

Faith for Faithful Disbelievers: Christopher Morse as Systematic Theologian

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Christopher Morse has set out to salvage “dogmatics” as a theological discipline, but a first-year seminarian might naturally wonder if her teacher isn’t dodging the big issue. The most natural question for dogmatics would seem to be: *What should any individual Christian, personally, believe?* Yet even the faith statements Morse eventually offers are usually stated in terms of *doctrine*, as in “the Christian Faith” or “the church’s faith in God the Creator,” and a reader is bound to wonder if these locutions aren’t more sociological than personal, presented in terms of “the deposit of faith”—the “traditioned” symbolic representations of the “social facts”¹ associated with worship.²

Now it’s true that when it comes to what should *not* be included among those doctrines, Morse’s recommendations seem to take on a more personal aspect. Discerning “faithful *dis*beliefs” is something both individual congregants and church councils can readily do. Hence the subtitle of his book.³ But this presents an immediate obstacle. For it doesn’t take long for any novice seminarian to notice the unfamiliar dissonance this process produces. For example, one of Morse’s “proposed disbeliefs” is that “the life of Jesus Christ is not fully human.”⁴ Well, logically speaking, doesn’t this just mean that a Christian should believe that Jesus Christ “became fully human,” exactly as the Nicene Creed assures us? So why not just affirm the Creed? Why all the syntactical gymnastics here? What, one might ask, is Christopher Morse avoiding here?⁵

Morse’s answer might be that he’s not the one doing the avoiding, and in this discussion, I want to make a bit clearer what this answer might mean—first through a comparison with some prescient reflections by William James, and then with an interpretation of Morse’s own work.

1 Emile Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1982), 59.

2 “...all major controversies of true and false doctrine have been integrally related to issues pertaining to worship” (*Not Every Spirit*, 53).

3 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2009).

4 *Not Every Spirit*, 166.

5 In his preface to the second edition, Morse recounts the discomfort that greeted the publication of his book (*Not Every Spirit*, xix).

WILLIAM JAMES AND RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITY

“Faith” is often proposed as the answer to a troubled question: “What does it take for me to be saved?” But many who stumble their way into the office of a helping professional might begin instead with, say: “Why am I stuck in this crappy job?” Then come the biographical details—lost opportunities, adverse circumstances, bad judgments; and perhaps then, confessions of personal inadequacy. Finally: “What is there to *do*—how do I fix this?” If that professional is a pastor, one typical answer is going to be: “Have faith!” Or perhaps the despondent questioner no longer holds any hope that her life *can* be fixed, that there is anything that *can* be done—but once again, the priest says: “Have faith!” But how does such a person do *that*?

This injunction just to “have faith....” seems bland until the dots are filled in. And there are plenty of claimants to filling in those dots. Some claim that the Resurrection Power already lives in us—there’s *everything* to do, and we just need the prosperity pastor to remind us. And behold! There is an internet site to help us accomplish this, where we can play and replay the inspirational message, and learn that “when you gave your life to Christ, God put a power in you greater than any power you’ll ever face.”⁶ And so from now on, you’ve got it—“the power to accomplish your dreams.” This power is now in your possession—as long as you keep coming back for reinfusion. And, no, this is not addictive behavior.

On the other side are those who claim that things are so bad that it’s really quite hopeless and there’s *nothing at all* to do—except to take in the diabolical horror of where, for all eternity, our sorry plight is likely to land us. Fortunately (we’re told) there are indeed a series of steps one can take—or rather, theological truths we are to assimilate step by step—which have the amazing feel of a straight-forward Euclidean proof. At series end, we get our answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” Q.E.D.! So (what a relief) there is indeed something to do! It’s simple-sounding, it’s exactly biblical (Acts 16:31), it promises to feel great, and there’s a website for this too.⁷ Then, just click where it says “I have accepted Christ today.” And there you have it.

But this is not the gospel Christopher Morse hears. To the question of whether “having faith” is something we should be *doing*, Morse and others who are influenced by Calvin and Barth, would say “No!” This would turn “faith” into a “work,” and this, he would say, is to miss the fact that the Christian faith disbelieves Pelagius. But it’s one thing to say, as Morse certainly would, that a person should not aim at a faithful belief like one aims at a basketball hoop or at a stock acquisition. It’s another thing to identify the actual content of that belief, and if Morse is to be our guide, then don’t we need to find out what Morse is actually saying about this, as opposed to what he’s saying he’s *not* saying? So once again, don’t we need to understand what faithful *beliefs* a Christian should have? That is the question a novice reader of *Not Every Spirit* is bound to be asking.

6 <http://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/ThisWeeksMessage.aspx> (sermon for April 20, 2014).

7 <http://www.gotquestions.org/how-can-I-be-saved.html>.

