

# Testing the Spirits

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## FOREWORD

Because I know that Christopher Morse is no fan of indulgent tributes or excessive sentimentality, I will keep these introductory remarks brief and restrained, except to say that learning from, working with, and befriending him have profoundly shaped me, both as a teacher of Christian theology and a person. At present my students at Hood Theological Seminary helpfully receive much of his wisdom and insights into the discipline of “dogmatic theology” through his influence on my thinking and approach to the same.

I first met Christopher Morse at Yale Divinity School while enrolled in an excellent course he offered there in spring 1997 on twentieth century Christian theology. Two years later I entered the doctoral program at Union Theological Seminary as his student in systematic theology, completing my dissertation under his helpful direction in 2006. He married my wife and me in 2003 and today my two children, Nicholas and Grace, refer to him affectionately as “Uncle Kit.”

I have read his excellent, one volume Christian dogmatics, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, well over twenty times, cover-to-cover. Although it is commonly recognized to be in the “canon” of recent introductions to Christian theology, there remains in that book a treasure trove of insights and methodological ingenuities that wait patiently for other theologians to encounter and critically engage in print. One of these is the vision of theological education Christopher puts forward in *Not Every Spirit*’s first three chapters. After being tasked to deliver the 2014 Closing Convocation address at Hood Theological Seminary, I decided to use the occasion to present that vision to the Seminary community the night before graduation exercises. What follows is the text of that address, given May 16, 2014.

**1 John 4:1–4:** Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. <sup>2</sup>By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, <sup>3</sup>and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. <sup>4</sup>Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

“To love God, in the sense of placing trust and hope in the One identified in scriptural traditions and attested in the ongoing life of the church as the Lord, is at the same time to refuse to trust and hope in what the writers of scripture in their

distinctive ways refer to as idols, false gods, false prophets, unclean spirits, or even as the Antichrist. Scripturally this refusal to give allegiance to that which is not of God is presented as a faithful act.”<sup>1</sup>

## TESTING THE SPIRITS

Congratulations. The day you’ve been waiting for is almost here. After a series of semesters spent studying for exams, writing papers, and preparing sermons, you are now some sixteen hours away from walking across that stage, shaking the president’s hand, and finally getting your hands on the diploma that at one time seemed very far out of reach.

In the weeks to come families and congregations will throw parties for you. If you come from a small town you may even get your name in the local newspaper. But at the very least you can always, in these days of electronic self-celebration, promote your Hood graduation *yourself* on your Facebook page.

But after the relatives from Georgia have driven away in their mini-vans, after the family parties and church receptions are over, and when that self-congratulatory Facebook post has become old news, what then? When the memory of this weekend begins to fade? When it’s just you and your diploma, hanging on the wall of your office, staring back at each another? When you begin to ask yourself, what was it all for—the time spent away from family studying ancient texts, pondering the ethical implications of the Gospel?

And what does it really mean to hold a theological degree anyway? What difference does having one make at the end of the day?

The best way to answer to these questions may be to ask, how have you changed as a result of the theological education you have received? Whether you realize it, you *are* different now than when you first stepped onto this campus some number of years ago. *Something has been added to you that was not there before.*

But what is it, exactly, that has been added? And, more importantly, to what end or for what purpose?

Let me start with what I think has *not* changed as a result of your having come to Hood.

First, I seriously doubt that acquiring a theological degree has brought you somehow “closer” to God. Augustine famously said that God is “closer to us than we are to ourselves.”<sup>2</sup> Paul states in Acts that God is the one in whom we “live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). To be alive, in other words, is to be close to God. The moment we took our first breaths God was close and has been ever since, whether we knew it or not. The life changing moment for people of faith was not when God “came close” to them, but when they found themselves with the ability to recognize God’s steadfast presence in their lives and then decided to allow that presence to guide them from that point on. And you certainly didn’t need

1 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, 2d ed. (New York: Continuum, 2009), 5.

2 “Interior intimo meo et superior summo meo” (*Confessions* III. vi.11).

this army of PhDs assembled on this stage to tell you *that*. Any good preacher with a Bible could have done so.

Secondly, I don't think it true that you now "know God" better than you did before, *as a result, that is, of your theological studies*. God, as the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber had to remind everyone at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is a subject, not an object.<sup>3</sup> God, that is, is more like a person than a thing. *Things*, for instance, can be dispassionately studied, dissected, and scientifically examined—in a laboratory, under a microscope, or in a classroom. But to know a *person*—well, that requires personal encounter, one that takes place in the context of what Buber called an "I-Thou" relationship. Such a relationship is one for which a lecture, a textbook, a classroom discussion can never substitute. So, no, your theological education has not somehow granted you membership in an elite society whose members, by virtue of their education, "know God" better than everybody else. No matter how many letters come after your name, you are still going to have to wait for *God* to reveal God's self to you if you are to know this One who is more like a person than a thing.

