

A Theological Discourse on the Concept of Heaven of Tertiary Students in San Beda University Campuses

Melanio L. Leal, M.A.
San Beda University

Abstract: *The paper is an attempt to determine the understanding of heaven of tertiary students in San Beda College campuses. It also presents a theological discourse on the concept of heaven. The usual understanding of heaven for most students which is generally uncertain, their understanding of heaven as a place which has been fixated as an extra-terrestrial location into which one goes that resulted in an unfortunate view of reality that separates them from creation and the present world and the absence of deliberate and systematic research effort done on this topic have given the researcher very strong impetus to embark on this study. The paper hopes to build a more solid foundation of Christian faith after one has fully understood heaven as an anticipation of life's fullness. Lastly, it is the aim of this paper to jolt more theological reflections on life, and on the world-view of human existence in ever changing contextualization.*

Keywords: *Heaven, The State of Being "in Christ", Destiny, Communion of Saints, Fullness of Life*

Introduction

This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity - this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed - is called "heaven." Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness (CCC #1024).

Heaven, one of the ultimate realities, is perfectly described by the Church as a state of life, a perfect life with the Holy Trinity and the blessed, a state of supreme happiness. Is this description of heaven suffice the intellectual cognition of the faithful who have been longing to capture the very meaning and

essence of heaven? Sufficing or not, it is but necessary to clarify what this ultimate reality is all about.

Paradise is what Islamic followers call their heaven. You can gain access by having your actions of good outweigh your bad actions, as laid out by the Quran. Paradise is a garden where the faithful lie upon couches in a climate-controlled environment surrounded by “bashful, dark-eyed virgins, chaste as the sheltered eggs of ostriches.” They will drink from crystal goblets and silver vessels as “immortal youths” hover about them looking like “scattered pearls.” The believers will be clothed in green silk and brocade and will wear silver bracelets, and they will “drink a pure draught” drawn from Allah’s own source as a reward for their striving and patience.¹

The Buddhist notion of heaven would be that of “Nirvana.” Buddha believed that all human suffering was linked to desire and in order to reach Nirvana, we need to extinguish that desire and let go of everything. Buddha taught that desire is a flame that burns us, causes suffering, and keeps us tied to the cycle of death and rebirth (reincarnation) because the flame continues burning into the next life. What they hope for is Nirvana, or the extinguishing of that flame, which is also the end of suffering.²

In the Christian tradition, the Sacred Scriptures, especially the New Testament provides quite a few terms designating the reality of heaven.³ “Heaven” (Greek, *ouranos*), is where Christ lives (Jn. 17:5), and has gone to prepare a place for his disciples (Jn. 14: 2-3; 2 Corinthians 5:1). There the angels contemplate God (Mt. 18:10); heaven is the treasure-house of the just (Mk 10:21).⁴ The Book of Revelations depicts heaven as a city called “New Jerusalem” which has a wall and 12 gates, and on each gate is the name of one of the tribes of Israel along with an angel. There are also 12 foundations, 1 each for the 12 apostles. The size of the New Jerusalem: 1,400 miles square with a 200-foot wall. The structure itself is made of all kinds of precious stones, some of which have

¹ See What Heaven Looks Like According To Various Religions. I Hope I Get In One. (September 12, 2014) <http://www.viralnova.com/heaven/>

² Ibid.

³ Several recent works have dealt with the reality of heaven and paradise in art, literature, history, for example: C. McDanell and B. Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); J. B. Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); A.E. Mc Grath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

⁴ Paul O’Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope: An Introduction to Eschatology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 149.

not yet been identified on this earth. There is a river of “the water of life,” which flows from God’s throne, and trees of life line the banks of the river and produce fruit every month. Believers will have God’s name written on their foreheads, and all pain, tears, and death will disappear forever.⁵

Part of the indigenous religious beliefs and cosmology of the Filipinos is the reality of heaven. Although it is often described as cosmic dimension or a skyworld, consists of persons of heavenly phenomena, it is definitive, conceived as a destination of journeys in the native mythology. Something that can be found similar to catholic religious beliefs and cosmology. Through the Spanish conversion process, heaven was given an indigenous reinterpretation like an escape from the possibility of endless predation in the afterlife by aswang and other spirits.⁶ Later on, heaven becomes something being longed and aspired by the locals.

There may be differing notions of what heaven is like, one thing is certain, though: a lot of people believe there is. Is that something true as well with the student participants in this research? Are they believers of heaven? If they are, what do they know about it?

This study is an attempt to determine the understanding on Heaven by college students of San Beda College both Manila and Alabang campus. From his extensive and intensive reviews of related literature, the researcher found that there has been no previous deliberate and systematic research effort done as regard to this topic. Thus, the absence of a related study has made this attempt significant. This significance could jolt more theological reflections on life, and on the world-view of human existence in ever changing contextualization.

Method

In this research, questionnaires were administered to 844 students containing 20 statements or propositions on heaven (See Table 1). Students were asked to either agree or disagree on all the statements. For clear framework on the analysis of the data, discussion focus were given to those statements that obtain the

⁵ See What Heaven Looks Like According To Various Religions. I Hope I Get In One. (September 12, 2014) <http://www.viralnova.com/heaven/>

⁶ See Fanella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 138.

highest and lowest ranks usually are the rank 1 and last rank. The ranks of the statements may likewise have given some patterns that can result in a series of findings, and so these patterns created by statement ranking were also given analytical focus.

