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Response to Reviews of Exploring Heaven and Prayers at Twilight

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I thank Steve Moroney and Tom Johnson for incisive and affirming critiques of Exploring Heaven and Prayers at Twilight. Their summaries are good, their analyses perceptive, and their commendations gratifying. They are constructive critics. Steve Moroney notes as “special favorites” in the annotated bibliography certain authors — Barbour, Lewis, and Polkinghorne. Tom Johnson notes my debt to other “favorites,” including Justin, Tertullian, Augustine, and Lewis (I would add Baxter, Swedenborg, and Zaleski), whose bold and imaginative treatments of the afterlife I found instructive. I was also challenged by authors, including science fiction writers, whose perceptions of the future differ from mine, but whose imaginative insights instructed me. I am grateful that the reviewers consider the annotated bibliography a useful part of Exploring Heaven.

Moroney raises a few minor issues and two major ones. The minor ones are: 1) too little discussion concerning hell, 2) ambivalence about prayer to angels, 3) a paucity of references to rewards, 4) some questionable biblical exegesis, and 5) excessive speculation. The two larger, theological, issues he raises are: 1) downplaying divine self-sufficiency, as if God needs us to be fulfilled, and 2) insufficient attention to anticipated heavenly relationship with God.

Regarding the minor issues: My aim was to write about heaven. Peter Kreeft, among other writers, has dealt extensively with hell, but perhaps I might have amplified my text to deal with variant theological interpretations. Citing an Eastern Orthodox prayer was intended to be descriptive not prescriptive, illustrating a tradition that affirms a bond between earthly and heavenly creatures. Although Protestants have scriptural grounds to question the practice, Orthodox theologians would consider the mediation of Christ primary and that of others secondary. Regarding paucity of text about rewards in heaven: the substantive meaning of this metaphor is affirmed implicitly, if not explicitly, by references to spiritual growth and to service in a restored social order. Concerning exegesis: Moroney implies that the
utter destruction of Jericho in Joshua chapter six precludes any local innocents gaining heaven, and that I seem to impugn God’s judgment by questioning their death as “collateral damage.” I’m more concerned with trying to understand the nature of divine will than I am with how Jericho’s wall collapsed. To the criticism that by urging dour adults to put on happy faces, I’ve misconstrued the meaning of Jesus’ exhortation to childlike humility, I can only plead guilty to a loose construction of the text. Moroney thinks I’m vulnerable to charges of “excessive speculation” by asserting that, given our creaturely limitations, we might have accidents in heaven. He cites Revelation 21:4: “he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” Doesn’t this imply no hurtful injury, no stubbed toes, no angelic rescue from tumbling over a cliff? My answer is to assert that, in the poetic style of Hebrew parallelism, the Revelator makes “pain” a synonym for mourning and crying—inward pain, sorrow.

Regarding the major issues: First, regarding whether God needs us so He won’t be lonely. Moroney rightly asserts divine self-sufficiency and suggests substituting the verb “want” for “need.” Point granted. As we learn from Jesus, however, love is a divine characteristic. God is love. So I would argue that God “needs” me like I need my wife, a need arising from a loving relationship, not from insufficiency. I don’t think this interpretation requires positing a limited God. By acts of creation and redemption God graciously expresses a love need. I thank Steve for sharpening the issue.

Second, is there insufficient emphasis upon the joy of basking in God’s presence? Moroney cites appropriate scripture to buttress this allegation. His criticism is well taken. In stressing the physicality of the resurrected life and speculating about the nature of the heavenly kingdom, I may have neglected to reaffirm a basic point about heaven as being in God’s presence, wrapped in glory. In defense I plead that it’s difficult, in a non-anthropocentric way, to convey empirically what the words of a hymn “face to face shall I behold Him” signify in respect to the creator and sustainer of the cosmos. Maybe metaphors like “in the shadow of his wings” convey such ecstasy. For the musical “Children of the Light” I wrote lyrics to a hymn based upon a text from the book of Revelation, “The Lamb at the center of the throne will be your shepherd.” I guess we look to Jesus, then as now, to show us the Father.
Tom Johnson has correlated *Exploring Heaven* and *Prayers at Twilight* in a concise and helpful way, for example explicitly summarizing the inclusiveness of my vision on a number of issues, rightly underscoring my conviction that coherence is the highest rational test and that all truth is ultimately divinely revealed. Johnson has traced a thread of joy through both books, reminding me of the line from an old spiritual, “I’ve got heaven on my mind, and I’m feeling mighty fine!”

Johnson applauds my vision of real personal, super-physical, social existence in heaven. He calls it “an extrovert’s paradise.” I hadn’t thought of it that way. My evangelical mysticism *does* focus upon sensory components, but I do also affirm rational-intuitive aspects of life, both now and for eternity. So I think heaven is an introvert’s place too.

Tom raises a tough question about time in eternity. I can only reassert my view that creaturehood by definition implies dimensional limitation. So I surmise that just as we may expect spatial boundaries within a complex and changing cosmos so we may expect temporal sequences to be present within eternity. Eternity is time’s context. Earth time may cease, but not time itself. We have to exist somewhere and some time. Creaturehood requires specificity. So does Kingdom living. Presently entropy supplies existential connotations to clock time measured against planetary motion. Created things are born, live, and die. In heaven the death cycle, at least for “children of the resurrection,” no longer rules. In heaven, rather, under the sovereign, redemptive, power of our Creator, cosmic dimensional boundaries for life will persist. So, asks Tom, how will the calendar work? From judgment day and counting? I would guess the equivalent of our clock time might be marked, rather, by whatever cosmic venues, earth or otherwise, we find ourselves in. All times are in God’s hands. Eschatological dimensions are quantitative, not just qualitative. Whether it’s clock time or lived time, Paul’s admonition surely applies in heaven as well as on earth: “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you” (2 Thessalonians 3:16).

Speculation about heavenly physicality is informed not only by biblical revelation, especially the resurrection of Jesus, but also by our awe and reverence before the immensity of the universe. While the Quaker Theological Discussion Group met in Atlanta in November 2003, Voyager I had just exited our solar system after twenty-six years.
of traveling 38,000 miles per hour. Eight billion miles from home, it soared deeper into our galaxy where a hundred billion more solar systems swirled and sparkled. God the Creator, who blessed the earth with the Light of Christ, is sovereign over the entire cosmos, not only Earth, and not only our solar system. To my mind, it is more coherent to view heavenly life in terms of this cosmic reality than it is to tuck it away in a restrictive conceptual nook.