

A New Heaven

DEATH, HUMAN DESTINY,
AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Harvey Cox

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

INTRODUCTION

Why We Need a New Heaven

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. (Revelation 21:1)

I had recently turned ninety when I started writing this book. Consequently, when friends asked me what I was currently working on, and I told them, they smiled knowingly. They were sure they knew why I had seized on this topic. Entering my sunset years, they thought, it was only natural that my thoughts would turn to what might or might not come next. The curtain was about to go up on my last act, so a book about the “here-after” was just what everyone would expect. It would be my swan song, my last hurrah.

But my friends were mistaken. I did not undertake this project because of a sharpened sense of my mortality. I had other reasons. However, my friends were not entirely wrong. The reader will see that as I wrote, my awareness of my finitudes did become increasingly significant to me, making the book more personal than I first intended.

When I was fourteen, I thought about death and the afterlife a lot. I think most kids do at that age. But I did not worry about heaven or hell. I could not imagine that God, whom I pictured as a kindly old man, could possibly dispatch me, or anyone else,

to eternal torment. As for heaven, I was not sure whether there was such a place, but I had my doubts. At that age, neither possibility bothered me much. What did unsettle me, however, was the prospect of nonexistence. Imagining a universe spinning on for millennia, its stars and planets heedlessly orbiting, but without me, made my stomach tighten. When I learned that our solar system and eventually the universe itself would also eventually expire, it did not seem alarming. It was the nonexistence of my own self that seemed so unthinkable. As I left my early teen years, this jumble of horror and the emptiness gradually faded, and for decades I rarely thought about any hereafter. Then why this book?

It is the product of a combination of personal, spiritual, and intellectual experiences. First, for several years I had been meeting in my home now and then with some of my former students to sip beer and soft drinks, munch cookies, and discuss current theological, political, and religious issues. At one of these informal seminars, one of these ex-students, the Rev. Rebecca Pugh, the minister of a thriving congregation in Salem, Massachusetts, suddenly told me that I should “write a book about heaven.” I looked at her in disbelief. I told her that I had little intellectual interest and no direct experience with whatever lay beyond “this mortal coil.” I reminded her that my first major book had been *The Secular City*, not “the celestial garden.” I said that for years I had focused my teaching and writing on the role religion plays in this life, and that Jesus constantly urged his listeners to stop their persistent staring upward and to pay attention to what was happening within and around them: “Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”

I thought this would settle the matter. But it did not. The next time we met, Rebecca persisted. The members of her congregation, she said, were baffled and frustrated by the contradictory claims about the “hereafter” they heard, mostly but not exclu-

sively, at funerals. She warned me that she would continue to pester me until I agreed to write the book. Still, I temporized. I had no appetite to rake over the coals of a subject that had been fought about so fruitlessly for so many centuries. I even remarked, maybe a little tastelessly, that Jesus had once said, “Let the dead bury the dead” (Luke 9:60).

Then, however, in quick succession I attended the funerals of two old friends, one in St. Luke’s Roman Catholic Church, the other in a funeral home. Fresh from my recent debates with Rebecca, I listened to what was being said with more than usual attention. Rebecca was right. In the prayers and hymns, and in the words of the priest and the minister, a cascade of inconsistent images and phrases flowed into the congregation’s ears (or maybe over their heads). We heard both that the deceased was now in the merciful presence of God, but also that at the final resurrection he would be “carried into that presence.” But why should someone be carried to where he already was? One prayer referred to his grave as a “final resting place,” but also that what we were participating in today was not final. We were urged to comfort those he had left behind in their sorrow, but also to celebrate the joyous welcome he was even now receiving from the heavenly host. At the graveside we heard “ashes to ashes and dust to dust” but also that this earthly body would one day be “clothed in an eternal raiment, and a new and glorified body.” No wonder Rebecca’s church members were bewildered.

Attending these funerals brought back to my mind the dozens I attended when, as a teenager, I worked part time with my Uncle Frank, the undertaker in our little hometown. (I will return to that formative episode in a later chapter.) I had heard these funereal phrases many times then, but never noticed any incongruity. After all, death itself is the ultimate contradiction. Maybe, I thought, given its intractable incomprehensibility,

people simply have learned not to hear the contradictions. I will return to this issue later.

In any case, after the home seminars and the funerals, I started to ponder more often about death and the afterlife. I decided it was time for me to engage in some serious study, observation, and reflection on this old but new mystery. I thought that I might even eventually attempt to write a book on it. I knew this would be an arduous voyage. But it might make Rev. Rebecca Pugh a little quieter, at least for a while. What follows then in these pages is a kind of logbook of my journey through a universe of heavenly signs and symbols, of fervent beliefs and equally potent doubt and disbelief.