So let's explore this. Both the prosperity preacher and the fundamentalist evangelical seem to be recommending that faith is indeed something we can *do*. Though Christopher Morse it too genteel to say this outright, these are the faithless believers—lacking, that is, Morse's notion of "faithfulness," which we will try to uncover here, and we will begin by asking this: While there may be lots wrong with these two answers, isn't there also something *right* in the idea that we can't just sit and wait for the natural world to take its course? Morse insists that beliefs harbor lies until their disbeliefs are uncovered, so might not even these rejected *faithless* beliefs harbor some truth? This possibility reveals, I think, a perplexity worth noticing, and it's worth pausing here to set the scene.

As a way of framing this, let's consider a famous section in William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which divides the religious sensibility into two types. The first James calls the "healthy-minded," and this is likely (at first) to strike his reader as a fitting description. It has the attestation of solid middle-class common sense—that it's best for people to weather hardships with sturdy resolve because once they do, they'll find the universe a pliant ally. Here is the voice of Emerson, Whitman, Teddy Roosevelt. James cites Theodore Parker, a prominent Transcendentalist and Unitarian minister: for him, however cold runs the stream of life, it has never been "too strong to be breasted and swum through."⁸ Should we ourselves not take on life in just this way—as a welcome, bracing challenge?

These healthy-minded are all over the internet these days. The universe is said to respond to the "laws of attraction," so why dwell on the negative, since "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Rom 8:28)? We've earlier quoted Joel Osteen (pastor of "the largest Protestant church in the United States"), who assures us: "Life will go so much better if you simply choose to be positive."⁹ So let not your heart be troubled: consider the lilies, etc. Prosperity is just around the corner—close enough to stave off the great depression that naturally besets the minds of the financially insecure. That sounds kind of healthy-minded.

But though James at this point is not exactly dismissive of this "healthy" religious temperament, it is not so easy to see him as the neutral observer his text claims him to be.¹⁰ *Varieties*, first delivered as lectures in 1901–2, constitutes a meditation on "morbid psychology, mediating and interpreting to the philistine much that he would otherwise despise."¹¹ It's not hard to imagine just who James' "philistine" is. For despite the ironically disarming rubric he applies to its cheerful adherents, James the psychologist spots what's really going on with the "healthy-minded." Their intrepidly nurtured "happiness" is really an "instinctive weapon for

8 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*; Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901–1902 (New York: Modern Library, 1929), 81.

9 Joel Osteen Ministries, <http://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/ThisWeeksMessage.aspx> (April 6, 2014).

10 "Please observe, however, that I am not yet [sic] pretending to *judge* any of these attitudes. I am only describing them." James, *Varieties*, 141.

11 James, private correspondence, quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James: Briefer Version* (New York: George Brazillier, 1954), 254.

self-protection against disturbance," while manifesting all the while as *faith*—faith in "the all-saving power of healthy-mindedness as such, in the conquering efficacy of courage, hope and trust, and a correlative contempt for doubt, fear, worry."¹² We today know this to be a feature of public culture as familiar to contemporary Americans as it was to William James.¹³

Against this "healthy-mindedness," James contrasts the "morbid" features of "the sick soul," for whom "evil is an essential part of our being and the key to the interpretation of our life."¹⁴ Morbid-mindedness takes many related forms (including James' own experience of depression decades prior)—perhaps an abiding anxiety obsessed with signs of one's own invisible election, or at least a gnawing recognition that evil is indeed a real force and a real danger to one's own well-being. James' point is not just that psychologically wounded people have trouble coping with life's challenges. The real point here is that real life is *so* fragile, evil may *so* entrap us at any turn, that the temperament alert enough to register this danger can hardly embrace the shallow affirmations of motivational psychology—the sort of appeal that James dismisses as "the very consecration of forgetfulness and superficiality."¹⁵ This is not just a case of emotional scars leaving one obtusely impermeable to the brisk tonic of positive thinking—though this may be true enough for some. The point is that such shallow affirmations are a temptation that *should* be resisted, if we deeply care about our own spirituality.¹⁶

So even though he claims only to be describing the *varieties* of religious experience, James himself specifically insists that healthy-mindedness is inadequate in just this way—because it turns away from genuine evil. James is explicit enough here: experiencing evil (and not just dismissing it as an inconvenient barrier to one's own self-realization) "may after all be the best key to life's significance" and to "the deepest levels of truth."¹⁷ So far so good.

But here's the crux. This pronouncement comes relatively early, in Lecture VII. By the time James reaches the end of his extended presentation—thirteen lectures later—he seems to have softened his criticism of healthy-mindedness considerably. James himself espoused a radical pluralism and a moderately subjectivist epistemology, and given the vagaries of context and sensibility, he finally balks at supposing that "all men should show identical religious elements" in their views

12 James, *Varieties*, 87, 93.

13 This feature of American pop culture has been an enduring mark of American middle class life for two centuries, and the catchphrases of James' own day—"the Gospel of Relaxation," "the Don't Worry Movement," "Youth! Health! Vigor!"—probably sound a bit less quaint to us than other remnants of the Gilded Age might. These might almost be quotes from the last self-help book you viewed on Amazon, and if not, just turn on Sunday morning cable TV.

