he bases his entire soteriology on the bedrock of a fully realized redemption in the work of Christ. Everything *has* already happened *in him*, and for this reason alone, it has happened *for all*: "All things must be summed up in Christ, because in principle all things already are. Hell is an ultimate impossibility, because *already* there *is* no one outside Christ."⁵³ Robinson has the grip of a bulldog on this christocentric claim regarding salvation. It is no less the case for Morse, but whereas Robinson treats heaven in the context of an existential soteriology, Morse treats the topic more as a matter of theological ethics. Each of them could and should learn from the other: Robinson's book lacks the sociopolitical ethics of heaven that Morse develops so creatively, while Morse lacks a fuller discussion of soteriology that would help ground his ethical reflection in the work of Christ. Robinson would also have benefited from an exposure to a post-Martyn version of apocalypticism. The following words by Robinson would feel perfectly at home in Morse's text: "The world *has been* redeemed. Hell has been harrowed, and none can

⁵² Robinson, *In the End, God*, 62-63.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 113.

finally make it their home. The shadow of the cross has fallen aslant it: the halls of death are condemned property.”⁵⁴

As I noted above, this special edition of Robinson’s work has been published as a contribution to the rise (and, in some sense, the recovery) of EU. This development within evangelicalism is worthy of close attention, especially with the release of the very fine volume of essays on universalism throughout Christian history, *“All Shall Be Well”: Universal Salvation and Christian Theology from Origen to Moltmann*, also edited by Gregory MacDonald/Robin Parry.⁵⁵ EU agrees with the “Arminian” view that an individual has to make a conscious decision of faith in Christ in order to be saved; it only disagrees with the traditional notion that such a decision has to be made before death. This “Arminianism” is, I believe, the point of connection between EU and Robinson’s work: both make the decision of faith the determinative center of Christian existence. But EU disagrees with Robinson’s “Barthian” notion that salvation is fully and finally accomplished *in Christ*, with the result that individual faith is *not* the actualization of something that Christ merely makes possible. Faith for Robinson—and, I think, for Morse as well—is the acknowledgement of a divine action that is already finished in Jesus Christ. It does not have any *objective* salvific significance in itself, though Robinson does give it a very crucial *subjective* significance as determining our concrete relation to our objective identity in Christ. EU, by contrast, *does* give salvific significance to our subjective conversion. Its vision of universal salvation is then based on the possibility of *post-mortem conversion*, a possibility that these proponents claim will, in the eternal future, result in the salvation of all. Adherents to EU believe there is a hell of conscious torment, but they reject the view that it is impossible to escape hell via conversion to faith. Robinson and Morse, however, firmly oppose giving the individual such a significant role in the realization of salvation. On this point, both of them stand in a Pauline apocalyptic tradition that places all the emphasis on God’s fully actualized work in Christ—what Morse identifies as the heavenly forthcoming of God.

It is in large part due to EU’s axiomatic affirmation of post-mortem salvation that Parry, writing as MacDonald, rejects Robinson’s claim (in the block quote above) that the Christian is not interested in what will literally occur in the chronological future: “But surely that is just wrong. If the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁵ Gregory MacDonald, ed., *“All Shall Be Well”: Explorations in Universalism and Christian Theology from Origen to Moltmann* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

cosmos will never *actually* be ‘resurrected’ at some future time then the very thing that invests the present with eschatological significance is voided and the myth becomes no more than [sic] wishful thinking—a *false* myth.”⁵⁶ Parry goes on to cite two passages where Robinson seems to speak more confidently about the temporal end of the world, as evidence of what Robinson actually thinks, or at least what he *ought* to think.⁵⁷ Notice first that this places Robinson in precisely the same situation as Morse: both lay all the theological emphasis upon the existential present, but they nevertheless speak at times about a still-future historical end that will consummate God’s will. But is Parry right to say that Robinson’s earlier statement is “just wrong”? Is a literal cosmic resurrection in the future—and thus some notion of heaven as a post-mortem location—required in order to invest the present with significance? Morse does not seem to think so, and he makes a cogent case for why that is through his apocalyptic reading of scripture. But he and Robinson are somewhat unclear on this problem, so we have to leave the matter unresolved, at least as it pertains to their work.

