

# *Heaven on Earth*

God's Call to Community in the Book of Revelation

Michael Battle

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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*First edition*

Published by Westminster John Knox Press  
Louisville, Kentucky

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*Book design by Drew Stevens*

*Cover design by Allison Taylor*

*Cover art: Vesica Pisces #3 by Eric Cross*

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Battle, Michael, 1963– author.

Title: Heaven on earth : God’s call to community in the Book of Revelation / Michael Battle.

Description: First edition. | Louisville, KY : Westminster John Knox Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016032995 (print) | LCCN 2016048201 (ebook) | ISBN 9780664262549 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781611647945 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Revelation—Criticism, interpretation, etc. | Ubuntu (Philosophy) | Communities—Biblical teaching.

Classification: LCC BS2825.52 .B375 2017 (print) | LCC BS2825.52 (ebook) | DDC 228/.06—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016032995>

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*For my sister, Dr. Constance Battle, OBGYN  
Who valiantly practices God's will on earth as it is in heaven.  
She brings life into the world as she battles cancer.*

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## *Foreword*

The Revelation of John is one of those biblical books that are very readily consigned to the Too Difficult box. We know that even in the early church it caused problems: intelligent readers recognized that it didn't sound very much like the St. John who wrote the Gospel; anxious bishops worried about the way it seemed to make the world to come rather too much of an intensified version of the present universe. And throughout Christian history it has generated a wild profusion of fantasies about the details of the world's last days and a useful repertoire of scenarios and characters to be used in theological and ecclesiastical polemics—whores, dragons, and apocalyptic horsemen.

It is prophecy, poetry, and politics all at once; a heady mixture. It is a testament to almost superhuman heroism under persecution, the voice of communities that are facing a completely ruthless and murderous state. It is a gift to the volatile and unsettled and disturbed, offering consoling pictures of divine vindication and the torment and death of enemies. It reveals not simply the purposes of God but also the complex mechanics of how communities and individuals manage impossible stress and suffering in their imaginative lives. And just because of all this, it is not a book to ignore, however tempting it is to do so. It tells us essential truths about how God weaves the divine life into the experience of the dispossessed and threatened. It creates extraordinary and endlessly fertile metaphors for conflict and homecoming. It also creates a world in which we can get badly lost, a world where shock, fear, and resentment can breed nightmares.

To read the book sanely and Christianly but still to keep our ears and eyes open to the depth of its imaginative challenges, we need a sane Christian expositor who also understands what matters about poetry and politics, and who knows what prophecy is and isn't. Michael Battle is wonderfully well equipped as a guide to such a reading, and his reflections are going to be a really valuable framework for many people willing prayerfully to "sit under" the holy text but wary of the seductions

of theological fancy and self-justifying mythologies. It is an unusual and creative book which will be a welcome addition to the resources of critical and obedient biblical discipleship.

Rowan Williams  
Cambridge, summer 2016

# *Introduction*

## Are We There Yet?

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

—Revelation 22:13

Beginnings are perilous.

Such peril is familiar from family vacations. Often on family road trips, I experience a painful question from the backseat: Are we there yet? Barely out of the driveway, a youthful voice poses a question that is really a complaint. Although the question is painful at the time, it becomes humorous on reflection. Beginning our journey, we cannot help but grumble for it to end. The book of Revelation not only ends the Christian Bible, it also produces a great deal of complaints posed as questions.

When traveling through the book of Revelation, one enters a world of controversy and confusion. Without some clarity of context, such controversy and confusion becomes all the more problematic. This is not a family vacation in which the road trip entails a succession of signposts and advertisements along the highway. The reader is set up to enter a maze in which the final outcome is also the true beginning. Similar to T. S. Eliot's wisdom, Revelation's end is really the beginning. Events that occur in Revelation do not represent a succession of sequentially occurring events. John writes as if dreaming, using a stream-of-consciousness technique. The past and present occur at the same time, as do the imminent and the transcendent. Such a methodology concurs with my desire for the transcendent God to also be here and now.