14 James, *Varieties*, 129.

15 James, *Varieties*, 137.

16 This term "spirituality" is not a term that Christopher Morse much cares for; yet "spirituality correctly understood has rich dimensions and a field of meaning that no related term quite covers." See Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, vol. 16, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedia of the Religious Quest (New York: Crossroad, 1985), xv.

17 James, *Varieties*, 160.

on life—even, apparently, in their estimation of the moral nature of the inner and outer worlds they inhabit. Here then is James the herald of cultural diversity, proclaiming that each of humanity's various attitudes is but "a syllable in human nature's total message," so that "a 'god of battle' must be allowed to be the god for one kind of person, a god of peace and heaven and home, the god for another."¹⁸ And this tension—between the "deepest level" of religious truth and the descriptive comprehensiveness of religious experience—this is a perplexity that James does not appear to resolve.

But why raise all this in a discussion of Christopher Morse? Because here is a perplexity that Morse's signature treatment of theology actually addresses, and I raise it to indicate that what Morse proposes has broader applicability beyond dogmatics. Though this is not the occasion to address this broader aspect in any detail, here I hope to remind us of what that treatment envisions and to give an account of what the resulting content turns out to be. At the very end of this discussion, we will return to William James.

BEYOND FAITHLESS BELIEF

It is often the case that immense scholarly mileage gets fueled by a single biblical passage. Luther made a famous turn over Romans 1:17. Colleagues of Walter Wink will perhaps recall the impact of Matthew 5:41 on his life's work.¹⁹ And Christopher Morse may have just about cornered the contemporary market on elaborating Matthew 2:16–18²⁰—which also turns out to be our point of contact with William James.

The story of course depicts the horrific events that follow the adoration of the magi—the slaughter of the innocents and, importantly, Rachel's refusal to embrace false hope in the wake of indelible evil. She "would not be consoled"—even by the birth of the Messiah (and even by the assurances of the prosperity gospel!)—because even the Nativity event itself does not restore her murdered children, any more than the Resurrection erases the Crucifixion. But here's the other side of it: disbelieving the assurances of peace, peace where there is no peace—this does not entail that there will be no peace.²¹ Rather, it directs hopes elsewhere, to where the faithful Christian believer should expect to find their fulfillment. It has to direct one's hopes to the content of faithful *belief*.

Faithless believers, on the other hand, trust in the idols of their own self-protective instincts. Their "contempt for doubt, fear, worry" affords them "cheap grace," under the "pretense that there really is no dreadful harm in life from which

18 James, *Varieties*, 477.

19 Walter Wink, *Just Jesus: My Struggle to Become Human*, ed. Steven E. Berry (New York: Image, 2014), 65–67.

20 *Not Every Spirit*, 9–12. For previous commentary on this, however, see p. 348, n 13.

21 Rachel's voice is the voice God hears, as the *genuine* consolation sounds: "There is hope for your future" (Jer 31:17). *Not Every Spirit*, 10.

to be reclaimed."²² Just because their own hope of salvation really lies only in the power of their own beliefs, faithless believers take doubt to be the enemy of faith. But this, Morse insists, is just plain wrong. Doubt is not an abrasive to faith: doubt is its whetstone. It sharpens people to awaken from the anxiety of escapism. This is not an observation unique to Christopher Morse, but its application to the systematic practice of theology is much less widely recognized than, arguably, it should be, and for the last thirty years Morse's professional mission has been to spread the word.

This may have been dimly discerned by James, and we can see this in the perplexity that confronts us in *Varieties*. (1) On the one hand, James holds that not just anything warrants our belief. Our beliefs should be subject to more than just our own best intentions, which can easily be rationalized into a vast artifice of authorization. Smart paranoids do this, and so can ingenious theologians. Accordingly, James the philosophical pragmatist famously recommends that we test our beliefs "by the verdict of experience," and that we do so not just by its momentary intensities but by its future consequences. And so (for James) despite our dedication to remaining unmoved by evil, only the experience of evil may open up the "deepest levels" of life's significance—not all at once, but in the fullness of. A significant life truly is objectively better than an insignificant one. (2) On the other hand, James the social scientist (and radical empiricist) remains cautious of any effort to compile a complete picture of existence.²³ Though he acknowledges a supernatural dimension of wholeness that sees beyond "the facts of physical science at their face-value,"²⁴ James' own proto-postmodernist pluralism drives most of his philosophical agenda, and this leads him to admit that despite its dangers, there is something right about healthy-mindedness. There *are* occasions for taking up the challenge of life, for reminding oneself of the dangers of wallowing, etc. In more difficult moments, this is where the "god of battle" comes to the rescue. Yet it remains unclear what this implies other than just descriptive comprehensiveness—about which a radical pluralist has not all that much more to say. (Plurality just is.) So then there seems to be least a surface contradiction in what James does say here, and one has to wonder what he really means.

