

1-1-2004

## A Review of Exploring Heaven, #2

Tom Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Johnson, Tom (2004) "A Review of Exploring Heaven, #2," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 103, Article 5.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol103/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

## A REVIEW OF *EXPLORING HEAVEN*, #2

TOM JOHNSON

Two years ago when I read an early draft of *Exploring Heaven*,<sup>1</sup> I wondered how anyone, even Arthur Roberts, could write such a large book on a subject about which we can know so little. Eventually I remembered my own 350-page dissertation on a small aspect of a minor problem in one of the New Testament's shortest books, and I set that concern aside. At least, I set it aside temporarily until I was asked to review the book.

Steve Moroney has done a fine job of providing an overview of the content of each chapter in *Exploring Heaven*. Thus, my analysis and comment will take a different tack. I want to comment on Arthur's methods, criteria, and conclusions, and to weave references to and examples from *Prayers at Twilight* into the text and footnotes.

In *Prayers at Twilight* Roberts says,

My dear wife tells me not to speculate about heaven.  
It indicates lack of faith, she says,  
and besides our minds can't comprehend  
    what it will be like. So don't get morbid.  
    Focus on enjoying this life.  
Don't peek; let heaven be a surprise.  
Lord, is it wrong to be curious  
    about what we will look like,  
    what we will do there,  
    and how we will relate to everyone?<sup>2</sup>

Well, Arthur peeked. He has written a comprehensive exploration of the concept of heaven that people will be using for generations to come. Arthur wants to know everything he can about heaven, and some things that he can't. He shakes and rattles and squeezes every present under the tree, and has a pretty good idea what he is going to be getting on that "great gettin' up morning." He also believes that there will still be plenty of surprises.

Arthur's world is an *inclusive* world. He doesn't like separating things: heaven and earth (not separate, interconnected, flowing over

32 • TOM JOHNSON

into one another, interpenetrating); physical and spiritual, soul and body (always co-existing, not destined for an ultimate, Platonic parting of the ways), religion and science, working together, cooperatively seeking the one unified truth; objective and subjective, compatible ways of knowing, both respected.

The strict divisions we often make among various disciplines, methods, and orders of reality strike Roberts as artificial. “This is a nice idea; it has some good in it, but it doesn’t work very well.” For example, on the unity of knowledge he says, “To an ordered mind a certain mutuality of inquiry and effort is required to achieve coherence in the pursuit of truth. Separate ‘watertight compartments’ don’t correlate well with rationality.”<sup>3</sup>

Science must use all its best tools to help us understand the physical and material world, but there are ultimate questions concerning the meaning of human existence that science is not equipped to answer. It is these ultimate questions that push us to ask about heaven, about life after death, and to hope for it, Roberts says. There is something in us that does not want death, “the final enemy,” to be the last word.<sup>4</sup>

In his book *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*, Richard T. Hughes asks how we can teach from a Christian perspective. He says, “My first objective... is to help students develop an appreciation for human finitude, for limits, for the ambiguity of the human situation – even for the inevitability of death.”<sup>5</sup> To that end he seeks to ask and to have the students ask “ultimate questions.” There are only three, he says, and they arise out of being human:

1. “How can I cope with the inevitability of death?”
2. “Am I an acceptable human being?”
3. “Is there any meaning in life, and if so, what is it?”<sup>6</sup>

These are the kind of questions Arthur Roberts assumes people ask, and *Exploring Heaven* was written to help readers wrestle with them.

In chapter two Roberts continues his quest for a unified approach to understanding heaven. Where is it? What does “the logic of human life, scientific knowledge, and religious teaching” tell us?<sup>7</sup> Notice the threefold set of sources for seeking and measuring truth. Roberts’ method is eclectic. It is neither strictly philosophical nor exegetical. He respects both philosophy and exegesis, as the annotated bibliography shows, but neither one on its own is determinative.