In many ways this book you hold in your hand is a confessional book, in the sense that I am a self-avowed Christian. I do not hide this

fact. My concern, however, is that I may contradict the aim of this book if you, the reader, are not able to journey along with me, due to feeling alienated by my particular identity or having already been harmed by unhelpful interpretations of the book of Revelation. I am reminded of my own alienation when I hear people co-opt blackness as a negative image: black ice, dark soul, dark thoughts, film noir. Oftentimes, white people will use such language with no ill intent toward me as a black and dark person. The parallel to Revelation is that we all need to be educated as to how intent affects impact. John's intent is

Discovering the Living One is dangerous, and we would know less of it without the fractured and disturbed languages of people like John the Divine and their contemporary equivalents.

—Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*

to see the healing of the *ethnoi*, the people. His impact, however, often causes more nightmares.

Rowan Williams is helpful in solving the problem of the gap between intent and impact. The provocative title of his book *A Ray of Darkness* is a paradox, he says,

but one that easily annoys those who suspect that paradox conceals “muddle”—an intellectual or spiritual cowardice. We need paradox, however. Of all people, John of Patmos helps us see this because “we need to express some sense of this strange fact that our language doesn't ‘keep up’ with the multiplicity and interrelatedness and elusiveness of truth.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this is why I adhere to my context as a black Episcopal priest and theologian who still sees himself in the black church. I hold up the black church in a white church here because I still see myself in a unified church. John encourages me in his Revelation when he says that light and darkness as we know it will one day have a complete paradigm shift (Rev. 21:23). So, before we begin, please know that my intent is not to alienate anyone; rather, I seek to imagine in my particular Christian context how a view of heaven need not lead to culture wars and further excuses for oppressing others. Heaven, as envisioned by John of Patmos, has much greater purpose.

In our beginning it is important to understand that John does not provide a linear narrative in which we know how many miles are left until we reach Disney World; rather, he jumps back and forth, with God's judgments and events happening at the same time. This way of telling the story is important for so many of us using Revelation. I mean it when I say we “use” the book. Too often Revelation is used to wag God's judgmental finger. From the reader's perspective, however, much of God's judgments appear unintelligible due to conflicting

symbolism. For example, the seven broken seals seem to be obvious, and yet from another perspective they look like seven trumpets, and from a third angle they look like seven bowls of wrath.

John writes in *medias res*, in the midst of a messy world, to encourage the members in the backseat of his journey to resist the powers and principalities that keep making us turn in the wrong direction. Indeed, where is God and what is God doing in the midst of such confusion and haplessness? In short, God is already with us (even driving in the front seat), but like little children on a long road trip, we lose patience with God because we lose patience with the journey. It is better to create our own gods, idols, and powers. In other words, we want to stop our journey with God too soon. So, God reminds us with nightmares and visions that we haven't arrived yet—that the way we live now must become a more mature way to live. Similar to the need to grow out of the immaturity of treating heaven as some kind of pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, John's Revelation demands that we change our selfish paradigms of heaven that is separated from earth. This is so heavy a challenge that Revelation bursts our bubble of what heaven is like.

John takes this methodology seriously because he does not edit his stream of consciousness. He allows its own logic to imagine normative ethics through the story of a persecuted Christian community. This is why he uses superheroes and monsters to symbolize how Christians discern what is of God and how to behave on earth as it is in heaven. But what I love most about John's imagination is in how the main superhero is often galloping (or however lambs walk) behind the scenes as the greatest power. The Lamb is the greatest superhero—even more than the rider on the white horse. Although true to the indiscriminate nature of a lamb's pastoral presence, this greatest of superheroes causes the apocalyptic bang. In other words, the Lamb is more ferocious than the dragon and the beasts from the sea and land.

\* \* \*

With this strange journey of ending before we begin and superheroes who are little lambs, I feel the obligation to tell you about our trip here before we get into the thick of things. In terms of my methodology, I rely on personal experience and use this genre—including vignettes from theologians, hymnody, literature, and popular culture—throughout the commentary to make the case for a sense of how to realize heaven on earth. I hope the reader will discover that I

am passionate about this work, and I hope that my particular perspective will not hinder the reader from also pursuing heaven on earth. In fact, I hope such passion will reflect the creative bent to my work. Of course, such creativity will always have to be judged through the eye of the beholder—the reader. The commitment to a concretized view of heaven requires passion, given the state of our world: political deadlock, war, global warming, racial profiling, civil war among Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism), increasing poverty, and a squandering of resources.