Table 1: Propositions regarding Heaven

		SD	D	U	A	SA
		1	2	3	4	5
C.	Propositions regarding Heaven					
1	Heaven is the dwelling place of God, the angels and the blessed.					
2	In Heaven, man has intimate union with God.					
3	Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings.					
4	Heaven is the state of supreme and definitive happiness.					
5	Heaven is the community of those who are incorporated into Christ.					
6	Heaven is a vision of the divine essence.					
7	Heaven is also sharing in the life and love of God.					
8	Heaven is a place where we will not encounter problems anymore.					
9	Heaven involves being in harmony with the cosmos.					
10	Heaven is the destiny that God wills for all.					

11	Heaven is my real home.					
12	Heaven is just a state of mind.					
13	It is meant for people who did not commit sin.					

Results and Exposition

Referring to table 2 (Overall Participants' understanding regarding Heaven), as indicated by the overall mean of 3.27, the respondents generally perceived uncertainty regarding the statements about heaven. They expressed agreement to 5 items they had positively endorsed, namely, that "Heaven is the dwelling place of God", the angels and the blessed (1); that in Heaven, man has intimate union with God (2); that it is sharing in the life and love of God (7), it is the destiny that God wills for all (10) and, it is where human beings share in God's fullness of life (14). There were only two statements to which the respondents expressed disagreement, namely, that "heaven is meant for people who do not commit sin"(13); and that "heaven is just a state of mind"(12). On the rest of the thirteen 13 statements regarding heaven the respondents expressed uncertainty.

Table 2. Respondents' overall Perception on Heaven

Item No.	Propositions Regarding Heaven	Average		Rank
1	Heaven is the dwelling place of God, the angels and the blessed.	3.66	Agree	1
2	In Heaven, man has intimate union with God.	3.66	Agree	2
7	Heaven is also sharing in the life and love of God.	3.59	Agree	3
10	Heaven is the destiny that God wills for all.	3.54	Agree	4
14	Heaven is where human beings share in God's fullness of life.	3.52	Agree	5
11	Heaven is my real home.	3.46	Uncertain	6

3	Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings.	3.45	Uncertain	7
4	Heaven is the state of supreme and definitive happiness.	3.44	Uncertain	8
8	Heaven is a place where we will not encounter problems anymore.	3.39	Uncertain	9
6	Heaven is a vision of the divine essence.	3.38	Uncertain	10
20	Heaven is a state of life.	3.35	Uncertain	11
5	Heaven is the community of those who are incorporated into Christ.	3.35	Uncertain	12
9	Heaven involves being in harmony with the cosmos.	3.31	Uncertain	13
17	Heaven is not a place; but a personal relationship with God.	3.23	Uncertain	14
16	Heaven is the eternal destiny of the just.	3.22	Uncertain	15
19	Heaven is a reward for people who follow God's commandments.	3.20	Uncertain	16
18	It is a place where the saints are united with God.	3.10	Uncertain	17
15	Heaven is not something above or beyond but a mode of existence here.	3.03	Uncertain	18
13	It is meant for people who did not commit sin.	2.41	Disagree	19
12	Heaven is just a state of mind.	2.04	Disagree	20
Overall Mean		3.27 = Uncertain		

Legend:

- 4.5 - 5.0 = 5 (Strongly Agree)
- 3.5 - 4.4 = 4 (Agree)
- 2.5 - 3.4 = 3 (Uncertain)
- 1.5 - 2.4 = 2 (Disagree)
- 1.0 - 1.4 = 1 (Strongly Disagree)

Endorsement of specific statements from among a choice of 20 represents common points of agreement among the respondents. This set of endorsed statement suggests a focus from which our goal of communicating the meaning of heaven to the youth can be more effectively attempted.

A quick glance at the set of statements which the respondents chose to endorse is the presence of the word “God” in each of them. They are literally saying “It is God’s heaven”! Mention is made of angels, the blessed, man, and life, but all these are linked to God. It seems it was easier to feel certain and endorse these God-referenced statements than the others that were not, as is the case of the set of statements about which the respondents are uncertain. That Heaven is, indeed, God’s Heaven in a point Tony Kelly makes in his book “The Range of Faith”. Kelly says:

Heaven, first of all, is God’s coming into his own; it is the divine Mystery, revealed in Jesus, finally made explicit. So, before theology speaks in terms of human fulfilment, Heaven is fundamentally a divine fulfilment: Merciful Love finally unfolded; the Son subsuming the whole of creation into his relationship with the Father; the Spirit penetrating and possessing the universe as the field of divine communication and love...Heaven is primarily God’s Heaven, a divine infinite joy in self-giving, in the ecstasy of being “everything to everyone” (1Cor 15, 28)⁷

Ratzinger, in explaining the meaning or nature of heaven, takes us through a well laid out summative exposition. He starts by describing the tradition of the use of heaven as a symbol. He says that Christian tradition uses the image of heaven, an image that is linked to the natural symbolic force of what is “high” or “above” in order to express that definitive of human existence which comes about through the perfect love to which faith tends. He stresses that the aim is to come to know more deeply the hidden presence by whose gift we truly live.⁸ He then goes on to pinpoint the ground for Heaven’s existence, saying:

⁷ See Tony Kelly, *The Range of Faith: Basic Questions for a Living Theology* (Makati, Phils.: St. Paul Publications, 1987), 191.

⁸ See Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 233-234.