The more pressing issue is with the position of EU on heaven and hell. It is worth noting that *The Evangelical Universalist* has a lengthy chapter on hell, but no sustained discussion of heaven. For Morse, by contrast, it is precisely the rehearing of heaven that forces a rehearing of hell as well—as that which has been *overcome* by the forthcoming of God. Without this rehearing, Parry remains within a univocal literalism, which treats heaven and hell as post-mortem extensions of our bodily existence. This is most evident in the way he presupposes, along with most literalist evangelicals, that the Apocalypse of John concerns future events in salvation history. The problem then is how to support a universal salvation if heaven and hell are actual destinations. Parry does this by arguing, as others have before him, that the judgment of hell is not an eternal condition—it is “a terrible *but temporary* fate”⁵⁸—and that conversion remains possible beyond death.⁵⁹ Certainly, if we take the traditional hearing of heaven as our starting-

⁵⁶ Robinson, *In the End, God*, x.

⁵⁷ The two passages are: “The temporal end (or *finis*) will certainly reflect and embody the moment of ultimate significance (as the last move of a chess match translates into finality the move that really won)” (ibid., 48); “the meaning of history must be vindicated *within* history and yet . . . the complete purpose of God must *transcend* history” (ibid., 88).

⁵⁸ MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 155.

⁵⁹ Cf. ibid., 32: “What is it about death that would fix humans against God in a way that they were not previously fixed? Why should it be that from that moment on change is

point, combined with the free-will evangelical assumption that we actualize our salvation through the decision of faith, then this kind of post-mortem extension of God's offer of salvation is necessary to establish a universalist eschatology. But what if heaven needs to be heard anew, as Morse argues? And what if the nature of our decision of faith has to be understood anew, as Robinson argues? What if the gospel itself demands a thorough demythologizing of this account of heaven and hell? The republication of Robinson's classic study will hopefully bring some of his insights to a new evangelical audience. But this needs to be situated within Morse's apocalyptic-theopolitical rehearing of the gospel news about heaven. If *evangelical* universalism necessarily means a univocal literalism, then ironically it may be necessary to give up our ties to (this form of) evangelicalism in the name of the gospel (*euangēlion*) itself.

REMYTHOLOGIZING HEAVEN: HEAVEN AS CONSTRUCTIVE-PARADIGMATIC TRUTH

I have argued in this paper that Morse and Robinson present two ways of demythologizing the biblical talk of heaven. Over against a literal state of bliss in the hereafter, Morse hears heaven as an apocalyptic promise that proclaims a divine incursion in the incalculable Christ-event. Robinson interprets heaven as an eschatological myth that transposes into the future what the believer knows to be true here and now. Both insist on the necessity of mythical language, yet both still engage in a demythologizing of heaven—something that becomes clear when we correctly understand the nature of Bultmann's project. Morse would benefit from clarifying his position on the question of universal salvation and the end of history, while Robinson, along with the evangelical universalists, need to attend to the apocalyptic interpretation of heaven.

In this conclusion, I want to briefly suggest an alternative account of heaven as myth. The goal will be to connect aspects of Robinson's conception of myth with Morse's apocalyptic interpretation, with the result that we can affirm a remythologizing of heaven at the same time that we acknowledge the necessity of demythologizing. We can accomplish this by appropriating the sociological theory of myth formulated by Bruce Lincoln. Here is the definition of myth from the opening of his 1989 work, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, which I will quote at length:

impossible? . . . If one says that change is possible, then one opens the door for the possibility of post-mortem salvation.”

In my view we would do better to classify narratives not by their content but by the claims that are made by their narrators and the way in which those claims are received by their audience(s). Thus, some narratives make no truth-claims at all, but rather present themselves and are accepted as fictions pure and simple: These I propose to call Fable. Others, in differing styles and degrees, purport to offer accurate accounts of past events. But of the stories that make such truth-claims, only some have sufficient persuasive power to gain general acceptance, and the others—those that, in the opinion of their primary audience, lack credibility—I shall classify as Legend, calling those that do have credibility, History. . . . Beyond this, there is one further category, and that a crucial one: Myth—by which I designate that small class of stories that possess both credibility and *authority*. . . . In part I have in mind something similar to what Malinowski meant when he described myth as a form of social charter and what Clifford Geertz meant in his characterization of religion as being simultaneously a “model of” and a “model for” reality. That is to say, a narrative possessed of authority is one for which successful claims are made not only to the status of truth, but what is more, to the status of *paradigmatic* truth. In this sense the authority of myth is somewhat akin to that of charters, models, templates, and blueprints, but one can go beyond this formulation and recognize that it is also (and perhaps more important) akin to that of revolutionary slogans and ancestral invocations, in that through the recitation of myth one may effectively mobilize a social grouping. Thus, myth is not just a coding device in which important information is conveyed, on the basis of which actors *can then* construct society. It is also a discursive act through which actors evoke the sentiments out of which society is actively constructed.⁶⁰