So, how will I make this book manageable to read? How do I map it out? I divide this book into three parts. First, in order to better see our own chaotic world and societies around us, we look at the nightmares and strange occurrences in the narrative of Revelation. I introduce my thesis here that the writer of Revelation creates the same parallel because he never allows heaven and earth's nightmares to separate. I adopt John's stream-of-consciousness technique of going back and forth between the nightmares and strange events in both heaven and earth.

These shocking nightmares and visions lead us to part 2—waking up to the problems in Christian faith today. Problems such as individualism often result from these nightmares; unfortunately, we would rather stay in our individualistic worlds than enter into the dreamscape again to envision better communities. Although in parts 1 and 2 we wrestle with John's strange world, it is important to note that visions like John's are not linear. A significant number of biblical scholars would even agree that it is wrong to force a chronological framework on the visions of Revelation.

This conundrum leads to part 3, in which we dream again, but this time with guides along the way who help us navigate the paralysis of our nightmares and idealism, guides such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Desmond Tutu. These two guides help us with our stream of consciousness in that we are now free to wrestle with nightmares and still remain hopeful that change and good dreams are possible. Even more, they remind us that dreams can become reality. Because we have these good guides, our nightmares, insomnia, and good dreams flow together in a more cyclical pattern.

Throughout the book the reader will experience my impatience in the midst of nightmares and insomnia, of not waiting until John's beautiful and redemptive ending. Even in the first two parts I try to find ways of pointing toward John's beautiful ending of redemption.

Although our goal in organizing the book in three parts is to finish a trip, John's trip toward a healing tree of the *ethnoi* (ethnicities and nations), we must also be mature enough to withstand the contemplation needed to complete such a long and seemingly impossible journey. Inevitably on this journey we will experience the effects caused by impatience for John's new heaven and earth. Mostly, these effects are lethargy and false dichotomies between heaven and earth. Instead of heaven providing a reference point from which to see how to live on earth, we use our individualistic concepts of heaven to obsess about who is in or out of our constructed heavens and earths. We need Christian exemplars who adhere to restorative justice rather than the retributive models of justice that create eternal barriers between heaven and earth.

There is great need to return to our visionaries like King and Tutu to inform how we may practice heaven by becoming more like God. We must practice the presence of God in order to find heaven

in our midst. In order to practice heaven, I argue, we will need to become more like God—a deeply troubling notion for most of us to wrap our minds around. In order for us to exist in heaven without such reality becoming too overwhelming to us, we will have to become God's beloved community. In the minds of many Christian mystics, the human process of becoming like (or mutual to) God creates helpful social and political movements. King's concept of the beloved community is vital here. The blessing of seeing God, however, becomes a burden in the world because those who become visionaries can no longer stay silent in systems and structures that belittle God's image.

In the process we learn more about the concept of Ubuntu, in which the spirituality of community continues to take on deeper meanings and connections to the concept of heaven. Tutu is a champion of this concept of Ubuntu in which the goal is to be persons in community. The concept of Ubuntu also helps us solve the divisions between heaven and earth, which need not be mutually exclusive but in fact exist in order to provide the reference point for why we are here at all. Jesus sums up why we are here: we are to love God, self, and neighbor. As we will explore in this book, there are many reasons why it is difficult for Christians

Although many Christians preferred to leave the book [of Revelation] behind, others chose to not give up these vivid and compelling visions. Instead they reinterpreted them, as Christians have done ever since.

—Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation*

to really believe this. Perhaps we fail to take Jesus seriously because we often grow bored with his simplicity and focus. Perhaps our language betrays us as we use spiritual language. And perhaps we need to mature enough in our spiritual lives so that our individualistic tendencies no longer interpret apocalyptic discourse to meet our own needs.

PART ONE

*Revelation's Nightmares*



# 1

## *God, Are You There?*

It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven.

—Revelation 13:6

I know God is beyond us, but I need God here with me.