Where William James ends is where Christopher Morse might well begin, and I imagine him doing so (as usual) with a gesture of reconciliation. We can read Morse as a gloss on James' half-acknowledged perplexity, which dimly suggests that even the credulity of the so-called "healthy-minded" conceals a partial truth. Morse's explicit point is exactly the converse of this—that plausible beliefs, unexamined, conceal vitiating falsehoods—but this may be only one side of a larger truth.²⁵ Moreover, the task of dogmatics is to do more than "simply cata-

22 *Not Every Spirit*, 335.

23 James, "Radical Empiricism" in William James and John J. McDermott, *The Writings of William James; a Comprehensive Edition* (New York: Random House, 1967), 134–36.

24 James, *Varieties*, 511.

25 What would be interesting to a philosopher would be that Morse's thesis naturally blends into a bi-conditional: At least for some theological statements, if a theological belief conveys a truth, it harbors a falsehood & even if a theological belief conveys a falsehood, it harbors a truth.

logue the varieties of religious experience.”²⁶ This is not at all to say that diversity of expression goes uncelebrated, but rather that the truth of a form of expression is no guarantee against its unintended distortion.

Morse’s method carries the historical familiarity of established procedure. It is well-known that this general approach—of moving ahead by establishing parameters of the permissible—is just what moved the doctrinal development of the church. Orthodoxy was a response to heresy. The problem of course is that actual historical details often confirm the suspicions of many of Christianity’s critics. The fact for example that “*homoousios*” was apparently introduced at Nicaea by Emperor Constantine himself²⁷ (whose magisterial motives we imagine to be not entirely pious) makes its subsequent adoption by the Council hardly a surprise, and the critical historian may find it hard to shake off the imperial aura of such doctrines, which have been known to sanction a betrayal of deep human expectations.²⁸

On the other hand, the content of a doctrine is not reducible to the circumstances of its origination—a consideration neglected by many traditionalists. This insight is prized by Christopher Morse, who makes considerable headway out of the ambiguity of the Greek *paradosis* (“handing over”), used both by Paul in “handing over” the resurrection tradition he has received (1 Cor 15:3), and by the gospels in portraying Judas “handing over” Jesus to Pilate (Mt 26:45; Mk 14:41). This reminds us that the very wording of the traditional story contains an implicit warning to be suspicious about any attempt at interpretation, to call upon other resources to test whether a given formulation contains the *paradosis* of freedom and not of betrayal.

This insight Morse takes as his central thesis—that “the truth of Christian doctrine harbors a lie whenever the faithful disbelieves these doctrines entail go unrecognized.”²⁹ It takes only a moment’s reflection on contemporary secular life to see the wisdom of taking this general approach to heart,³⁰ but in both political and theological discussions, it’s no simple task to identify just what one should disbelieve. And so Morse offers not just a general caution against giving oneself over too wholeheartedly to the spirit of every moment, but also proposals for “testing the spirits” for authenticity.

But, again, faithful *belief*—the real meat of the matter—gets sandwiched in between those parameters, and cannot remain uninspected.

26 *Not Every Spirit*, 20.

27 W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 499.

28 *Not Every Spirit*, 116.

29 *Not Every Spirit*, 13.

30 One can only wistfully imagine what social gains could be had if something like Morse’s method were generally applied in political discourse. Looking back on the Obama presidency, for example, Jonathan Chait observes: “Liberals dwell in a world of paranoia of a white racism that has seeped out of American history in the Obama years and lurks everywhere, mostly undetectable. Conservatives dwell in a paranoia of their own, in which racism is used as a cudgel to delegitimize their core beliefs. *And the horrible thing is that both of these forms of paranoia are right.*” (emphasis added). See Jonathan Chait, “The Color of His Presidency,” NYMag.com, April 08, 2014, accessed April 20, 2014, <http://nymag.com/news/features/obama-presidency-race-2014-4/>.

TEST RESULTS

I shall not here attempt a full account of the criteria Morse recommends.³¹ I am more interested in the distillation of the gospel message he actually does provide. But in keeping with his own cautionary procedure, I shall also indicate some of the basis for his account, as best I can briefly summarize it.