As the reader will see, my travels carried me to a rich range of sites. My travels landed me in Kursk, in the limitless steppes of Russia, where one of the biggest battles of World War II took place. It is the area to which hundreds of devoted Russian young people hike along muddy paths each year to carefully disinter the skeletal remains of some of the thousands of soldiers who died there but whose bodies were never formally buried. Motivated by a blending of reverence and patriotism, the youngsters undertake this task to give these long-neglected defenders of the fatherland a proper funeral.

My travel also allowed me to go back in memory to the desert in northern Mexico where I had once passed an unforgettable night with some Huichole Indians, who, for generations, have respectfully eaten peyote in their sacred ceremonies, and who believe that heaven is not far away. It is a present reality, though it can only be visited temporarily on special occasions.

Also, through intriguing research and conversations with faculty colleagues in archaeology, anthropology, and ancient history, I learned about a thirty-thousand-year-old human burial pit. Later, I found out about the different, even contrasting opinions the early Christians held about the hereafter. Finally,

my long trek also took me back to my small hometown in Pennsylvania to revisit the funeral parlor where I worked when I was sixteen, and to the cemetery near my home where I played hide-and-seek among the tombstones but now returned to see what I could find out about evolving views of the hereafter from the fading epitaphs carved on those granite slabs.

During the long mission I sometimes thought about my favorite traveler, Odysseus, whose brief visit to Hades we will return to later. Unlike him, I never had to contend with a Cyclops or a Circe, but like him I did hope to drop anchor finally in a home port that, after a prolonged absence, would feel familiar and welcoming, which is what actually happened.

To embark on any expedition, one needs some basic navigational instruments like a compass, a quadrant, and a chart. One of my teachers, theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965), has provided the theological equivalents of these necessities for me. Tillich developed an approach he called “the method of correlation,” which I have applied in this book. The process begins with recognizing that the word “theology” has two parts. The first is *theos* and the second is *logos*; and “theology” means relating the divine or eternal (the *theos*), on the one hand, and, on the other, the human quest for meaning as it is expressed in a given culture, its symbolic self-understanding (*logos*). This method produces the following procedure: The theologian begins by analyzing the symbols through which a culture expresses its existential questions, what Tillich called its “deepest concerns.” Then he or she searches the religious tradition to locate the symbols that attempt to respond to these questions. Theology thus pursues a pattern of question and response and becomes a process of “correlation.” Tillich suggested this tactic because, as he put it, “for too long theology has served up answers to questions no one was asking, so we must begin with the questions.” His point brings to mind a story told of Gertrude Stein as she was

dying, when one of the friends by her bedside asked, “Gertrude, tell us, what is the answer?” Stein opened her eyes and replied, “No! What is the *question*?” In one sense then, this logbook is not just the record of assorted answers but also a quest for “the questions.”

But since any question or answer invariably raises other questions, theology is not an enterprise that is ever finished. Why? Because cultures are constantly changing, and because a religion is not a closed and inert collection of doctrines but an ongoing practice. As Pastor Robinson told his fellow passengers on the *Mayflower* as they set sail, “For I am very confident the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of His holy Word.”

In this extended journey through cultures and eons, the *logos* will be what we learn about the quest for meaning that animates the many visions of heaven we encounter. The *theos* will be drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition, the one I know best, particularly what it says about death and human destiny. I choose this tradition not to advocate its superiority but for two other reasons. First, because it is the one most familiar to me and probably to many readers. Second, it is a living and changing tradition that has absorbed vital elements from others, and still does. For example, during the last century, nonviolence, which Martin Luther King Jr. derived both from Gandhi and from the Sermon on the Mount, has become integral to many Christians, who have also learned various forms of meditation derived from Asian faiths. At the same time, some other religions have adopted the idea of an ultimate victory of peace and justice, the equivalent of a kingdom of God, such as the “Buddha realm.” This is such a widespread tendency that some religious scholars believe that studying these visions has become the most fruitful way to compare faith traditions today.

Thus, since my starting point is my own spiritual tradition,

my travel diary also reflects a subtle change that took place within me, one that I will return to in the last chapter. In brief, my thinking gradually became not just an effort to respond to other people's questions but also to my own. Like the specialist in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's novel *The Cancer Ward* who discovers he has the disease himself, my orientation toward my subject became more "existential," not just reportorial. But an even more profound insight surfaced.

The word "death" is prominent in my subtitle. But I quickly noticed that it is not death itself that distressed our ancestors and still vexes us, if not continuously, then periodically. But what is it? "It" assumes an array of forms and has many names, and they all fuel the anxiety that gnaws at us, especially in certain circumstances.

I once worked as a chaplain in a hospital for what the staff called "terminal patients," with whom I had memorable conversations. These talks taught me that for many people today it was not the "dread of death" or of "something *after* death" that disturbed them. It was the process of dying. It was the prospect of lying encased by tubes and gauges while modern medical science squeezes out a few more days or hours of something that is hardly life. But even more fundamental than the fear of death or dying are the misgivings about whether our brief lives have any meaning beyond what we try to fashion for ourselves: "What is this really all about?"