Third, I seriously doubt—in fact, *I know*—that the process of earning a theological degree has "saved" you. News flash: Graduate theological education has never "saved" anyone and never will. Tomorrow you will not acquire the powers to confer salvation upon yourself or anyone else. That is because salvation comes by way of grace, not education and no exception will be made in your case. And on judgment day, if Matthew 25 is to be believed, the question the Son of Man will ask you is not whether or where you went to Seminary, what grades you received while there, but whether you took care of the least of these in society as best you could.

So I'm confident you were (1) close to God, (2) in relationship with God, and (3) probably "saved" before you came to seminary. But what you might *not* have been able to do before is what the writer of 1 John refers to as "testing the spirits." Let's hear from our text once more:

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

*Test the spirits to see whether they are from God.*

What "spirits" is the writer talking about exactly?

Well, what the writer does *not* have in mind is some kind of hyper-transcendent "spirit dimension" now taking place over our heads, outside the dimensions of time and space. Notice that the writer draws a connection between these "spirits" that require testing and the fact that, as he puts it, "many false prophets have gone out into the world." This connection is what makes these spirits and their testing very much a time and space issue. Christopher Morse in his book *Not Every Spirit*

3 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 2d ed., trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 75–120.

has it right when he argues that we should understand these "spirits" to refer to human claims made about, and in the name of, God.<sup>4</sup>

*Spirits as human claims made about and in the name of God.*

We live, of course, in an age where more people than ever are saying stuff about God and in the name of God. Fifty years ago, however, the "experts" were telling us that it was not going to be this way. Back in the 1960s sociologists of religion were predicting that secular worldviews were fast on their way to eclipsing theological ones and that progress in science and technology would hasten religion's delayed departure from the world.<sup>5</sup>

One of the great surprises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, has been that great technological and scientific advances have been met not with religion's diminishment but with its explosion, albeit in new forms and expressions. Accordingly, the challenge now before us may not be, as many would have us believe, the growth of unbelief, of atheism, but rather the growth of *too much* belief, *too much* religion, and *too many people* claiming the right to speak about and for God—not necessarily a good thing, given the kinds of crazy stuff people are believing and saying about God and in the name of God these days.

In a way we may now be closer than ever to the world from which our text this evening came, where the problem the writer had to deal with was not trying to get people to believe in God, but to get them to think in responsible ways about God and to be able to discern and name bad theology—bad talk about God—when it reared its head. For this reason—and I think the writer of 1 John would certainly agree—theologically trained persons, such as yourselves, have become more important—and more necessary—than perhaps ever before.

But before we get charged up to test the spirits, or the theological claims, made by those who do *not* identify with the Christian faith—"Nones," New-Agers, Muslims, or whomever—we first need to read 1 John in its entirety. There you will see that the "false prophets" who have gone out into the world are *not* adherents to non-Christian belief systems. They are, instead, members of the very Christian community to which the writer belongs. Persons who also claim to be saved by way of Jesus Christ and his Spirit. Persons who regard the Gospel of John as highly as the writer does. And it is here the call to "test the spirits" gets interesting: How do you test the spirits, the theological claims, made by someone who might be a member of your own faith community, who reads the same Bible, recites the same creeds, and prays the same prayers that you do?

But wait. Doesn't being a member of a church, a regular reader of the Bible, a teacher of Sunday School, a dedicated lay leader, somehow grant you immunity from bad theology?

Judging from your facial expressions, I'm guessing that many of you have been around long enough to know that this, unfortunately, is not the case. Like me, you too have heard too many bad, theologically irresponsible sermons. You too

4 Morse, 8.

5 Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

have stood by in disbelief as people project their own norms and values onto God and then demand that others worship that projection as God. You too have seen church people use Scripture as a weapon to protect and preserve their power rather than as a means of grace for the world. You too have seen the outwardly pious attempt to conceal their personal agendas by claiming the testimony of the Spirit to legitimate their cause and/or to demonize those who disagree with them.

The biggest threat to Christianity, the writer of 1 John tells us, may very well be an internal rather than an external one and I fear he is right.

Unfortunately, our ability to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God” has been made more difficult by a very modern approach to the Christian faith that has reduced it to a series of propositional truth statements to which a person must will him or herself to assent. Do you believe in the Virgin Birth? Check. In literal, bodily resurrection? Check. In the total inerrancy of the scriptures? Check. In substitution atonement theory? Check. In the miracles of Jesus? Check.

If the Christian faith were only that simple. If only it were as easy as agreeing to the truth of a set number of propositions on a piece of paper.

What I hope you have learned at Hood is that the Christian faith involves a great deal more than believing certain things *about* Jesus and *about* the Bible. As the writer of the book of James states, there is little to distinguish this kind of faith from that of the demons (Jas 2:19) who too can assent to a number of Christian propositional truth statements, written down on a piece of paper. No, what I hope you have learned at Hood is that faith is not a matter of believing certain things *about* Jesus, but of putting your whole trust in him, the one through whom God is working to heal, redeem, and transform the created order. And I hope you have also learned that the authority of Scripture resides not in its inerrancy, but in the fact that it contains the Gospel, or God’s word of promise to the creation—and thus to you as well, as an integral part of that creation.