Morse is no Christian triumphalist. He is very clear that no one needs to be a Christian in order to explore these matters. (This helps explain his keen interest in the avowedly atheist work of Alain Badiou.³²) But one needs to be *something*. There is no access for anyone not reared in some *particular* human community—especially in its liturgical life³³—and so “whatever talk may proceed from other [cultural] contexts,”³⁴ the *Christian’s* project is not to talk of God in general but of God in relation to Jesus Christ—or, better, in relation to “what happens in the life span of Jesus of Nazareth.” It would be a mistake, for example, to argue from abstract properties defined by Chalcedon and then draw conclusions in isolation from actual human context. But this is exactly what fundamentalists often do.³⁵

What is missing in fundamentalist accounts is the divine power accessible through worship. So even though the fundamental test for any Christian belief is congruence with scripture, that fundamental test must not be a fundamentalist enterprise. And of course!—some Union graduates might exclaim—who at Union would read scripture *literally*?! But that depends upon what one means by this. If “literal” entails “interpretive invariance” (as the terms today is usually taken to imply), fundamentalists might agree with many a liberal, at least on this hermeneutical aspect—that to accurately assess the text, one needs the definitive, invariant meaning that reflects what historically happened, either in terms of the historicity of actual events (e.g., Jesus actually rose from the dead) or in terms of the historicity of implied context (e.g., the actual authorial intention of the historical Mark was to reduce the tension among early Christian beliefs about Jesus). But though Morse insists that he reads scripture “literally,” he does not mean it in this way at all. His reading his unapologetically postliberal, whereby through a “literal” reading of scripture—by this he means a meticulous listening to the “soundings”

31 Ever sensitive to the soundings of language, Morse has produced an alliteration of these criteria: Continuity of apostolic tradition, Congruence with scripture, Consistency with worship, Catholicity, Consonance with experience, Conformity with conscience, Consequence, Cruciality, Coherence, and Comprehensiveness.

32 Christopher Morse, “The Resurrection as Myth and as Fable: The Difference after Thirty Years,” in *In Search of Humanity and Deity*, by Robert Morgan (London: SCM Press, 2006).

33 “. . . all major controversies of true and false doctrine have been integrally related to issued pertaining to worship” (*Not Every Spirit*, 53).

34 *Not Every Spirit*, 115.

35 Here, for example, is Rousas J. Rushdoony quoting Van Til: “Orthodoxy takes the self-contained ontological trinity to be this point of reference. The only alternative to this is to make man himself the final point of reference” (<http://chalcedon.edu/research/articles/the-word-of-dominion/>).

of the text—we hand *ourselves* over to the “semiotic functioning intrinsic to this particular way of speaking.”³⁶

But we cannot give a hearing to the text (nor to any other vehicle for divine power) unless our interpretive language has resonance with the lives we actually have. “To speak of God at all is to employ language that we also use in speaking of subjects other than God.”³⁷ We proceed by *via analogiae* and not by *via remotiois*,³⁸ and it is not enough to leave us only parameters of *disbeliefs*. Again, as we turn from our *disbeliefs*, where are we turning *to*?

Here then, finally, we turn to the details of Jesus’ earthly biography. The Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, by making manifest “the uttermost depths of human misery,” also make apparent God’s promise for the “apocalypse of glory” which that narrative reveals—and reveals not just for the human Jesus, but also for us, in the “unprecedented glory of not being left orphaned but of being loved in a community of new creation beyond all that we can ask or imagine.”³⁹ And this is really the crux of the gospel for Morse. Ever since his earliest work on the logic of promissory statements,⁴⁰ he has insisted that the gospel message is eschatological, and that this message is not revealed “all at once” in the reportage of empty tombs and post-resurrection sightings. Indeed, drawing from the work of Arthur Danto⁴¹ and others, Morse insisted early on, purely as a *logical* matter, that the Resurrection event cannot be reportage. Despite valiant insistence by fundamentalists, the history of any event occurs within a narrative, and narratives make essential reference to the standpoint of a narrator who is not contemporaneous with the narrated events.⁴² (This explains his opposition to “univocal literalism” in hermeneutics.)

I do not think that application of an *a priori* logical schema settles the discussion, however, and I’m not sure that Morse now thinks it does. The best fundamentalists have a ready reply to all these “liberal” talking points, so the best any theologian can probably do, ultimately, is to suggest that one’s opponent has missed the message, for which Morse of course appeals to scripture itself. There Jesus the apocalyptic prophet speaks in parables conveying the incommensurability of God’s kingdom—this “strange new world within the Bible.”⁴³ If scripture conveys God’s Word, then its message must come to us not as the best results scholars

36 Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 33–37. For a review, see *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 63: 3&4: <http://usqr.utsnyc.edu/article/book-review-the-difference-heaven-makes/>

37 *Not Every Spirit*, 120.

38 *Not Every Spirit*, 16.

39 Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 121–122.