Truth-seeking (Roberts' life passion, according to his students) involves listening to life, all of it, and truth-seeking demands that we be multidisciplinary. There is no rigidly prioritized ranking of the sources of truth, to be assessed in some deductive and linear fashion. While Roberts affirms the authority of scriptural revelation, he is primarily trying to listen to Christ as the Master Teacher, and he thinks Jesus has a very diverse curriculum.<sup>8</sup> You can apparently learn as much from gazing at the sky or carefully looking at a small, sunlit patch of flowers (Annie Dillard style), as you can from studying the Sermon on the Mount! And of course the latter tells you to consider the lilies and the sparrows.

So also, in *Prayers at Twilight* we read:

The sunset on the prairie flamed beautifully today.  
Streaks of red and gold splayed across an azure sky  
before light slowly ebbed and darkness fell  
closing down a beautiful day, Lord,  
and promising a greater one,  
an eternal sunrise.<sup>9</sup>

Reason, evidence, what other thoughtful Christians have held before us on these matters, personal and corporate spiritual experience, and, more foundational, the testimony of Jesus and the apostles in the Scriptures, all these are frequently appealed to as criteria or warrants to believe in heaven and related articles of faith. Arthur's is a faith seeking understanding in these many ways, but he also does not hesitate to speculate: "So, with appropriate reverence, let's speculate . . .,"<sup>10</sup> but always within the bounds, of course, of biblical authority, consistency, and coherence.<sup>11</sup>

And it turns out, the boundaries are quite far flung. In chapter seven on "Activity in Heaven," Roberts' embodied<sup>12</sup> concept of heavenly existence (based on Jesus' resurrection<sup>13</sup>) furnishes him with quite an agenda of things to do. We might need Day-Timers (remember, there's no night there) to keep track of it all.<sup>14</sup> (But if there is no time in eternity, why have a calendar?) This is my question, not Arthur's. He does, however, foresee resting,<sup>15</sup> healing,<sup>16</sup> singing and worshipping,<sup>17</sup> probably not eating,<sup>18</sup> working and producing,<sup>19</sup> but not reproducing (probably no sex in heaven),<sup>20</sup> playing,<sup>21</sup> family life,<sup>22</sup> possibly commercial activities,<sup>23</sup> the arts,<sup>24</sup> governing,<sup>25</sup> socializing,<sup>26</sup> traveling and exploring the cosmos<sup>27</sup> – in short, an extravert's paradise. I, for one, had other hopes.

34 • TOM JOHNSON

Every chapter in the book demonstrates Arthur's fairness, his ability to empathize with views other than his own, to see their advantages and to argue for them cogently. He identifies weaknesses or aspects of reality a given position inadequately addressed. And he tells us where he himself comes out after all the reasonable options have been considered.

For example, after considering and sympathetically critiquing six proposals concerning the location of heaven,<sup>28</sup> from "heaven as an illusion" to "heaven as the context of reality," Roberts states, "This is where I stand. I hold this view along with other persons of faith over the centuries."<sup>29</sup> Or, after discussing naturalistic, cultural, and religious points of view on eternal life in chapter three, he summarizes his own communal and resurrection-based position.<sup>30</sup> Or, after reviewing five theories of the atonement (in a section on how people gain eternal life), Roberts acknowledges good in all of them, sees them all as metaphorical, and affirms that the atoning death of Jesus opens the way to eternal life for all.<sup>31</sup>

On the whole, the stands Roberts takes are well within classical Christian orthodoxy, generously tinted with Quaker distinctives. For example, he clearly affirms both the resurrection of Jesus as an actual event and God's Light within every person as sound bases for the hope of heaven and for life beyond death.<sup>32</sup> Knowing Arthur Roberts' previous work, this theological standpoint is not surprising. What *is* unusual and refreshing is the breadth of views he considers and the broad cultural and religious knowledge he interweaves into the discussion. He converses vigorously with philosophers of science (such as Polkinghorne, Jastrow, Gingerich, Barbour, and Murphy), with literature about near-death experiences, with the writings of early church teachers (such as Justin, Tertullian, Origen, and Augustine), and more recent theologians (such as Barth, Cullmann, Moltmann, and C. S. Lewis), as well as with several classic spiritual writers.<sup>33</sup>