I am not the only one in this predicament, as you will hear me argue in this book. It is my hope that a down-to-earth conversation about why the book of Revelation remains important today can help with this predicament. Revelation is down-to-earth because it is not just for church folks to read—or preachers, or scholars, or students—but for anyone trying to understand the goal of what God creates. People riding subways, working on farms, and protesting in the streets are all wondering about this goal. The wonder is so profound that we often end in deep conflict as we struggle over whose interpretation is the true answer. The goal of God’s creation, Revelation tells us, is to end in heaven, but it’s not the kind of heaven you might have in mind.

The essential problem of heaven is that not many of us really want it. A friend told me that a Nazi once said, “You take care of the things of heaven and we’ll take care of the earth.” Thankfully, my friend had a witty response, “That’s a bad division of real estate.” Out of nothing, God makes human beings dream of and envision a community reflective of heaven on earth. Even through hopeless situations, God requires us to believe—even in heaven. One of the essential points I want to make is that many of us no longer know how to believe in heaven. We are caught between two extremes. On one hand, the concept of heaven is no longer taken seriously because of seeming irrelevancy to our earthly existence. On the other, some believe so strongly in their

personal versions of heaven that whole swaths of human communities are considered dispensable and left out.

I want to find a way to believe in heaven in which we can both take it seriously and leave no one behind. Whether we like it or not, heaven is important. Without a concept of heaven, we lack the basis for why we exist on earth. Lacking such vision, we wander in a wilderness and forget for whom we are made. Therefore, my vision of heaven does not assume anyone else is in hell. For this reason, I need to make sure that the reader receives a “map” so that one knows where one is going. In addition, we need to deal with biblical texts that seem to contradict me, suggesting that there indeed is a hell.

If one consistently argues that heaven is not otherworldly but a means to God’s presence, then one needs to bring to life teachings of Scripture (for instance, Rom. 8:18–25; Rev. 21:1–7; 1 Cor. 15:20–29). The typical criticisms against my argument that heaven and earth are intrinsically related usually follow the same debates around pantheism in which perceived reality is inseparable from divine reality. Perceiving my argument as somehow against God’s transcendence misses the mark, however. I am more iconoclastic than pantheistic. What many Western Christians perceive as “orthodox” Christianity is more aptly described as “individualistic” or “personal” Christianity. This kind of Christianity easily sees the apocalyptic only in individualistic terms: for example, if one does not accept Jesus as personal savior, then one goes to hell forever. I argue here, however, that there can be no individual salvation (understood as an afterlife) apart from communal transformation of communities and sociopolitical systems. In order to guard against Westernized, individualistic kinds of utopias, one must wrestle with how earth and heaven are interrelated. Heaven is not separated from earth, because by doing so we define earthly existence as somehow the same as heavenly existence. In other words, heaven is for those who deserve it and earth for those who deserve less than heaven. Heaven becomes the extrapolation of the good life for those who are underprivileged. What I argue here, however, is that the confluence between earth and heaven is not meant to make heaven simply a better earth. No, heaven provides the reference point of paradigm shifts and transformation rather than technical fixes such as making the poor a little less poor.

My method will be to travel toward heaven in light of its common problems of individualism, boredom, and delusion. Through these three pitfalls of heaven, I will ask how counterviews of heaven can

facilitate a better life on earth. Be warned that I will not try to exhaust the historical thought on heaven nor try to trace all the factors that led to the current demise of heaven. Rather, I examine pivotal figures who offer explicit direction as to where (or where not) to look for heaven. I invite the reader to slow down and imagine with me how heaven and earth intersect.

We will have a wise cast of characters to help us imagine this intersection. It is also important to note the meaning of some of the terms used in this book. I use the ancient category of *soul* (the emotional center of life) that is distinct from *spirit* (conscious being). I understand spirit to be capable of the full presence of God, but few obtain such awareness. Those who do obtain consciousness of God's presence are called *mystics*. Mystics describe heaven as unmediated contact with the supernatural life of God. So those on earth can catch glimpses of heaven. I also see heaven as that place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger, which is Frederick Buechner's beautiful definition of vocation. This *theology of proximity* also describes heaven, which also constitutes angels and the community of saints who always touch the world's deep hunger with deep gladness. Such a worldview of mystical community is increasingly strange for Westerners, whereas in the Southern Hemisphere angels and the communion of saints remain alive and vital in our earthly existence.