40 Christopher Morse, *The Logic of Promise in Moltmann’s Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

41 Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge: Including the Integral Text of Analytical Philosophy of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). For an attempt to extract the spiritual dimension of Danto’s secular philosophy, see David Seiple, “The Spirit of Arthur Danto,” in *The Philosophy of Arthur C. Danto*, ed. Randall E. Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn, vol. XXXIII, Library of Living Philosophers (Chicago: Open Court, 2013), available at https://www.academia.edu/5278026/The_Spirit_of_Arthur_Danto.

42 *The Logic of Promise*, 101.

43 Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1978), 28.

can offer, but as “divinatory imagination” (Barth).⁴⁴ Since the form of this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:31), our sense of what is coming cannot be reliably framed with reference to the nature of what is disappearing—not as the foolishness of the world, in other words. We face an *adventus*⁴⁵ that is irreducible to a *futurum*⁴⁶ (Moltmann). And here, ironically, is where fundamentalist scholarship itself fails to meet the test of congruence with scripture!

Now, it’s not clear at this point whether Morse is making a metaphysical as well as a phenomenological comment. A metaphysical interpretation of “*adventus*” would entail that the incommensurability is more than just our entrenched blindness to the deep (but still rationally formulable) structure of our own world—in accordance with, say, our having been already created in God’s image in a world that God has already deemed to be “good.” In other words, “transcendence” would have to mean more than simply “incommensurable with our present state of consciousness.” It would mean that the ordinary course of the cosmos would be radically altered as the eschaton approaches, analogous perhaps to the way that a creationist would preserve the belief in a “literal” six-day creation story.⁴⁷ Morse may not wish to take such a position—after all, the metaphysical interpretation, as an explanation for the workings of the eschaton, would place him in the company of fundamentalists who reject the uniformity of nature just so they can explain the geological record on “biblical” presuppositions.⁴⁸ In any case, what is clear is that, for Morse, if the Holy Spirit is our guide for the *adventus*—if God is still speaking to us today—then it will guide us into circumstances that are as new and uncharted as history itself, for which both dogmatic formulations and their contexts of application need rethinking.

However, there may be limits to the revisability of dogmatic formulations, and Morse’s efforts at a logically minimalist rendering of the gospel message work both as a hedge against endless revisionism and as a remedy against Christian exclusivism. So the Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection get interpreted, in terms of the Incarnation, Resurrection and Parousia, as the most encompassing symbol for the most fundamental gospel truth: For “sifted to the heart of the matter, all

44 *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 58.

45 “. . . in which a new reality comes into the present that is not accounted for as an extrapolation from any available residue of what has gone before” (*The Difference Heaven Makes*, 46).

46 “. . . a becoming that emerges from the potentialities of the past” (*Ibid.*)

47 Scholars unfriendly to fundamentalism may be surprised at the scientifically sophisticated responses available to defend creationism. See, for example, John K. Reed, “Untangling Uniformitarianism, Level II: Actualism in Crisis,” *Answers Research Journal*, no. 4 (2011), accessed May 6, 2014, http://legacy-cdn-assets.answersingenesis.org/contents/379/arj/v4/uniformitarianism_actualism.pdf.

48 Here is one typical fundamentalist interpretation of the geological record relating to the age of the earth: “. . . it is likely that some of the laws of nature were altered in some way by God’s curse on the whole creation in Genesis 3, resulting in the bondage to corruption that Paul speaks of in Rom. 8:19–23.” See Terry Mortenson, “Philosophical Naturalism and the Age of the Earth: Are They Related?,” *Answers in Genesis*, March 2, 2005, section goes here, accessed May 04, 2014, <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/2005/03/02/philosophical-naturalism-age-earth>.

technical terminology aside...is the refusal to believe that any situation is hopeless—*any* situation.”⁴⁹

The importance of this terminology is twofold. First, Morse sounds at times almost like an anonymous Unitarian Universalist: “the wider world of Christ’s life span” encompasses “the practices of all religions and human societies without regard to how ‘Christian’ these may claim to be in their ‘Lord, Lord’ talk (Matt. 7:21).”⁵⁰ And yet for Morse, the Incarnation remains the crucial dogmatic move towards that very universality: Jesus Christ becomes not just human, but Humanity itself—a “concomitance of crucified and risen life” that consummates in “apocalyptic vindication.”⁵¹ The point is that there may be other (non-Christian) symbols that convey a similar message.