Like Robinson, Lincoln posits a myth that has the function of a model—but he augments that account by understanding it as both “model of”

⁶⁰ Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 24-25.

and “model for.” Robinson’s “model of” only captures the *representative* nature of myth as a picture or theory that extends or transposes a community’s knowledge about God (based on revelation) into the future. Lincoln’s “model for” conveys the *constructive* nature of myth as a program or charter that mobilizes a community for practical action in the world. The former sees myth as symbolic truth; the latter as “paradigmatic truth.” By understanding myth in this way, we are able to incorporate Morse’s ethical and political reflections into a mythical account of heaven.

I am proposing that we remythologize heaven in Lincoln’s constructive-paradigmatic sense of myth. The mythical nature of heaven has to be recovered in such a way that talk of heaven is, as Lincoln puts it, “akin to that of revolutionary slogans and ancestral invocations.” The apocalyptic promise of God’s heavenly forthcoming is mythical precisely because it mobilizes a community of faithful action in service to God. The word of heaven’s irruption into the world is a revolutionary word that identifies us as children of God and commands us to go out in radical obedience. The community goes forth in correspondence to the forthcoming of God. We *are invoked* at the same time that we *invoke* God’s name in prayer and thanksgiving. The myth of heaven is thus socially constructive in two senses: first, it constitutes the community of believers as a people living in faithful obedience to God’s word; second, it then compels this community to construct their sociopolitical existence in such a way that it corresponds to God’s heavenly reign. Heaven is paradigmatic not in the sense of a literal blueprint that tells us how to create heaven on earth, but rather as gospel news that gives the community a new way of seeing the world as the place of God’s heavenly advent. Like Martyn’s notion of “seeing bifocally,” the myth of heaven is a contravening vision of the world; it mobilizes the community in a way that scandalously disrupts the systems of death and oppression that falsely claim dominion.

The benefit of interpreting heaven as a paradigmatic truth is not that it gives new content to our talk of heaven, but instead it reframes the way we hear and interpret this content. It means, as Morse rightly states, that our hearing of heaven in the gospel is irreducibly ethical in nature. There is no theological kernel that one can articulate apart from its sociopolitical purpose. It is this aspect of Morse’s thesis that provides the fundamental correction (or perhaps supplement) to the more existential picture of Bultmann and Robinson. A further benefit of this remythologizing of heaven is that it opens up ways of critically analyzing the false myths of heaven that

are prevalent in our culture today. The old fundamentalist-dispensational myth of heaven as a post-rapture state of bliss is thus falsified not only on strictly scriptural terms, but equally on the basis of the kind of model for Christian life that it provides. Its function as paradigmatic truth results in an ethic that is void of the revolutionary action authorized by the gospel news of Jesus Christ. We can trace fundamentalist politics back to their particular myth of heaven. Christian engagement with the world is grounded on paradigmatic myths of heaven, and we have to test these myths against the gospel news to ensure that our sociopolitical action is consonant with God's mobilizing word in Christ. The argument of this paper is that a properly evangelical myth of heaven has to hear of God's apocalyptic invasion of the cosmos in Christ as an event that demands a radical decision of faith and an even more radical obedience as missionary agents of God's gracious reign within the world.

Finally, it is worth noting that this remythologizing of heaven coincides with, even necessitates, the demythologizing of heaven described earlier. Heaven as theopolitical charter—that is, as God's *invocation* of the community for the sake of a new worldly *vocation*—obviously runs against any conception of heaven as a post-mortem destination for believers. At the very least, this understanding of Christian faith is indifferent to the traditional notion of heaven. What will or will not occur in the chronological future is not the concern of the gospel kerygma. The concern is rather with a *present* decision and a *present* mobilization. We therefore have to distinguish between two kinds of mythical thinking: the social myth articulated by Lincoln, and the metaphysical mythology criticized by Bultmann and Morse. The former is a myth that concerns the action of the community; the latter is a mythological thinking that concerns our speech about God, and which views God as something “in hand.” The task of theology proposed in this paper is to demythologize heaven in the sense of myth-as-metaphysics and remythologize heaven in the sense of myth-as-paradigm. In this way, theology will speak of God as an apocalyptic event “at hand” and of the community as a constructed and constructing agent of heavenly witness within the world.

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