One way for Westerners to recover a healthy concept of heaven is to reintroduce the concept of *beatitude* as synonymous with heaven.

Beatitude is essentially the knowledge and experience of God that, when possessed, leaves nothing to be desired. Beatitude enables imagination of how relationships among persons are healthy. Charles Williams has such imagination as he states, "So full of derivation and nourishment are these [relationships] that they may well be named the in-othering . . . and the in-Godding."<sup>1</sup> This in-othering and in-Godding too can happen on earth—the discovery of beatitude in the other.

Lastly, *earth* is used differently than *world*. *Earth* means the corporate life of empirical existence as we know it here and now—that is, our struggles as mammals and creatures, systems and structures. In this book, I do not intend heaven to mean a better earth, because such imagination forfeits the possibility of the paradigm shifts needed for us to solve seemingly irresolvable conflicts (i.e., war, poverty, disease).

Christianity is "permanent revolution" or *metanoia* which does not come to an end in this world, this life, or this time.

—H. Richard Niebuhr,  
*The Meaning of Revelation*

What I suggest by *world* that is different from earth are those instinctual and structural struggles that are ambivalent toward participating in the full presence of God.

Many have used the language of transformation, spirituality, and empowerment to write about the apparent notion of heaven. Rather than putting forth a new interpretation of heaven, I intend to remember heaven as some of my Christian ancestors and contemporary Christian exemplars teach me. Even still, my concept of heaven will indeed be challenged by many who pursue discrete and exclusive worldviews within Christian communities. Eventually, in this book, I argue that there should be a common desire for heaven—otherwise, heaven will remain unintelligible. This common desire is the miracle we are all looking for. Without an interdependent vision of what perfects us all, no person can be ultimately happy—in heaven.

In large part, this down-to-earth approach is vital for us today because Revelation remains an authoritative document about what God's presence (i.e., heaven) looks like and who gets to live there in an uninhibited way. Instead of this world in which bad things happen to good people, many of us believe there will be a world of uninhibited goodness in which select citizens get to live. Such a controversial conversation, however, usually does not end well because select citizens presuppose others who are excluded. I argue here that the book of Revelation narrates this conversation about heavenly selection in a different manner. Human beings do not select heavenly citizens. God makes these determinations, which is fitting since the actual book of Revelation does have a "happily ever after" ending. So, why do we fuss and fight about who lives uninhibitedly with God?

In short, we fight because we are narrow-minded. I must apologize here for making insults in our very introductions to each other! Here is what I mean. Conversations concerning the book of Revelation fail to consider how the writer of this apocalyptic vision is also weighted in controversy and confusion. In other words, Revelation is a disorienting vision that naturally elicits controversy and, I would add, confusion. John's speech intentionally interrupts and throws us off course. This is so because John himself is disrupted by a vision any mortal person has difficulty recognizing—heaven on earth. His disorienting voice can speak for itself, "I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me" (Rev. 1:12). Only someone who is confused "sees" people's voices.

Any book on Revelation worth its salt contains controversial elements. This is so because Revelation is meant to be a controversial,

provocative vision of what it looks like for God to be uninhibited with us. I write this book with such vision in mind so that spiritual leaders may know how to respond in healthy ways to the dreams and nightmares in Revelation. Throughout history most civilizations have contemplated their own end. In my writing, therefore, one will not find a great deal of debates between faith and history or how one applies the historical-critical method to Scripture. In short, my premise is that John's Apocalypse is a vision in which heaven and earth cannot be separated because God's presence cannot be inhibited. In fact, the term *apocalypse* means a veil lifted, disclosing something hidden from humanity.

An uninhibited God is what I think of as heaven. Such presence among creation is the reason for the design on the cover of this book. It displays the *mandorla* (an Italian word for almond). The mandorla, two circles overlapping one another to form an almond shape in the middle, symbolizes interaction between opposing worlds. In this book, these worlds may be taken to represent heaven and earth. Early Christians used the symbol of the mandorla to represent a merging of heaven and earth. This evolved into the symbol of God's merger through the incarnation in Jesus who becomes heaven and earth in microcosm. The deepening of the symbolism of the mandorla to mean Jesus himself was practiced by early Christians who revealed themselves to one another by scratching a small circle in a wall. Another Christian would come along and scratch another circle slightly overlapping the first one. In this clandestine activity, Christians could communicate during times of persecution and thus complete a mandorla, which also indicated the sign of the fish, an early symbol of Jesus.