Secondly, this does indeed have metaphysical-sounding implications. Apocalyptic vindication—and this has to include our subjectively experienced well-being—is guaranteed through God’s Promise (in ways that we do not understand). The lifespan of Jesus Christ—a union of “narrative particularity and promissory universality”⁵²—actually encompasses our own lives in being “custom made to fit the actual circumstances of each and every recipient.” Here Morse is quite traditional: he believes quite “literally” in the afterlife—and not simply postmortem appreciation among friends and neighbors (no “cumulative residue of lingering influence”), not some diffuse remainder of psychic energy dispersed into the great vastness, and not a spiritualized continuance of a disembodied self that never dies. We do die. And we shall be resurrected—in the body and in the full recollection “in glory of one’s own irreplaceable life story and name.”⁵³

If this is correct, then it seems possible to give an appropriately minimalistic theological rendering of faithful belief (in words that stick fairly closely to Christopher Morse’s own), as follows:

Faith (or faithfulness) is
trusting in the promise
that engenders our hope
in the power of the One
who, through grace, will love us into freedom.

SUMMARY INTERPRETATION

There are three aspects to Morse’s faithful disbelief. The first, which he surveys in great detail, concerns the parameters of faith. The second, which he identifies less expansively, concerns the logically sparser formulations that lie

49 *Not Every Spirit*, 230.

50 *Not Every Spirit*, 304.

51 *Not Every Spirit*, 163–166.

52 *Not Every Spirit*, 150.

53 *Not Every Spirit*, 343.

within those parameters and are governed by the *analogia fidei* (Barth).⁵⁴ But the third lies, as it were, perpendicular to both, and avoids capture by either parameter or creed. Here is a space that gets filled, in the process of testing the spirits, *not* by a doctrine at all. It gets filled by another *spirit*—the spirit of whoever the faithful disbeliever has thereby become. For the real test is not of doctrines but of the interrogator, and the real goal is not to be a caretaker of settled dogma, but to be a steward of the mysterious divine economy, shown forth in “the saving power of Jesus Christ now coming into the actual flesh and blood sufferings that present themselves to us, and around us wherever we are located in space and time.”⁵⁵ And this is the reason that what is left within the parameters of disbelief feels so doctrinally elusive. For how can we capture the being of a person? How can we circumscribe in advance the changing circumstances of space and time?

From Morse we might see that “having faith” is not one of the things we can do; rather, faithfulness is one of the ways we can be. This comes clear, I think, in two related considerations. One of these gets expressed (as has been noted) as the injunction against idolatry—in this case, the danger that one’s own strivings take on the character of self-justifying, self-protective distraction from God’s will. Despite the Calvinist admonition to avoid making faith into a work, discerning which disbeliefs lead us toward faithfulness is certainly a crucial task—one that is specially assigned to those with the requisite gifts (the teachers of the church and the academy) to be made available for the further task of leading others ever more fully into “the faith.” The task is to “hand over” an entire sensibility towards life itself, one that will be a *paradosis* of freedom and not of betrayal. This is conveyed not by formulae, not by a computerized checklist of theological truths, not by repeated affirmations channeling the power of positive thinking. Nor is it captured once-for-all by a journal article or a textbook of theology. And this again is why faithful disbeliefs are crucial: because the formulation of faithful *beliefs* is necessarily minimalist.

The other consideration takes off from this, and gets reflected in Morse’s idea that theological inquiry is a *reciprocal interrogation*,⁵⁶ whose point is less about coming up with the right answers than it is about asking the right questions. From this angle, the proliferation of criteria in Morse’s test procedure has the benefit of ensuring a continual reappraisal, whose content cannot be entirely encompassed by the beliefs that result. The notion that the aim of dogmatics is not the establishment of settled doctrine might strike some as eviscerating rather than salvaging dogmatics. If Morse is right, however, one of the menacing traps in the Christian life—and the “great temptation”⁵⁷ faced by theologians and Christian philosophers—is not just cheap grace, but cheap utterance. Following Jesus is not easy, and this is partly because it’s not easily understood who it is we’re to follow, where it is we’re to go, and how exactly we will get there. And so

54 Christopher Morse, “Raising God’s Eyebrows: Some Further Thoughts on the Concept of the *Analogia Fidei*,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* XXXVII, no. 1 & 2 (Fall 1981).

55 *Not Every Spirit*, 39, 42.

56 *Not Every Spirit*, 93.

57 *Not Every Spirit*, 43.

faithful silence is at least as important as faithful speaking: “the true proclamation of Easter can only be made by those who, in concert with Rachel’s voice, have first been silenced by Good Friday.”⁵⁸

Here then finally is the reason for such an elaborate rhetoric of circumlocution in *Not Every Spirit*. Though many a first-year seminarian has probably wondered if Christopher Morse couldn’t just have hired a decent editor, this misses the point entirely. Yes, Morse’s lists of faithful disbeliefs don’t exactly trip lightly off the tongue, and it’s a significant challenge to keep all the syntactical negatives properly in mind. It’s hard mental work. But given the mysteries of the faith and the complexities of real life, what else would one expect?