A careful reader of the Bible will also notice that its writers are much more concerned with the problem of idolatry, or bad theology—the testing of the spirits—than they are with the problem of atheism, or the absence of belief altogether. When Jesus encounters Satan in the wilderness, for instance, Satan tries to deceive him by proof texting scripture (Luke 4:9–10)!<sup>6</sup> Paul’s opponents are not people who are trying to get those in church to stop believing; rather, they are, like Paul, fellow Jewish adherents to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Read his letters carefully: Paul’s struggle with these persons is not about modern questions such as “Does God exist?” His debates with them center, rather, on how best to interpret Scripture in light of the fact that God has raised Jesus from the dead. On how best to test the spirits.

And when the time comes for you to test the spirits, how will you discern, as Jesus did in the wilderness, the difference between a proof text and a responsible use of Scripture? When the time comes, how will you, like Paul in Galatia, stand up and demand that the Church conform itself to the Gospel, rather than the Gospel to the Church?

In 1933 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a short statement paper entitled, “What Should the Student of Theology Do Today?” Nowhere in this paper did Bonhoeffer say anything about building new fellowship halls, getting congregations to tithe more, tailoring sermons and liturgies to reach younger age demographics, or learning from corporate CEOs how to run an effective church. Instead, Bonhoeffer wrote “that the student [of theology] should prepare, through studies, to test the spirits in the church of Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

In Bonhoeffer’s Germany, “testing the spirits” or the theological claims of other Christians, became not just an academic exercise but quite literally a matter of life and death. Many preachers, youth ministers, bishops, and lay leaders of the time were developing and proclaiming a theology that idolatrously merged German culture with Christian culture and Nazi political philosophy with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Too few pastors at the time were sufficiently trained, Bonhoeffer realized, to “test” these “spirits” in the churches. As a result, the one institution powerful enough at the time to have awakened the German people to the emergent evil among them, to the evil that was disguising itself as good, to the dangerous political ideology masquerading as faithful theology, fell asleep at its post and allowed the gates of hell to prevail.

An inability to test the spirits prevented many Christians in this country from recognizing that segregation and Jim Crow were contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> Thank God that the spirit testers of the Black Church kept the power and promise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ alive during this time. But what about those who failed to test, who could not tell the difference between the authentic Gospel and the “gospel” of white racism? If they had received theological training, how and why did it fail them? Why could they not draw from it and apply it when faithfulness in that particular time and place called for them to do so?

And more to the point: What will prevent *you* from falling down on the job and failing to bear witness to the Gospel when the situations that await you call for you to do so? What are the tests that await you in your churches, in your ministries once you leave this Seminary with your degree in hand? Will you be ready?

One of my favorite movies growing up was *The Karate Kid*. The best part of that film was Pat Morita’s memorable way of training Ralph Macchio karate. Remember how he made Macchio come to his house each day and do manual labor, using very deliberate, specific techniques and movements? Paint the fence! Sand the floor! Wax on, wax off! After a week of this, his muscles sore, his back tired, and his face sun-burned, Macchio is ready to quit, seeing no practical value in anything he has been doing. Finally, when he has had enough, he tells Pat Morita that he is quitting, that he is through doing what seems to him to have been pointless hours of manual labor.

In that film’s great epiphanic moment, Morita reveals to him that the work he has been putting Macchio through was not in vain. That what he thought was

7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Was soll der Student der Theologie heute tun?” 1933, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2d ed., 3:243–27, quoted in Morse, 32.

8 Morse, 37.

pointless labor was unknowingly training him, through muscle memory, in basic karate techniques.

It may not yet be entirely clear to you why Drs. Mbuwayesango and Trick were so hard on your exegesis papers. Why Dr. Turner was so insistent that you understand how people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century used the Bible to justify slavery. Why Dr. Mobley wanted you to see the often undetected social and cultural forces at work in human religion. Why Drs. Crumpton and Lattimore kept throwing pastoral care and counseling hypotheticals and case studies at you. Why Dr. Resner would bang his head against the wall when you allegorized your preaching text. Why Dr. Love wanted you to view Christian education from a learner's, not a teacher's, perspective. Why Dr. Young kept lecturing about this thing called "orthopraxis." They did all of this to get you ready, perhaps unbeknownst to you, to test the spirits to see whether they are from God.

And it was for this reason, I believe, that God brought you to Seminary. Not to grow closer to God. Not to know God better. Not to get saved. But to prepare you to test the spirits—the things said about and in the name of God—in the churches. And it is for this purpose that those of us on this stage now send you out back again into the church tomorrow, degree in hand, to hold it accountable to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Amen.