Heaven's existence depends upon the fact that Jesus Christ, as God, is man, and makes space for human existence within the existence of God himself. One is in heaven when, and to the degree that, one is in Christ. It is by being with Christ that we find the true location of our existence as human beings in God. Heaven is thus primarily a personal reality, and one that remains forever shaped by its historical origin in the paschal mystery of death and resurrection.⁹

Tony Kelly similarly reminds us that it is important to focus the meaning of heaven on the reality of Christ. Christ is the central defining point, as it were, of heaven.¹⁰

Christ is the essential focus of the meaning of Heaven. It is not so much that Christ is "in Heaven" as that Heaven is being "in Christ". He is God's parable of "what God has prepared for those who love him". His death contests any self-enclosed worldly version of life. His resurrection frees hope to anticipate a final dimension of life as a new creation in the Spirit.¹¹

The five statements on which the respondents were in agreement highlight the reality that Heaven is God's self-fulfilment, and that Christ ought to be the focus. On the other hand, the two statements to which the respondents disagree provide further confirmation by what they reject. This is so in the statement "*It is meant for people who did not commit sin (13)*". In disagreeing with this statement the respondents imply that it is not enough that one does not commit sin to deserve heaven. One must make some positive contribution to a fully lived life, and that they expect much more about Heaven; an indication that the respondents think very highly of heaven. That man has a great task to accomplish in life, that a fully lived life is so important. Indeed, much, much more so. For man is called to be a new creation in the Spirit.

Similarly, when the respondents disagree with the statement "Heaven is just a state of mind" (12) it is as if they are saying: "No! It cannot just be a state of mind. I cannot agree to this idea". This reaction is an indication that to them heaven is real. They

⁹ Ratzinger, 234.

¹⁰ Kelly, 192.

¹¹ Kelly, 190-191

rightly intuit that heaven is the ultimate reality. Moreover, that it is a reality that is more about God than about man. Or rather, about the relationship that God has established with man, and the fulfillment of a great promise God has made to man. It could be right to say that heaven is a state of mind, but of the mind of God, and for man to align his own mind and spirit to that of God, and thereby find his own fullness and fulfillment. This should mean that the life we experience is our participating in the bigger life of humanity, the cosmos, and God. Participants clearly involve commitment to God, to life and to the world as the larger whole within which man will find fullness of heavenly life.

Tony Kelly helps us to understand this important angle in the meaning of Heaven:

To exist as a human being, even a spiritual being, means to be embodied in the “matter” of the world. The soul exists and functions in what is other than itself, so as to become embodied in an ensemble of relationships, dynamics, conditions we understand as “our world”. To have a body means to have a world, to be intrinsically part of a larger whole.¹²

Having commented on the responses under “agree” and “disagree”, we now turn to the 13 statements that fall under “uncertain”. We continue our reflection on Heaven taking our cue from the key idea in each statement or group of statements that are related or similar in content.

The understanding about heaven for most ordinary Christians and the youth has been fixated as an extra-terrestrial location. This has resulted in an unfortunate view of reality that dissociates man from creation and the present world of which he is a part. Ratzinger admonishes that Heaven “is not an extra-historical location into which one goes”. Heaven should not be imagined as a place elsewhere that implies our “leaving the earth” and abandoning our commitments in, and to, this world. For this outlook has resulted in a diminished appreciation of what undreamed of future is offered by God, and has provoked uncertainty and even dissatisfaction, instead of an anticipation of life’s fullness.

¹² Kelly, 194.

Let us then proceed to present a more enthusiastic outlook. We begin with three themes that evoke fullness of life and human fulfilment. Then as we proceed to cover the rest of the thirteen statements, find in each a different facet of the meaning of heaven.

On theme one: **Heaven as fullness of life.** (*Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longing (3); Heaven is the state of supreme and definitive happiness (4); Heaven is a place where we will not encounter problems anymore (8).*) The ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longing comes into the state of supreme and definitive happiness, where we will not encounter problems any more. These are lofty statements, yet the respondents felt uncertain about endorsing them. It is interesting to note that the focus of these statements is man, rather than God. This is an indication that the respondents seem more hesitant about agreeing when the description of heaven or statement about heaven is humanly based. This sentiment is validated by what we have noted earlier in what Kelly has pointed out about heaven being primarily God's state of fulfilment. Man's fulfilment comes as a gift from God, as sharing in the life of the risen Christ and hope of sharing in his resurrection.

On this matter, Ratzinger gives us a richer interpretation that relates the resurrection to man's hope for complete embodiment in the world.

If then Christian hope expresses itself in terms of the resurrection of the body, it is not longing for a resuscitation in this little bit of exchangeable matter. It is envisaging a complete embodiment in that world which is radically God's creation, which comes to us and bears us on in all the patients unfolding of the cosmos and in all the varied forms of human creativity. Such a hope does not want to escape from its essential world but to belong completely, creatively to it.¹³

On theme two: **Heaven as communion of the blessed.** (*Heaven is the community of those who are incorporated into Christ" (5), It is a place where the saints are united with God (18).*) These are all positive and inspiring, statements, but somehow the youth did not feel confident about; not enough to give their agreement. And

¹³ Kelly, 194.

while mention is made of Christ and God, the subject and emphasis is clearly not on them but rather, on the community, the saints, the reward for people and the destiny of man. Even in the case where the same item – “destiny” is cited in both the agreed and uncertain line ups, a difference may be noted. In the statement endorsed the phrasing says “the destiny that God wills for all” (10). Whereas in the statement found in the uncertain category, it says “eternal destiny of the just” (16).