ONE FINAL DOUBT

However, after all is said and done, isn’t there a thorn gnawing at the side of this whole project? One can imagine a bright seminarian engaged in his own wide-ranging spiritual quest, perhaps experienced enough with the techniques of academic interrogation to be bothered still. For still, have we yet discovered whether or not what’s to be gotten from the process of testing the spirits is really *true*? How do we know it’s really the Holy Spirit that’s guiding us and not our own well-trained subconscious? How do we know that it’s really *God’s* power that we are trusting in? And how do we really know that we will really be resurrected? We may see signs—we in faith may have taken up our own pallet and walked away from an impending disaster, and we may see this as confirmation. But (as the logicians would say) a sign is only that—inductive confirmation—and from our earthly corner we lack even a true metric of its logical strength. If signs were more than this, the scribes and Pharisees would have stopped their murmuring.

This is particularly unsettling when we apply our own interrogative whetstone to Morse’s list of proposed disbeliefs. Morse deflects the notion that the Bible itself is God’s Word by disbelieving that “God’s Word can be confined and is not now free to speak wherever and as God chooses.”⁵⁹ But this gives fundamentalists no trouble at all: they aren’t “confining God’s freedom!”—they just believe that God has actually chosen, freely, to speak in the original autograph of Scripture. And the notion that our disbelief that the life span of Jesus indicates anything other than God’s promise to love us into freedom—this, to them, must seem like nothing more than the product of our imagination, however “divinatory” we take that to be.

And here then we get to real nub. The very fact that, in place of Morse’s *paradosis* of freedom, a fundamentalist might nonetheless offer, for example, a logically solid forensic theory of atonement—this presents us with a clash of

58 *Not Every Spirit*, 114.

59 *Not Every Spirit*, 93.

incommensurable paradigms (Kuhn),⁶⁰ each with its own “criteria of adequacy” (Lindbeck).⁶¹ And from this observation we draw two final points.

First, any response one gives to any theological answer whatsoever is likely to be consistent with some intellectually impressive set of considerations—and those who don’t agree with it are likely to regard some of those considerations as purely ad hoc.⁶² Here they may think that they are in possession of the obvious truth about this, but matters are not so simple (as followers of Bill Nye should realize after his debate with the creationist Fred Ham⁶³). This is just where spirit-testing comes in and especially its long list of examination procedures, whereby Morse offers not a “crucial experiment” (Popper) but a “requirement of continuous growth” (Lakatos).⁶⁴ His insistence upon reciprocal interrogation—rather than a once-for-all God’s-eye vantage point—explains the elusiveness of faithful belief’s content.

And secondly, although the impressive set of theoretical moves undergirding a position like forensic atonement do happen to ring true to a fundamentalist, they are likely to present advanced students of Christopher Morse with little more than the clunky-sounding moving parts of scholastic argument. This suggests that the greatest barrier to faith may be tone-deafness to the *soundings* of scripture and even of human contact itself—the deafness that allows fundamentalists to love the sinner and hate the sin of their gay friends. In the end, when it comes to testing the spirits, all we may have to go on, finally, is just our humanity.

This second point brings us back finally again to James. Our deliberation, James says, must stand before the “verdict of experience,” and by this he means for us to attend closely to “certain subjective marks with which it affects him.” Admittedly, his own list of these marks⁶⁵ is hardly a description of “the hope of glory.” But the priority James gives to the “consonance of experience” makes our point here: for Morse, the final test is always going to be how the “soundings” of the ten-pronged testing resonate in the daily hearing of those who faithfully keep that

60 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

61 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 113.

62 Since the failure of both logical positivism and classical idealism, leading philosophers (excluding, that is, the philosophically sophisticated polemicists) have generally accepted the notion that there is no way of definitively establishing demarcating criteria for ad hoc unacceptability. And whereas the “harder” scientific disciplines can more or less spot the most likely ad hoc candidates (as theories that are experimentally unfalsifiable—parapsychology is a frequently given example), theology is in a dreadful position in this respect, since whatever might best confirm or disconfirm our most crucial beliefs lie outside the realm of possible earthly experience.

63 Bill Nye and Ken Ham, “Bill Nye Debates Ken Ham,” Bill Nye Debates Ken Ham, February 4, 2014, accessed May 01, 2014, <http://debatelive.org/>.

64 Imre Lakatos, “Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes,” in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, by Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 173–77.

65 “What, then, are the marks? A strong feeling of ease, peace, rest, is one of them. The transition from a state of puzzle and perplexity to rational comprehension is full of lively relief and pleasure” (“The Sentiment of Rationality,” in *The Writings of William James*, 317).

hope alive. And in the practice of reconciliation that follows, though we probably have to do more listening than speaking, nonetheless, speak we eventually must.

St Augustine, towards the end of *De Trinitate*, said this about what he had written: “We have said this not in order to say something, but in order not to remain altogether silent.” Christopher Morse, now towards the end of his career, could have added: “We disbelieve so that our speaking might not lead us too far astray.”