The symbol of the mandorla is important in terms of understanding worlds torn apart. It is also an image that helps us understand Jesus. Rowan Williams explains Jesus' impact: "He has made an empty space in the world for God to come in. And so he does not any longer belong just to the world of human beings: he is a space in the world . . . the place where God is free to act and to suffer. He has made room for God."<sup>2</sup> It is as though Jesus becomes the ultimate mandorla, in which there are no divisions, no exclusions of race, politics, sex, economics, and power. Jesus is the space between worlds for all to move from desolation to consolation. And so I invite the reader to move with me theologically as I anticipate typical culture wars over what inhibits God's freedom to merge heaven and earth.

Here we struggle between heaven and earth to discover that place where God ultimately resides. In my speculative imagination, that

place looks like ultimate reconciliation. At the heart of the drama of reconciliation in the book of Revelation is the war both in heaven and on earth in which good struggles against evil, consolation against desolation. My interpretation of the book of Revelation is ultimately not doom and gloom. The ultimate message that I discover in Revelation is one in which the times of desolation, when one surrenders in apocalyptic tensions, provoke God and us to move toward consolation. This is why God's angelic hosts show us a crystal clear river at the end. By the riverbank is a fruit tree—perhaps even an almond tree. Eating its fruit this time does not cast us out of paradise but welcomes us back in and even heals the *ethnoi*, the nations.

John's apocalyptic vision unconsciously invites God into our mandorla. The healing of the splits in creation begins. My spiritual director, Brother Curtis Almquist, SSJE, gave me a metaphor to help me see what is going on in Revelation. When I was going through specific tensions in my own life between desolation and consolation, he told me, "A Christian is called to live in between desolation and consolation, like a mandorla." As a spiritual leader I am called not to settle in consolation or desolation, because I will need to minister to those stuck in one or the other. Such claustrophobia will only wreak havoc and dysfunction.

"Michael," Brother Curtis said, "you must bushwhack a well-worn path between consolation and desolation. Remove the weeds and briars so that you can move easily between the two worlds and create your own mandorla."

The important point here, especially in light of our conservative, moderate, and liberal conflicts over Scripture, is that John's Apocalypse neither traps folks in hell nor makes us content in heaven knowing that others are weeping and gnashing their teeth forever. The book of Revelation instead invites an overlap between heaven and earth, generally very thin at first as John has a lot of nightmares and scary visions, but the well-worn path between heaven and earth that John describes eventually produces greater overlap. So great that a crystal river runs through. With greater overlap between heaven and earth, the healing of the nations is finally seen.

When we think better about heaven we think better about justice—especially restorative justice. Despite some readings of Revelation, God's presence is not vindictive. Such a narrow perspective of God justifies many power schemes in which our phobias and isms flourish. Racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism all flourish through a big story that says God smites those who live in darkness and blackness. In this

metanarrative, God's retributive justice regains the power balance of the way things used to be. More and more, we are hearing a counter metanarrative in which God's power is not controlled by time and circumstance; rather, God's power is not what we often think it is, such as toppling chariots, gutting dragons, and building mass graves for sinners to weep and gnash their teeth. God's power is not like that. Instead, God's power is revealed through the vulnerability of love that does not coerce or demand unearned intimacy. Such a power is practical realizing that retribution's logic yields to anarchy. In Jesus, the power of restorative justice looks practical in its counternarrative against anarchy, cycles of violence, recidivism of the incarcerated, and so much more.

We must remember that those who focused on reparation and retribution, like the liberation theologians in the 1960s and 1970s, were *all for* a collective vision of shared

theology, humanity, and, yes, heaven on earth. Other American Christians like the Catholic convert Dorothy Day advocated for restorative justice and change, trying to bring heaven to the cities of the 1930s to 1950s. Although I focus in subsequent chapters on the thought and work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King Jr., there are many others who share a restorative justice vision for heaven on earth, including Latin American and Hispanic liberation theologians whose ideas overlap with my own. And yet, more work remains to discover how restorative justice is a vital concept to help us think toward ultimate solutions.