Heaven is associated with the communion of saints. This is an image familiar to the youth. Yet again the visualization is of the blessed transported to some out-of-this world location. Rather than say or think of a place, we might instead say that heaven is the condition whereby the saints are united with God. And in this condition of union with God, they remain in this world, but a world transformed by the resurrection, and brought to fullness in the Spirit. The gift of salvation and the state of human completion are embodied in the person of the risen Christ. As the community of those who are incorporated into Christ, the blessed are in communion with the resurrected Christ and with one another. Ratzinger expounds:

If heaven depends on being in Christ, then it must involve a co-being with all those who, together, constitute the body of Christ. Heaven is a stranger to isolation. It is the open society of the communion of saints, and in this way the fulfilment of all human communions... but simply the unruptured self-communion of the whole body of Christ – and the closeness of a love which knows no limit and is sure of attaining God in the neighbor, and the neighbor in God.¹⁴

On theme three: **Christ has possessed this world as his own.** (*Heaven is not something above or beyond but a mode of existence here (15); Heaven is a state of life (20), and Heaven involves being in harmony with the cosmos (9).*) These statements may have confused the respondents, insinuating as they do that Heaven is in the here-and-now, whereas they expect heaven to be about the afterlife. But the explanation given below by Kelly should help us gradually grasp this meaning when seen in the light of Christ’s Incarnation.

¹⁴ Ratzinger, Eschatology, 235.

The cosmos has toiled for these thousands of years to bring forth our human present. In our human consciousness, the vast impersonal past and the vision of a personal future meet in the joy of recognition. For this material world continues to give itself to us to be our food, our drink and our breath. It offers its energies to be tapped for the human good. We live out of it and die back into it...

In such a vision, the cosmos and the human spirit interact to bring into being what we recognise as our human world. The human spirit finds its proper place in a material world. And this material world is lifted into new levels of being through the activity of the human mind, heart and hand. For the Word to have become flesh, to remain eternally human, means that he has possessed this world as his own. Already in him, it has become the beginning of a new creation. Neither for the New Adam nor for us who believe in him, can Heaven mean leaving this world behind. It must mean this world, and ourselves in it, brought to fulfilment. All the "groaning" we referred to above, will yield to the "Alleluia" of a creation finally at home with its Creator.¹⁵

On theme four: **Heaven as a more complete way of belonging.** (*Heaven is my real home (1); Heaven is a reward for people who follow God's commandments (19); Heaven is the eternal destiny of the just. (16).*) We experience limits in our existence and baffling cruelty; hence arises a craving for justice and a hope for heaven. We feel we are made for greater things. Christ's resurrection gives us a glimpse and a validation of this truth. Heaven then as involving the resurrection of the body means life in a world transformed, into which we are newly embodied. We can therefore say that Heaven is the complete "incarnation" or embodiment of our existence in Christ. (Kelly) Thus it is more correct to say heaven is our true home. And as we strive to live by the light of the resurrection we should honor our commitments in this world.

Heaven need not be a denial of the importance of our commitments to this world. Rather, it is the the daring expression of our hope for a deeper, more complete way of belonging to the world and its history; it is the language of an ultimate love of life; it implies an ultimate involvement with

¹⁵ Kelly, 195-196.

*the Divine and human agents who, in their different orders, have brought this world into being.*¹⁶

Ratzinger sees Heaven as both the whole process and completion of the world's transformation unfolding in two stages: the forging of a new unity between God and humanity in the 'body of Christ', and the completion, maturing and perfecting that follows. He asserts that:

*Heaven will only be complete when all the members of the Lord's body are gathered in. Such completion on the part of the body of Christ includes, as we have seen, the "resurrection of the flesh." It is called the "Parousia" inasmuch as then the presence of Christ, so far only inaugurated among us will reach its fullness and encompass all those who are to be saved and the whole cosmos with them. And so heaven comes in two historical stages. The Lord's exaltation gives rise to the new unity of God with man and hence to heaven. The perfecting of the Lord's body in the pleroma of the "whole Christ" brings heaven to its true cosmic completion.*¹⁷

On theme five: **Heaven as personal relationship.** (*Heaven is not a place; but a personal relationship with God. (17)*) But from our childhood heaven has been spoken of as a place, so the contrary statements somehow confuse and make us uncertain. We repeat that heaven is not an extra-historical place into which we go upon death. Rather it is this same world but transformed. Just as Christ's body has not been destroyed, but transfigured and glorified.

Having set aside this misconception as a place we go to, we may proceed to say that we need to nurture our relationship with Christ and work on a life program of becoming like him in our faith, love and action. Heaven is being 'in Christ' and 'with Christ' living in God, which, for man, is the state of boundless fulfilment.

*God totally permeates the whole man with his plenitude and his utter openness. God is "all in all," and thus the human person enters upon his boundless fulfilment.*¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., 185.

¹⁷ Ratzinger, 237-238.

¹⁸ Ibid., 235.

On theme six: **Heaven as final vision.** (*Heaven is a vision of the divine essence. (6)*) The idea that heaven consists of contemplating God in what St. Tomas describes as “beatific vision” is difficult to appreciate for the active youth. This is why they feel uncertain about this statement. Ratzinger offers a more active image:

And, in pride of place, from this Christological foundation there follows a theological affirmation: the glorified Christ stands in a continuous posture of self-giving to his Father. Indeed he is that self-giving. The paschal sacrifice abides in him as an enduring presence.¹⁹

Kelly suggests that what is meant by vision is a deeper knowing, a sense that we have seen our true being as we have attempted to live “in Christ”; a sense of full recognition; and a feeling of being home.

