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A REVIEW OF *EXPLORING HEAVEN*, #1

STEPHEN K. MORONEY

Recent surveys indicate that four out of five Americans believe in the existence of heaven, a place where people live forever with God after they die. These same people, however, have a broad spectrum of opinions about what heaven is like and who will be there. Popular consternation about heaven has not been helped by theologians who have shied away from this topic, as with Louis Berkhof, who covers heaven in a single page within his 738-page *Systematic Theology*.¹ Many people are curious about heaven, and Arthur O. Roberts, professor at large at George Fox University, accepts the challenge of providing answers for many of our questions in his book *Exploring Heaven: What Great Christian Thinkers Tell Us About Our Afterlife with God*.² Roberts' introductory chapter signals four of the book's central goals: to examine what the Bible teaches about heaven, to promote respectful dialogue between scientific and religious ideas about heaven, to get beyond vague notions about heaven to more satisfying answers to our questions, and to listen to the perspectives of famous thinkers about heaven. The body of the book draws on wide-ranging sources, as well as Roberts' own creative imagination, to explore eight key questions people have about heaven.

Chapter two tackles the question of *where* heaven is located. Roberts shows through careful analysis why he is unsatisfied with secular ideas that heaven is a mere illusion to be cast aside, just a mental concept of perfection that does not actually exist, simply a cultural construct or mythological human artifact, a realm where souls/spirits happily live in a disembodied state [a common outlook among Americans], or a reality only in the mind of God. Instead, Roberts stands behind the view that heaven describes the conscious continuation of resurrected, embodied persons enjoying multidimensional existence in a renewed heaven and earth.

Chapter three concerns itself with the *meaning* of eternal life. Again, Roberts examines and rejects several views with which he disagrees, as a prelude to affirming his conviction that eternity encompasses both the highest possible quality of life and the unending quantity of everlasting life. God graciously provides the possibility of

eternal life, Roberts says, by expiating sin through Christ's death and resurrection, which can be understood, at least in part, through various atonement metaphors. Roberts follows Jerry Walls' teaching that to complete the process of sanctification, "training in discipleship will occur in heaven."³ In Roberts' view, hell exists as the flipside of heaven. He says hell is a real place where, "finally impenitent ones will live on forever in a realm reserved for them, in a society unleavened by the righteousness they profited from on earth but rejected for themselves."⁴

One of the delights of this book is the impossibility of separating its skillfully woven interdisciplinary strands. It might be said, however, that while chapter two is largely philosophical and chapter three mainly theological, chapter four turns to the apologetic question of what *evidences* we have for heaven. Roberts believes that purposeful intelligence in the universe makes the hope of heaven reasonable and viable. Persistent cultural intuitions about an afterlife and reports of near death experiences further increase the plausibility of heaven, in his estimation. The scriptural affirmation of eternal life (detailed in Appendix A) and the bodily resurrection of Jesus, backed by convincing eyewitness reports, make the reality of heaven more probable yet. Lastly Roberts cites Christians' corroborative personal experience of Christ within us and among us as our hope of glory. In the author's view, the cumulative evidence points to heaven as an actual place for personal life after death.

Who will dwell in this renewed, enhanced creation healed from the wounds of sin? In the fifth chapter Roberts mentions four possible *inhabitants*. He believes angels will be there as "heaven's natives." The church celestial will be there in the form of billions of persons from every tribe, tongue, nation, and people who have responded by faith to the Light within. Roberts' best guess on animals is that they will enjoy species immortality but not individual resurrection (cats but not a resurrected Fluffy). He is even more tentative on the heavenly presence of extraterrestrials (non-earthly intelligent beings), while affirming that God is sovereign over the entire cosmos, including the parts we do not know about.

