

The Coming Cloud

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

Nowhere is the challenge of interpretation more demanding than in the sermonic and catechetical appropriate of the scriptural tradition’s apocalyptic texts, a challenge that Morse repeatedly takes up in his work. For example, in his reflections on the “Life to Come” concluding *Not Every Spirit*, Morse attends to the sayings of the New Testament regarding the coming of the “Son of Man,” derived from Daniel 7 and featured in Luke 21:25–28 with its synoptic parallels. In his section on “The Coming Cloud,” Morse interprets the redemptive coming of the Son of Man amid nations in distress and a destabilized natural order not as “a prediction of the inevitability of destruction, but a promise, as only God can make and keep, that even when the worst things come upon us that can possibly happen, they will not be able to prevent Christ’s coming to us and to all the world in redemption, an ultimate reclaiming from all harm.”¹

In the years leading up to the publication of *Not Every Spirit*, I was privileged to read preliminary drafts of this book, including the section on “The Coming Cloud.” I was also thereby prompted to try to think through the implications of apocalyptic for homiletics, understood primarily as theological reflection on the practice of preaching.² But side by side with this “second order” work, I felt compelled to see if apocalyptic, when reframed as Morse’s “promissory narration,” would actually preach.

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

1 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994), pp. 329–335, here p. 334.

2 See James F. Kay, “The Word of the Cross at the Turn of the Ages.” *Interpretation* 53.1 (January 1999): pp. 44–56.

in the chapel of Princeton University on the occasion of the 44th anniversary of the detonating of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima.³ Twenty-five years later, as the distress within and among the nations continues and as the ecological crisis continues to spin out of control, I offer this word in thanksgiving for all I learned from Christopher Morse about the call to faithful disbelief and about the God of the Bible who makes us prisoners of hope.

TEXT: *AND THEN THEY WILL SEE THE SON OF MAN COMING IN A CLOUD WITH POWER AND GREAT GLORY.* (Lk. 21:27)

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

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

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

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

But as you know, coming clouds do not always bring such blessings. Only fifty years ago this summer, the clouds were gathering—war clouds. Adolf Hitler was demanding the annexation of Danzig and the Polish Corridor into his Third Reich. Meanwhile, on these shores, some 350 American women gathered at the New York World’s Fair. There amid the marvels of “The World of Tomorrow”—these women declared to the world of that day their unanimous opposition to sending American boys to fight another European War. These women were all mothers, Gold Star Mothers. They had already sacrificed their children to the First World War.⁴

But nothing these mothers said and nothing the diplomats did could avert what Winston Churchill later called, *The Gathering Storm*. And so the war came.

And the war did not end until the coming of another cloud at 8:15 a.m. on August 6, 1945.

An eyewitness recalls:

“The sky was serene, the air was flooded with glittering morning light. . . . The sirens and also the radio had just given the all-clear signal. . . . A blinding

3 See James F. Kay, “The Coming Cloud,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 11.2 (July 1990): 164–168; and in *Seasons of Grace: Reflections from the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1994), pp. 3–8; reprint ed. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2005), pp. 3–8.

4 *Christian Century* (May 17, 1939): 651. On the New York World’s Fair of 1939, see Steven Rea, “Back to the Future,” *Applause* (August 1989): 21–23.

flash cut sharply across the sky. . . . [My] skin . . . felt a burning heat. . . . [A] violent rush of air pressed down my entire body. . . . I raised my head, facing the center of Hiroshima. . . . [There I saw] an enormous mass of clouds . . . [they] spread and climbed rapidly . . . into the sky. Then its summit broke open and hung over horizontally. It took the shape of . . . a monstrous mushroom.”⁵

A physicist blinded by that same cloud later wrote, “. . . everything seemed dark, dark all over. . . . Then I thought, ‘The world is ending.’”⁶

A novelist later remembered thinking she was witnessing “the collapse of the earth which I had read about as a child.”⁷

Amid the rubble, the housekeeper at the Jesuit Mission cried out over and over again, “*Shu Jesusu, awaremi tamai!* Our Lord Jesus, have pity on us!”⁸

And since that brilliant August 6, the poison mushroom cloud threatens to come again at almost any time.

The coming cloud:

Will it be a cloud like the one for which Elijah prayed—a cloud which blessed the earth and her people like an outreached hand? Or, will it be a cloud that smothers the world with death? Which will it be? Can we forecast the future?

There are those who claim we can. There are those who say we can know the shape of our future and even control our future by spotting present trends.

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

“By the year 2000 half of the new homes will be substantially computerized. . . . While you’re out, your house continues to perform programmed tasks: Start the dishwasher and water the garden . . . open gates to a certain delivery truck, activate household noises to deter burglars. Commands can be changed via telephone—if you’re ahead of schedule, call home to adjust temperature and humidity levels, turn on the sauna, feed the cat.” Video screens, we are told, will “provide security (the computer can distinguish you, regular guests, and pets from intruders), though kids might object to the electronic eyes that will allow parents to monitor Junior doing homework. When its time for bed, go right upstairs. The house will let the cat in and turn off the lights.”⁹

In the 21st century, of course, food as we know it will be a thing of the past. Meat, for example, “will be 90 percent fat free, reconstituted to look like London broil or sirloin. In fact, it will be something like sawdust glued together with alginate of kelp.” If you find this less than appetizing, *Life’s* editors quickly add, “Fear not—we tried it, and it was fantastic.”¹⁰

5 Robert J. Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 18–19.

6 Ibid., p. 22.

7 Ibid., pp. 22–23, quoting Yoko Ota, *Shikabane no Machi (Town of Corpses)* (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo, 1955), p. 63.

8 John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 18.

9 *Life* (February 1989): 62.

10 Ibid., p. 58.

Yes, we have tasted the future, and it’s “fantastic”!

We can now forecast what is coming: The bright, silver clouds of the future will open up the blessings of technology.

Or will they?

Well, what do you make of trends like these: ozone vanishing over the polar ice caps; the greatest mass extermination in 66 million years of the earth’s flora and fauna carried out by a fairly new species called *homo sapiens*; tropical rain forests disappearing at 100 acres per minute; 7500 dead dolphins washing up on our Atlantic coast two summers ago, and medical wastes still closing our beaches this summer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This same Jesus, who cried in agony from his cross of suffering, this same Jesus is coming toward us on the horizon of the future, “coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

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

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

We are not to cower in fear of the future.

We are not to crouch, like a boxer, in doctrinaire defensiveness.

We are not to flee from solidarity in suffering into privatized spirituality.

We are to stand erect, confident, hopeful, knowing that whatever cloud comes to meet us, faith will see the face of Jesus Christ.

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

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