Such a final vision will be at once the joy of complete evidence, God explicit; and the beginning of an endless adventure, God always infinite even as the Mystery reveals itself...²⁰

If we take the statements on heaven to which the youth agreed and disagreed as indicative of what they presently understand heaven to be, we get a positive picture. The youth affirm the reality of heaven rejecting the idea that it is “for people who do not commit sin”; they are saying that heaven requires a much higher qualification, considering the lofty descriptive statements they agreed to: that “Heaven is the dwelling place of God, the angels and the blessed” (1); that in Heaven, man has intimate union with God (2); that it is sharing in the life and love of God (7), it is the destiny that God wills for all (10) and, it is where human beings share in God’s fullness of life (14). The youth intuit that much more than not sinning is expected of them.

The expectation that there is life after death is complemented by the understanding that this new life is life with God. If so, then heaven is not to be described as an abode or place. But it is necessary to have relationship with God to be wished for all as well

¹⁹ Ratzinger, 234.

²⁰ T. Kelly, 199.

as to be desired by all. Heaven has to be accepted as the destiny that God wills for all: sharing in his life and, thus, eternal union with Him. Beyond the individual expectation of heaven as reward, the youth must also be helped to imagine that heaven refers to the state of existence of those who have died in the grace of God.

The youth then have to come to a clearer understanding of the nature of this relationship and how one enters into it, how to cultivate and nourish that relationship. Heaven is also presented in terms of the eternal joy it creates. But the danger of understanding it as somehow passive and a form of rest has to be overcome. Certainly, the state of union with the creator implies active engagement in creative action, rather than static contemplation and rest. Even if rest in God's peace is a dimension of heaven, it is but one side of what must be a multifaceted experience of life with God in Christ.

The youth must be helped to see the connection between heaven and the "brotherhood of men". For they have surely heard the suggestion made by the Beatles that bids them to "imagine there's no heaven" even as it bids all to celebrate a "world as one". They need something by which to counter this idea from the very popular and influential modern day idols of the youth. The youth of this digital age are familiar with morphing, multiple images simultaneously overlapping. And quantum physics has provided new descriptions of cosmic reality in terms of "properties of light" and "energy waves and vibrations..." The youth can make use of all these in the reimagining the beyond-death dimension. On the basis for this contemporary awareness the youth can easily relate to the miraculous visitation of Our Lady of Guadalupe (and her numerous other apparitions) as a clue to understanding the reality of heaven which the Mother of Christ already embodies and enjoys.

The deliberations on 20 statements about which agreement, disagreement and uncertainty were validated establish this much about heaven:

Heaven is primarily God's Heaven, a divine infinite joy in self-giving, in the ecstasy of being "everything to everyone" (1Cor 15, 28). It is God's coming into his own; Heaven is fundamentally a divine trinitarian fulfilment: (the Father's)

Merciful Love finally unfolded; the Son subsuming the whole of creation into his relationship with the Father; the Spirit penetrating and possessing the universe as the field of divine communication and love.²¹

Heaven's existence depends upon the fact that Jesus Christ, as God, is man, and makes space for human existence within the existence of God himself. And God made this possibility a reality in the death and resurrection of Christ. Thus, humanity heaven originated in the paschal mystery.²²

Christ's death contests any self-enclosed worldly version of life. His resurrection frees hope to anticipate a final dimension of life as a new creation in the Spirit.²³ God totally permeates the whole man with his plenitude and his utter openness. God is "all in all," and thus the human person enters upon his boundless fulfilment.²⁴

Thus, the risen Christ is the essential focus of the meaning of Heaven for man. It is not so much that Christ is "in Heaven" as that Heaven is being "in Christ".²⁵ (Kelly . 190). "we are in heaven when, and to the degree that we are in Christ; It is by being with Christ that we find the true location of our existence as human beings in God.²⁶

If heaven depends on being in Christ, then it must involve a co-being with all those who, together, constitute the body of Christ. Heaven is thus the open society of the communion of saints, and in this way the fulfilment of all human communion... the unraptured self-communion of the whole 'body of Christ', the communion of saints, sharing in the self-communion of the trinity.... in the closeness of a love which knows no limit and is sure of attaining God in the neighbor, and the neighbor in God.²⁷

If then Christian hope expresses itself in terms of the resurrection of the body, it is not longing for a resuscitation in this little bit of exchangeable matter. It is envisaging a complete embodiment in that world which is radically God's creation, which comes to us and bears us on in all the patient unfolding of the cosmos and in all the varied forms of human creativity. Such a hope does not want to escape from its

²¹ Tony Kelly, 191.

²² Ratzinger, 235.

²³ Kelly, 190-191.

²⁴ Ratzinger, 235

²⁵ Kelly, 190.

²⁶ Ratzinger, 234.

²⁷ Ratzinger, 235.

*essential world but to belong completely, creatively to it.*²⁸

*It is the daring expression of our hope for a deeper, more complete way of belonging to the world and its history.*²⁹ *Neither for the New Adam nor for us who believe in him, can Heaven mean leaving this world behind. It must mean this world, and ourselves in it, brought to fulfilment.*³⁰

*In the glorified humanity of Christ “this whole mortal creation, the world, will be transfigured and born again to become the kingdom of glory.”*³¹

From the above quoted reflections it is clear that reference to heaven in relation to man is spoken of in two planes: as the state of those who die in the grace of God and as a mode of existence *in the here and now*. If we choose to live in Christ now, we live in God’s unfolding but hidden “new heavens and new earth” . And our life in Christ will go on beyond death as “Life after life-after-death”. For the relationship that God establishes with man is eternal, so that the dead live on in God’s eternity. And so, human fulfilment is partaking in God’s own fulfilment no less.