What will *humans be like* in heaven? Roberts opens chapter six by surmising from Jesus' resurrected state that, "our resurrection bodies retain self-conscious identities and recognizable configurations but possess greater capabilities than our present earthly bodies."⁵ Roberts believes our resurrected bodies are likely to have enhanced and perhaps more numerous senses, though our heavenly bodies will still exist within boundaries. Points of continuity will probably include retaining physi-

cality and self-conscious identity. Discontinuities will almost certainly involve restoration from all impairments, freedom from temptation, the inability to sin, and sanctified character. We will, in Roberts' view, still function with limited knowledge and power, which has some implications for our *activity* in heaven, the subject of chapter seven.

By extrapolating from the known to the unknown Roberts induces that in heaven, "we will do things like caring for our bodies, working, playing, socializing, sharing affection, and worshiping."⁶ Our heavenly activities will probably include the toil-free work of "extending the universe of things and ideas," playing joyfully, traveling to explore uncounted galaxies, and worshiping God. Unlike earthly worship that proclaims God's truth, Roberts believes the heavenly church will focus more on fellowship and service, as we "discover our true vocation: to be co-creators with Christ."⁷

What will our *relationships* look like in heaven? They will be characterized by love, honesty, justice, and mercy, which provides an archetypal pattern for us to pursue while on earth. After offering a cautionary note that, "exploring heaven isn't an exact science," Roberts speculates in chapter eight about the nature of society in heaven.⁸ Family may continue, though with new boundaries. Commerce will consist in the equitable distribution of energy, clothing, and shelter. The arts will be pursued through various creative activities. Governance will include judicial review to settle our differing judgments, says Roberts. Religion will no longer require prayer or preaching since we will be taught directly by our Lord. Heaven will not be boring, but a place of righteous communal activity, in Roberts' view.

The ninth chapter examines both optimistic and pessimistic secular forecasts for the future of the cosmos before explicating the Christian view that eternal life will be enjoyed in a *renewed cosmos*, purged of sin and evil, and "swarming with life enveloped in the holiness of God!"⁹ Roberts believes that purified, creative people will, "join the Master Architect in cosmic reconstruction," actually sharing in "shaping God's own dreams—dreams for the peaceable kingdom."¹⁰ Two pages of concluding remarks are followed by an epilogue, ten pages of selected scriptural passages on the resurrection and eternal life, a poem on General William Booth's entrance into heaven, and a twenty-five-page annotated bibliography that highlights some of Roberts' choice quotes from the scores of authors he read. Ian Barbour, Richard Baxter, C. S. Lewis, John Polkinghorne, and Tertullian of Carthage seem to be special favorites, among others.

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The bibliography evidences the incredible breadth of Roberts' research from thinkers both within and outside of the Christian tradition, including perspectives that are anthropological, biblical, Gnostic, Hindu, humanistic, Islamic, Jewish, Mesoamerican, psychological and theological—the latter including patristic, medieval Catholic mystic, Protestant evangelical, Quaker, neo-orthodox, contemporary, and post-modern. In Dallas Willard's estimation, "Arthur Roberts has an unrivaled knowledge of the subject of heaven and of its literature."

In addition to Roberts' broad research, several other factors commend this book to readers. Some will value the careful step-by-step reasoning of a philosopher. Others will be attracted to the creative imagination of a poet. Nearly all will appreciate the clear and engaging writing of a lyricist. Roberts raises important questions about which we wonder, and he typically sheds light on the issues with a rare combination of hard-minded rigor and deft human touch. His deep love of God's creation allows him to see what might be missed by other thinkers. Roberts' repeated affirmation of the goodness of bodily existence on earth and in heaven shines as a bright theme throughout his work.

This is not to say that the book will go without criticism. Some may complain about issues not treated. For instance, in the two pages devoted to hell, there is a surprising absence of interaction with annihilationist views that have been so widely debated in Christian circles of late. The nature of rewards or treasure in heaven is also scarcely mentioned. Others may quibble with apparent inconsistencies such as his call for discernment in angelology followed by a devotional prayer to an angel: "Pray for me to the Lord."¹¹ Such petitionary prayer to angels is without precedent in the Scriptures, which name Jesus Christ as the one mediator between God and people (1 Timothy 2:5).