When it comes to the "inhabitants of heaven" (chapter five), Roberts says angels *will* be there,<sup>34</sup> animals will probably be,<sup>35</sup> on the grounds of Isaiah's vision of the "peaceable kingdom," and extraterrestrials *may* be (if they exist), since God is sovereign over the cosmos.<sup>36</sup> But on the issue of which *humans* will be in heaven, Roberts consistently leaves that to God. "God is the final judge and arbiter of human actions and intentions."<sup>37</sup> "God judges all of us by the true intent of our heart."<sup>38</sup>

Yet he has some hopes in this regard. “Heaven is a gift to all... who cry out... ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’”<sup>39</sup> And the “beneficiaries of God’s grace aren’t limited to persons who’ve heard the ‘good news’ preached.”<sup>40</sup> Roberts believes that billions of people will be in heaven from the millennia past, “from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation as far back in time as the beginning of human history. Responding by faith to the Light within, they’re enjoying eternal life in heaven.”<sup>41</sup> In *Prayers at Twilight* he even asks if there will be Neanderthals in heaven.<sup>42</sup> Amazing grace: no one gets left out!<sup>43</sup>

Yet Roberts does not deny the existence of hell. “Hell is a merciful God letting folks have their own way when they refuse his.”<sup>44</sup> “Hell accommodates those who willfully defy God’s rule, spurn proffered grace, refuse God’s judgment, and persist in going their own sinful way.”<sup>45</sup> But even so, God continues to love them and offer them forgiveness, mercy, and life. Will God’s love wear away their resistance and empty hell? Will God annihilate the impenitent rather than allow them to suffer forever?<sup>46</sup> Is hell purgatorial, an interim state of purification fitting us for the joys of heaven?<sup>47</sup> Roberts considers these questions but doesn’t know; however, he does know that God won’t coerce them.

Finally, one day, there will be a new heaven and a new earth, a future, perfect cosmos, true and beautiful and good, beyond the wildest speculations of human minds. God will bring in the new creation, hoped for by prophets and sages of the past and of the present (chapter nine). It will be mysterious and glorious. “Gone will be the coarse brutality of primitive eons. Gone the grinding poverty of failing subsistence systems.”<sup>48</sup> Present will be prairies and cities, peace and justice, the presence of God and the Light of the Lamb. This is, in *Exploring Heaven*, Arthur Roberts’ well-founded hope.

## CONCLUSION

One winter day in the mid-1990s I drove out to the farm of a friend, a believer named Kay Lackey. She was about 90 and pretty much confined to her farm house now with painful arthritis. She had hired help to do the few remaining farm chores and some of the cooking and cleaning. Her husband Harold had died a few months before. And she wanted to talk about heaven. “You’re a minister,” she had said on the phone. “Come out here when you can and tell me about heaven. I have some questions about Harold.”

36 • TOM JOHNSON

I would have done better with that assignment if I had had Arthur's book to consult, take with me, and give as a gift. Kay was a reader. That was about all that was left for her, since she did not find television worth watching. My answers did not amount to much more than: "Kay, we don't know much about heaven. The Lord has not given us a lot of information about it. He wants us to trust him, I guess. But it's a real place, and you are going there. It'll be quite an adventure. Our sufferings will be over, yours and Harold's. The Bible tells us it's a place of joy and peace, and we will be in the presence of the Lord who loves us."

"What about the streets of gold?" she said, "and mansions." "What about angels, and singing all the time, and harps? I never cared much for harps." "Me either," I said. We both liked guitars, which are sort of harp-like, strings and wood, the non-amplified kind. Acoustic guitars in heaven. She could see the possibility of singing there with the Gaithers. Her kind of angels.

We left it at that, heaven only barely glimpsed, just a few steps inside. It was not long before she heard the heavenly voice calling her, like Aslan to the children in Narnia, "Kay, come farther up and farther in." And now she too is *exploring heaven*.