All this has been made possible because the resurrection is dynamism already at work in the world since the Easter event. The world and the entire creation is implicated in the resurrection for it is meant to share it. We might therefore say that heaven is the outcome of the process of redemption by which creation is being transformed through the dynamism of the resurrection.

In as much as God from the beginning wanted to share his divine life with man, heaven is consequently the fulfillment of that desire. Hence, it is not so much that we will be “in heaven” or go “to heaven “and live in heaven”, but our being in heaven is being “in Christ” and “living in Christ”. This takes place in this transient world and this mortal life as it is being transformed and transfigured by the Spirit to culminate in a state of fullness and fulfillment ...“in Christ”.

Heaven is the state of transfiguration of the cosmos, the world and humanity. It is not an extra-historical location into which one goes, but the whole reality of God-cosmos-world transfigured in

²⁸ Kelly, 194.

²⁹ Kelly, 194.

³⁰ Kelly, 195.

³¹ See Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* translated by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 77.

which humanity is immersed...in unraptured self-communion of the whole 'body of Christ', sharing in the self-communion of the Holy Trinity. Heaven is humanity's fulfilment within God's own self-fulfillment.

As an aside we can say that heavenly life starts in this world and goes on after death; similarly purgatorial life starts in this life in penance and goes on after death until the purification and growth in Christ is completed. Even hellish life, the rejection of God's love, starts in this life and goes on after death in the face of God's abiding mercy and love.

Re-imagining and re-imagining Heaven. By all these we remove the traditional notion that heaven is a place. It is spoken of and imagined as a place "city, garden, dwelling place" only by way of a metaphor, the reality of which we have laid out above. We need to do this re-imagining, and re-imagining of Heaven, from a place we go to live in, to a new and fulfilled state of being, a new mode of existence. Of sharing in the resurrection of Christ in his life of glory, the fulfillment of humanity, the world and the cosmos are shared in the self-fulfillment of God, as God has desired from the beginning.

The gospels tell us that from the beginning God is intent on drawing every human being into the divine life. When John says "God is love" (1Jn 4:8, 16) he goes on to remind us that it is not as though we first loved God, but that God has first loved us. (1Jn 4:10) The divine initiative is always the determining factor in bringing the human person to fullness of life. We should not forget that God is the primary agent. God is the first and final giver.³²

Heaven as the fulfillment of God's self-giving purpose. From an appreciation of the nature of the Trinitarian life of reciprocal self-giving between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, which flows over into God's intent to draw every human being into the divine life, the first way we might describe heaven is as *the fulfillment of God's self-giving purpose*. The Father gave his Son to the world; the Son lived, suffered and died just as human beings do. But the power of the Spirit raised him from the dead into the life of glory. In the glorified humanity of Christ "this whole mortal creation, the world, will be transfigured and born again to become the kingdom

³² See Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 163.

of glory. The 'resurrection of the body' means the metamorphosis of *this* transient creation into the eternal kingdom of God, and of *this* mortal life into eternal life.³³

Again we see here the three intertwined dimensions cited in the preceding topic on Christ's second coming, namely, the dimension of personal salvation, the dimension of the kingdom taking in all humanity and history, and the dimension of the cosmos transfigured in the new creation. Starting from this perspective we can talk of heaven in a few other ways.

Heaven as embodiment of the risen Christ. "The gift of salvation and the state of completion in heaven are embodied in the person of the risen Christ"³⁴ In line with the self-giving life and purpose of the Trinity this gift, embodied in the risen Christ is to be shared with all human beings. Through the resurrection a new mode of Christ's presence in the world has come about. So we can also say that to share fully in this new mode of existence in Christ is what heaven is all about.³⁵ This new mode of existence is the state of full presence or "possession" of the being of God, which presupposes similarity with Christ's Spirit. This means the life of grace on earth and personal freedom has reached its state of perfection.³⁶ Thus, "we are in heaven when, and to the degree that we are in Christ".³⁷ This necessarily includes the joy of being in Christ and the anticipation of resurrection. Heaven, then, is sharing in the same destiny as Christ himself.³⁸

This realization, however, must be tempered with humility. For though we become one with God and share in his personal being, we always remain creatures with limited powers and capacity. The privileged relationship with God in Christ has to be valued and sustained.

Heaven as the community of the resurrection. Heaven is primarily the destiny of Christ but, by God's intent, also given as the destiny of humanity. Heaven thus implies the inclusion of the community of persons who have been transformed into Christ. It is the community of the resurrection. And more comprehensively,

³³ Moltmann, 77.

³⁴ See Colm McKeating, *Peace at the Last: A Christian Theology of the Last Things* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2009), 192.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

heaven is the ultimate state of humanity and the cosmos God has willed. The transformation of the world and of humanity comes to its fullness and completion in the community of the resurrection whose head is Christ.