As Tillich puts it, it is not the fear of death that unnerves us, as it did the ancients, who hungered for immortality; nor is it the dread of punishment after death, which caused people in the age of the Reformation to slaughter one another over how to be justified before God's judgment. In this era, Tillich says, our characteristic anxiety is that our lives, and maybe even the whole of earthly and cosmic history, are devoid of significance. This does not mean that we fret about the meaning of life all

the time. And doubtless some people might claim that the issue never bothers them at all. But I think Tillich is right in identifying the “quest for meaning” as the underlying spiritual question of our time. And what compounds this civilizational malaise is that the language in which we once thought about either death or the meaning of life no longer works for many people. Maybe this explains why the profoundly enigmatic symbol of “a new heaven” seemed so apt to me for a title.

This is where the word “new” comes in. It refers to two sources. One is the *logos* side of our method of correlation; the other from the *theos* side. From the first side, the obvious fact is that much of the language in which we have traditionally expressed the hope for heaven no longer seems plausible for many people. The symbol is broken. A new language is needed. But it must be one that preserves the reality of what the older language pointed to. A recognizable continuity with the past is necessary. The “new heaven” must be a new *heaven*, not a new something else.

But the “new” also comes from the *theos* side. As the vision from Revelation quoted at the head of this chapter makes clear, “heaven,” however we may conceive it, is not eternal. Like the earth, it “passes away.” But it is not replaced by nothing. It is replaced by a “*new* heaven.” As I will suggest later, this confirmation of the significance of heaven correlates with the physical resurrection of Christ, which, as Reinhold Niebuhr writes in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, is the Christian hope (against the idea of the immortality of the soul) that all history, and not just certain individuals, is being redeemed. There is a new heaven and also “a new earth.”

In light of this understanding of a “new heaven,” as I will suggest in this book, the ideas about heaven that informed our *forebears* were not just about “what happens next.” They were also, and more importantly, responses to the question of how

we should live here and now, about the purpose of our lives. Yes, earlier generations lived under different circumstances, so some of their concerns are no longer ours. But they were also human beings like us, so some of their deepest concerns are still with us. And our existential question about the meaning, if any, of life was their question as well, although they asked it in different ways. This is why the “answers” they generated in myths, dreams, philosophies, and depictions of heaven are still invaluable for us. The idea that “everything changes” has some truth, but anyone who reads Sophocles or Shakespeare or the Bible knows there are also some things that do not.

Clearly then, this is not a book “*about heaven.*” To claim that would surely be presumptuous. Rather, this book is my effort to render a faithful account of what some of our fellow human beings, in an assortment of cultures, and in our own, have thought both about life after death and what such a life means for life on earth. Also, when I write about “what they thought,” I use the word “thought” in an expanded sense. More than thinking about heaven, human beings have more often sung, danced, chanted, dreamed, and envisioned it. Therefore, the present book is not an intellectual history. The most revealing images of the next world are found not in formal theological treatises. They are passed on through the customs, ballads, anecdotes, jokes, folk sayings, legends, myths, and fantasies of ordinary people. They are “in the midst of you.”

But this is too much for any one book. And when you add the memories that I have recovered from my own nearly forgotten past, it amounts to even more. Then when you stir into this mixture of the inner and the outer the question of how the two cohere or conflict with each other, a new picture comes into focus. The plot thickens, but this is just the beginning. My overall goal is both to see how humanity’s visions of the next or other worlds are shaped by their terrestrial *civilizations* and

how much these visions in turn impact their birthing societies. Traffic on Jacob's ladder goes both ways.

This is hardly a new issue: How do the City of God and the City of Man interact? It is a perennial preoccupation. No theologian from St. Augustine to Reinhold Niebuhr has been able to avoid it. It is the meta-question that lurks behind all the others. The way we think about it defines how we think about much else, and this intricate dance has played out over the entire course of human history. It is a chronicle so massive as to defy exploration. Consequently, for this, in addition to the nautical equipment and the chart already mentioned, we need to have some idea of just what, amidst the welter of possibilities open to us, we are looking for. How can this be done?

For reasons I will explain in the next chapter, I will concentrate at first on *ritual* as the phenomenon most likely to expedite our search. The word "ritual" is usually linked to formal religion. But this is not true. There are secular as well as religious rituals. A ritual is a repeated and patterned form of behavior that conveys a distinct meaning, one that is larger than itself. There are family rituals and national rituals, rituals associated with sports and with politics. Individuals evolve their own personal rituals. My interest in rituals here is that, however simple or complex, if carefully examined, they express a vital element of the larger worldview of which they are a part. Think, for example, of the wealth of connotations implied in crossing oneself or shaking someone's hand.

National and religious rituals encapsulate whole worldviews and can be fully understood only in light of these larger canvasses. And as we will now see, the most promising rituals for understanding ideas of another world or an afterlife are the ones that represent the "gates of heaven": initiation and death rituals. We will turn to them in succeeding chapters.