Others may take issue with Roberts' biblical exegesis. In the Old Testament, Joshua 6 teaches that the Lord commanded the Israelites' warfare against Jericho, and Jericho's utter destruction was devoted to the Lord, under the ban (*herem*). So it might be asked whether Roberts is on track in wondering about a meeting in heaven between Joshua and "some of the innocents of Jericho whom he slaughtered."¹² In the New Testament, Roberts says, "Jesus urged dour adults to put on happy faces and become like little children in order to participate in the kingdom," to support his assertion that we will play in heaven.¹³ The reference here is to Jesus' statement recorded in Matthew 18:1-5 (cf. Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48) where Jesus is correcting the disciples' faulty notions about greatness in the kingdom. Nearly all commentators hold that

Jesus is not contrasting dour adults with happy children, but commending the exemplary, trusting humility of children (see the contextual connection between Matthew 18:3 and 18:4).

Other readers may charge Roberts with excessive speculation. For instance, he suggests that in heaven there will still be a need for humans to engage in “equitable distribution of energy, clothing, and shelter,” but many believe this will be unnecessary since God will directly provide in abundance for every saint’s heavenly need.¹⁴ Roberts proposes that due to our limited power and knowledge, “we will likely have accidents in heaven,” which some will find incompatible with the description of heaven as free of all pain (Revelation 21:4).¹⁵

These more minor issues aside, two larger theological concerns also present themselves. The first relates to the following claim, made toward the end of the final chapter.

Biblical doctrine teaches that God created humanity for the sake of companionship. What a beautiful thought: God creates each new person with special mental, physical, and spiritual endowments so that heaven won’t be lonely! How incredible to learn that God not only loves me but needs me and wants me around!¹⁶

Historically, most Christian theologians have taught that God does not *need* anything, but rather that in his perichoretic triune existence, God is the only self-sufficient being (perhaps suggested by John 17:5 and Acts 17:25). The historic Christian teaching is that God did not create people for the sake of companionship, so that heaven won’t be lonely, or because God needs us, but rather that God created people out of an overflow of love to display his glory (see Isaiah 43:7; Revelation 4:11). Though God does not need me, Roberts is certainly right that God loves me and wants me around (see Ephesians 1:3-12). Not divine *need* but divine *grace*!

The second concern is that for a book of this length and depth there is very little emphasis given to *God’s presence* in heaven. Of course, it is true that God appears on nearly every page of the book, and there are brief sections that concentrate on human-divine interaction in heaven.¹⁷ But on both my first and second readings, I observed relatively scant attention given to our heavenly relationship with God himself, perhaps out of concern that the picture of heaven as an unending worship service is boring.¹⁸ When discussing the possible inhabitants of heaven, Roberts concentrates on angels, the church celestial, animals, and even

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extraterrestrials, but he offers no extended treatment of *God's* presence in heaven.¹⁹

My concern is that with Roberts' intense focus on *human community* in heaven, there is a relative de-emphasis on what transpires between humans and *God*. The New Testament teaches that heaven is the dwelling place of God (Matthew 6:9; Hebrews 9:24; 1 Peter 3:22). This connection is so close that the word "heaven" (*ouranos*) oftentimes stands for God himself (Matthew 21:25; Luke 15:18; John 3:27). For many believers, the central feature of heaven is that *God is there and we will be with God*. The psalmist cries out, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you" (73:25). Psalm 27:4 declares, "One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, and to seek him in his temple." The apostle Paul likewise says he "would prefer to be away from the [earthly] body and at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). The reason he "desires to depart" is because he will then "be with Christ, which is better by far" (Philippians 1:23). This deep longing of believers from every era is realized in heaven, when "the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3). Then "no longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads" (Revelation 22:3-4). The book of Revelation repeatedly portrays the kingdom of heaven as revolving around the King and the Lamb on the throne. This prominent, central biblical dimension of heaven fades into the background as a secondary or tertiary feature in Roberts' book.