Kelly calls attention to the sad fact that we have become accustomed to think of the human body as a personal possession. This extreme material individualism has to be replaced with a more relational perspective. We ought to realize that the body inserts the human person into the cosmic totality. It therefore represents a focus of relationships rather than a boundary. The body exists in a network of relationships that extends to the whole physical universe. Each is grounded in the whole and the whole is embodied in and enriched by what each one is. The resurrection of the body is therefore of cosmic significance. Thus, this perspective is more personal, cosmic and Christological in its span.³⁹ G. Martelet states the Christological focus:

*Christ's transfigured body is the archetype of the universe already introduced, in a hidden and mysterious manner, into the state of transfiguration, and also of the human race permeated by Spirit and eschatologically unified.*⁴⁰

Because the power of Christ extends to all things, the range of hope is cosmic in its scope. G. Martelet catches the point:

*We believe that Christ, through his risen body is the principle of a life so absolute that it embodies on the cosmic plane the ultimate hope of a world that has been created for the resurrection.*⁴¹

Heaven as all of creation saved and transformed. Heaven is best understood and described on the basis of the Incarnation. It is the whole of creation grafted and integrated into the glorified humanity of Christ.⁴² The “new heaven” and the “new earth” must incorporate all that God has created, (as) transformed by the

³⁹ See Kelly, 174-175.

⁴⁰ Kelly quotes here G. Martelet, *The Risen Christ and the Eucharistic World*, trans. Rene Hague (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 157. See Kelly, 175.

⁴¹ Again, Kelly quotes here G. Martelet, *The Risen Christ and the Eucharistic World*, trans. Rene Hague (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 82. See Kelly, 174.

⁴² See, McKeating, 197.

power of the resurrection.⁴³

Kelly further explains why Christ is the ultimate destiny and form of creation. In this regard, he is the absolute point by which all is measured, the goal finalizing all genetic processes.

*In the full unfolding of the paschal mystery Christ is revealed as the ultimate factor in the destiny and form of creation. All creation's energies and forces are made subject to him, reintegrated into a new wholeness. (e.g Eph1:10; Col1:15-20; Jn 1:1-5). In and through Christ, the reshaping of the universe has irreversibly begun. Christ himself is the transcendent space in which all the becoming of history and the world takes place.*⁴⁴

To further stress his point Kelly quotes here L. Boros: "From the metaphysical depths of the universe, new, divinized forces are already flowing into our existential environment in the outer surface of things".⁴⁵ In this new environment we will not be disembodied spirits haunting the world to come, but totally human within it. In other words, to be "in heaven" means to be "somebody" in a transformed universe.⁴⁶

Heaven as life with and in God. God is life: to be with God is to live. For God, the source of life, the human person is always a living reality-- in life, in death, and after death.⁴⁷ The understanding of heaven centers on the idea of perfected relationship with God. This relationship starts during life and is anchored on participation in the community of the resurrection, the church, whose destiny and hope is in the glorified humanity of Christ. To live as the "resurrection community" requires a continuous striving to be like Christ. In truth that likeness of Christ is actualized as sonship and daughterhood to the Father, in Christ by the power of the Spirit, the power of resurrection.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid., 198.

⁴⁴ See Kelly, 175.

⁴⁵ Kelly quotes here Ladislaus Boros, *The Moment of Truth: Mysterium of Truth*, trans. G. Bainbridge (London: Burns & Oates, 1962), 154. See Kelly, 175.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 160-161.

⁴⁸ McKeating, 198.

Integration

We have presented the doctrine of heaven in the light of God's intent from the beginning of drawing every human being into the divine life. We have highlighted the fact that this is God's gift and is primarily his initiative, requiring on our part a free response. We have also made clear that our life with God is realized through our faith in Christ and by virtue of the transformation the Spirit will effect in our person and spirit. And, just as in Christ, this will be a state of intimacy with God. So, if heaven is essentially the state of intimacy with God, then this life is not disconnected with it. This life must be oriented to it (intimacy with God) and spent to be worthy of it, to prepare for it. Somewhat like a form of rehearsal or a school for heaven. The life of intimacy with God is not to be postponed to the future. It must start in this life. At bottom, it entails growing into the likeness of Christ. Integral to this outlook is the joy and excitement of knowing that one is entrusted with a secret: the mystery of God and his gift.

Earthly existence shares in nature are characteristic of matter, space and time. But non-material existence (life of the spirit) is a mode of non-space/time existence but which is nonetheless able to break through and manifest itself in time and space. This is the mode of existence those who have died take on, in some form of intermediate state while awaiting the Final Judgment. In the case of those who have lived in grace and died they have been described as "beings of light", this new mode of existence. The digitalization of information is a metaphor for a transformation to a non-physical mode of existence, into "properties of light" and "energy vibrations and waves". The youth are familiar with this technology and will be able to relate to a visualization of resurrected existence bearing these characteristics..

So what will the resurrected body be like?

Contemporary theologian John Polkinghorne is also a particle physicist. So he is familiar with the behavior of sub-atomic particles observed as energy vibrations and waves exhibiting properties of light. These properties somehow match the gospel descriptions of the risen Christ which Thomas Aquinas has noted as having

the capacity to transcend time and space (*subtlety*), has luminous brilliance (*radiance*) and suppleness and athleticism (*agility*). Taking Aquinas's view that the soul is the "form" or patterning energy of the body, Polkinghorne speculates that at death that form is remembered by God, and stored in the divine mind. And just as the "form" of a picture preserved in a computer memory may be uploaded in any new format bigger, sharper and more impressive than the original, the stored "form" in God's memory would then be reconstituted with a new and immortalized materiality. This new body would be continuous with the old one since it is informed by the same pattern. At the same time it would be something altogether new, more splendid, more complete and more resplendent, exhibiting *subtlety, agility and radiance*.⁴⁹