## NOTES

1. Arthur O. Roberts, *Exploring Heaven: What Great Thinkers Tell Us about Our Afterlife with God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). Hereafter, *Heaven*.
2. Arthur O. Roberts, *Prayers at Twilight* (Newberg, Oregon: Barclay Press, 2003), 3. Hereafter, *Twilight*. While this book of prayer-poems is primarily about heaven (he had hoped they would be published as a companion volume to *Exploring Heaven*), it is remarkably this-worldly, engaging subjects such as September 11, 2001 (9), unemployment (12), alcoholism and drug abuse (26), Alzheimer's (57), and war (29, 78). Typical of this balance is "With more to do" (102) that warns against being obsessed with heaven and urges the reader to "brighten the corner where you are."
3. *Heaven*, 5.
4. *Ibid.*, 8. Roberts also discusses death as enemy in two poems: *Twilight*, 33-34.
5. Richard T. Hughes, *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 107.
6. *Ibid.*, 110-114. He credits Paul Tillich for these.
7. *Heaven*, 9.
8. *Ibid.*, 71.
9. *Twilight*, 99.
10. *Heaven*, 135.

11. *Ibid.*, 113.
12. Roberts hopes for a strong, new body in heaven, about twenty-five years of age (*Twilight*, 65, 69), and not old, feeble, and out of date (16, 57).
13. *Heaven*, 102-105; *Twilight*, 4.
14. Roberts wonders how time works in heaven and how we will arrange when and where to meet people, in “When and Where,” *Twilight*, 55.
15. *Heaven*, 113-114, 116.
16. Healing in heaven (physical, emotional, social) is a major theme in *Twilight*, 40, 45, 52-53, 57, 105.
17. *Heaven*, 114, 127-128.
18. *Ibid.*, 116-117.
19. *Ibid.*, 118-120, 122-123. In *Twilight* Roberts hopes there will be lots of activity in heaven (70, 74, 81-82).
20. *Heaven*, 126.
21. *Heaven*, 120-122, 126 (Scrabble?) and in *Twilight*, 72 (swings?), 75 (fun), 77 (golf?), and 79 (mountain climbing?).
22. *Heaven*, 126, 135-138.
23. *Ibid.*, 138-141.
24. *Ibid.*, 142-144.
25. *Ibid.*, 145-149. Roberts was for many years the mayor of Yachats, Oregon. Roberts also reminds us in *Twilight* that the afterlife calls for justice (17, 59, 87).
26. *Ibid.*, 123-124.
27. *Ibid.*, 124-125. Three of the prayer-poems in *Twilight* touch on space travel (97), especially to Mars (81, 94).
28. *Heaven*, 12-34. “What kind of place?” is the title of one of Roberts’ poems in *Twilight*, 22.
29. *Heaven*, 34.
30. *Ibid.*, 40.
31. *Ibid.*, 43-48.
32. *Ibid.*, 71-79 and 49-51.
33. See Roberts’ “Annotated Bibliography,” in *Heaven*, 187-211.
34. *Ibid.*, 87-92.
35. *Ibid.*, 95-97. Roberts hopes that his horse, Eagle, as well as dogs, crows, gulls, squirrels, caribou, but not mosquitoes will be in heaven. See *Twilight*, 23, 48-49.
36. *Heaven*, 97-99.
37. *Ibid.*, 49.
38. *Ibid.*, 51.
39. *Ibid.*, 51.
40. *Ibid.*, 50.
41. *Ibid.*, 94. The question of “billions” in heaven is mentioned in *Twilight*, 41.
42. *Twilight*, 46.

38 • TOM JOHNSON

43. And that includes in *Twilight* redeemed sinners (42), stupid kids who take drugs (26), dead babies (58-59), and maybe not only Christians (76).
44. *Heaven*, 52.
45. *Ibid.*, 53. The same point is raised in *Twilight*, 93.
46. *Heaven*, 53-54.
47. *Ibid.*, 60. In *Twilight* Roberts accepts the possibility of purgatory (38) and hopes it includes forcing the people who write inane television commercials to watch their own ads for a year or two before letting them into heaven (66-67).
48. *Heaven*, 163.