Of course, not every reader will be looking for biblical and theological precision or proper proportion of emphasis. Many will simply want to have their imaginations stimulated to consider possibilities, and this is Roberts' long suit. His engaging, melodious writing is also combined with creative reflection in a second recently released book—*Prayers at Twilight*.²⁰ Here Roberts is at his best as he assembles over a hundred provocative, poetic prayers spoken from a strikingly wide array of life settings and perspectives. This wonderful collection is in the best tradition of unpretentious prayers plainly spoken. A few of the prayers appear at appropriate spots in *Exploring Heaven*, and most of them are offered up by people in the later stages of life reflecting honestly on life, death, and eternity.

This delightful anthology of prayers is at once heart stirring and thought provoking, while always remaining down-to-earth. Many of the supplications ask God to shed additional light on the afterlife. Several of the prayers ask for God's assurance that heaven is real, in light of personal doubts and skeptical scholarly claims. Perhaps the most common theme is wondering about the nature of heaven. Authentic fears, confusion, and questions about eternity abound through the prayers.

Some communicate curiosity about heaven, inquiring about who and what will be there. Others express their desires and hopes for the afterlife, including fun, work, golf, and reunion with loved ones. A woman prays, "by the way, Lord, I don't need a mansion, but a flower garden would be nice. Thanks."²¹ Two pages later an elderly man says, "Don't want a fancy place, but an apartment in New Jerusalem would be right fine by me, Lord."²²

Many of the prayers look back on life and wrestle with earthly issues such as the "scandal" of Christianity's particularity, generational tensions, and the problem of evil and suffering. Regret surfaces over past foolish ways and supplicants ask God's forgiveness for sins committed. Some cry out for help in this life, seeking God's presence and companionship. "Is there some vision of heaven, some touch of your Spirit to bless these twilight years? A heavenly touch would help, Lord."²³ Others ask for strength, comfort, and the extension of earthly life. Thanksgiving is expressed for God's blessings in this life and his gracious gift of victory over death in the life to come. An elderly lady riddled by Parkinson's disease and a couple happily married for sixty years and still deeply in love both tell the Lord they are ready for heaven in his timing. Having recently celebrated my grandfather's 103rd birthday, I was especially touched by the bittersweet, humorous prayer, "My Friends": "Lord, at one hundred and two if I don't die pretty soon all my friends in heaven will think I didn't make it!"²⁴

Many such gems await the reader of Roberts' assembled prayers. In the foreword, Nancy Thomas provides wise advice to not read *Prayers at Twilight* straight through, but instead, "take the time to savor the stories, understand the questions, experience the different reactions and approaches to heaven."²⁵ Still, readers may find themselves so entranced with these brief and wondrous prayers that, like me, they will find it impossible to stop after just one or two. The thoughtful inclusion of both numerical and alphabetical tables of contents makes it easy to return to favorites from this collection, or to locate just that "word as is

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good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will impart grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29). Like his student Richard Foster, Arthur Roberts has much to teach us through his genuine, searching prayers, especially those that grapple with the hope-filled but mysterious life to come.

NOTES

1. Lous Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939/1974).
2. Arthur O. Roberts, *Exploring Heaven: What Great Christian Thinkers Tell Us About Our Afterlife with God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).
3. *Ibid.*, 61.
4. *Ibid.*, 53.
5. *Ibid.*, 101.
6. *Ibid.*, 112.
7. *Ibid.*, 120, 128.
8. *Ibid.*, 134.
9. *Ibid.*, 162.
10. *Ibid.*, 164.
11. *Ibid.*, 90, 91.
12. *Ibid.*, 94.
13. *Ibid.*, 121.
14. *Ibid.*, 139.
15. *Ibid.*, 140.
16. *Ibid.*, 162-163.
17. *Ibid.*, 83, 114-115, 127-128, 150.
18. *Ibid.*, 114-115.
19. *Ibid.*, 86-99.
20. *Prayers at Twilight* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2003).
21. *Ibid.*, 69.
22. *Ibid.*, 71.
23. *Ibid.*, 98.
24. *Ibid.*, 103.
25. *Ibid.*, xvi.