A new dynamic visualization of the state of ultimate life with and in God has to improve on the Thomist beatific vision, which since the middle ages has remained as the accepted version. For Aquinas, God is the highest of all intelligible objects. The limitation in our current ways of knowing does not allow us to see the essence of God in this life. But these limitations will be overcome in eternity once the beatific vision is bestowed. This intellectualist view of beatific vision has no place for the body; for Aquinas it is essential that the beatific vision is an end, a condition of rest and contemplation.⁵⁰

Fortunately, there is a contrary perspective from the view of another major Christian tradition, namely, Eastern Orthodoxy, which offers room for a richer interpretation. Here, God is beyond knowing so life unfolds before mystery; the participation of the body is valued in the ongoing experience of deification or transformation; perpetual progress is posited so any notion of rest must be balanced by that of constantly increasing desire and fulfillment. From this perspective, Heaven is a matter of unending progress, moral, spiritual, and/or intellectual.⁵¹

A combination of these two viewpoints is possible by adopting Kelly's observation that the beatific vision should not be understood as seeing God's face from the outside, but rather

⁴⁹ See: Robert Barron, *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2011), 275-276.

⁵⁰ See Jerry L. Walls, "Heaven," *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 402-403

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 403.

from the inside, precisely as experiencing God's life, as being caught within the Trinitarian self-outpouring. "It is not a matter of looking at God "from the outside" (he says) but a knowledge born of an immersion in the boundless ocean of Trinitarian life. It is to live from, with and in God.⁵² In that abyss of mystery we are united with God and all creation in God. St Augustine much earlier already expressed this insight: "After this life God himself is where we will be."⁵³

Biblical imagery has used city, garden, banquet and kingdom to depict life in heaven. According to a study by Alister McGrath, two of these images stand out, that of city and garden.⁵⁴ Since cities represent the greatest achievement of culture and society, then the new Jerusalem is an apt image of heaven.

On the other hand, the image of garden combines culture and nature and our ability to participate in the beauty and bounteous delights of creation. Sometimes these images are combined either by depicting the city at the center of a garden or by describing paradise as restored within the walls of the New Jerusalem. McGrath makes this interesting observation: "However the images may have been deployed they capture the human longing for a return to Eden, for an unbroken relationship with God, with other persons and with the world of nature".⁵⁵ McGrath's observation fits nicely into another researcher's keen discovery and reminder.

N.T. Wright points out that Chapters 21 and 22 of the Book of Revelation makes it clear that the ultimate future is not about people leaving 'earth' and going to 'heaven'. Rather, it is the life of 'heaven', more specifically the New Jerusalem, coming down *from* heaven to earth ---exactly in line with the Lord's Prayer.⁵⁶

Heaven may thus be imagined as an ad interim state of transformation of the cosmos, the earth, and the dead, in the here and now, by the dynamics of resurrection already at work, but hidden to human eyes, to be fully revealed at some future moment of completion.

The state of fulfillment and fullness of being that man is called

⁵² See Kelly, 172-173.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See Walls, 401-402.

⁵⁵ Ibid., Walls, "Heaven," *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, 402.

⁵⁶ Ibid., Walls, 401.

to is nothing less than sharing in God's own fulfillment and fullness. We are drawn into the Father's infinite love for the Son by being "in Christ"; and "with Christ" reciprocate the Father's love in the Spirit which Christ has given and shared with us. The Spirit is the bond that binds the Father and Son in whom he takes great pleasure, and is well pleased. Heaven is the enjoyment that infinite love gifts us, and of the loving relationship we enjoy with the Father Son and Spirit, and in the communion of saints. Our relationship with God and our fellow men are energized by the Holy Spirit, the power of the resurrection. Thus Heaven is sharing in the glorified humanity of Christ, by the community of those whom he has gifted with his spirit as to be conformed to him, and incorporated, made part of him, in the building of the kingdom of God. We await the coming of the kingdom in its fullness, even as we experience how that kingdom is at hand under making transformation; and the kingdom has been with us since the Easter event, and indeed from the very beginning in the self-giving nature of God that needed to spill over into creation, in order to be shared by men in the self-surrender of the Son to the Father in the Spirit. By the power of the Creator Spirit the fullness and fulfillment of humanity, the cosmos and God are one.

Our state of conformity with Christ requires that our relationships and behavior are patterned after Christ. The moral dimension of our living "in Christ" is carried out in our service to others in *full conformity with Christ*. Our goal must be to mature in our life in Christ. As a consequence, with the Spirit of Christ in us we take part in transforming the world around us from greed, violence, injustice, hate and deceit, to one of generosity, peace, justice, love and truthfulness. The social injustice that is at the root of poverty and the degradation of the environment, which will do a great injustice to coming generations, is at the center of the moral challenge of our being and living in Christ. God desires fullness of life for all. Our being "in Christ" carries the burden of that desire.

If then we live in Christ by the Spirit, we are called to repentance for such continuing social injustice. With Christ who 'takes away the sins of the world', we anticipate the world's transformation even as we set ourselves to make our contribution to the process. With the awareness of the power of the resurrection at work in the

world we look forward to the future fulfillment promised by God. He will create this world anew. We envision yet already enjoy this heavenly fulfillment as a banquet, so on earth we gather around the Eucharist to celebrate our communion with God in Christ, thanking God for the fullness and fulfillment in a limitless future, for a challenging but grace-drenched present, while remembering what he has done for us in the death and resurrection of Christ.

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