The oppressed do not see any dichotomy between God's love and God's justice.

—Allan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective*

## INTERDEPENDENT SALVATION

Especially in this twenty-first-century world, still dominated by Western culture, we need others to help us rethink justice outside the scope of personal salvation alone. The problem here is that in personal salvation no one else really matters. As long as I am saved, it doesn't matter if I hear others weeping and gnashing their teeth forever. My personal heaven is so titanic in its protective membrane that my existential happiness is not affected by others who suffer forever. In fact, I can be ultimately happy that people deserve their just punishment. This way of reading Revelation, however, is erroneous and dangerous.

The confluence of heavenly and earthly existence can only be imagined through a personal lifestyle that takes into account the fact that others exist. Logically speaking, I cannot even be happy unless I have a frame of reference that others are happy as well. For example, when I celebrate my birthday I do so only in the reality of others who help me practice the concept of celebration. In other words, celebration implies that others exist. The reward in this imagination is the discovery of what indeed is personal; namely, we cannot be personal without also being interpersonal. I'm sorry to say to the rugged individualists out there—that's just the way we are made.

So I invite the reader to guard against those heavens in which one is personally joyful while others suffer in hell. We need each other to know our own personal salvation. Even though we must first confess our broken reality, eventually we should all have a common quest for heaven. Without such a common vision we perpetuate war on earth, as individuals and groups think they can be whole at the other's expense. In philosophy, this is called solipsism—the individual's world is all that really matters.

It was only when I first traveled to Africa that I realized my own Western solipsism. I realized that I have amphibious identity as an African American. Because of the historical and sociological realities of the United States, I never really felt like an "American"—a description that is itself problematic and presumptuous (as if Canadians or Bolivians are not American also). But when I was in Africa, those who were African did not see me as African, but American. My accent, attire, and lack of rites of passage let them know right away that I was not really African. I found that those experiences have helped prepare me to write this commentary.

In this book about heaven and earth's communal approach to salvation, I have the daunting task of trying to show our amphibious identities as citizens of heaven and earth. My daunting task is that I must find a way to bridge my point of view with those who rightfully refuse to listen to me. A conservative Christian certainly can critique my universalism. Non-Western readers are right to critique my perspective as a Westerner who has the leisure to write a book. Unless I make this personal confession, many readers will feel as though they have embarked upon one long sermon—unclear as to whom I imagine is sitting in the church pews. As I have already indicated, I hope the church pews morph beyond affinity groups and into chairs and subways full of diverse people who want to figure out a better heaven than

a personal one in which I can be happy while someone else is suffering. And yet the personal dimension of heaven is important because it creates a desire to reach ultimate fulfillment. What is counterintuitive (at least for many Western people) is that such personal fulfillment requires community. Trying to explain personal fulfillment in this way is a daunting task in Western culture.

I also think my task is daunting because of the social isolation of the United States in which many may say they want the planet to flourish while at the same time lacking a worldview that other people around the world are actually suffering because of how we live in the United States. In other words, my habits betray me by wasting the world's resources. My nation-state is a fraction of the world's population, and yet we control an outsize share of the global resources. Saying this and truly realizing this are two different realities.

One of the most important practices for citizens in the United States is to travel the world (yes, really the world, and not just southern France or Ireland). Such travel moves away from lavish vacations and into pilgrimage toward God. Responsibly seeking God in the world will not waste resources if such travel opens the eyes of US citizens to how we positively and negatively affect God's creation. As in the pilgrimage of Malcolm X and many others, when we travel we cannot help but be open to epiphany and the empowerment of others. Such travel is our responsibility, especially since many of us are capable of doing so. Such experience will let us know there really are worlds—heaven and earth—out there and not just in here. This is also important because not many Western people, especially through their belief in heaven, realize how narrow our worldview is. One piece of evidence of this was a national geography test in which a majority of high school students in the United States thought Nicaragua was in the Middle East. Again, it seems difficult to write a book with the intent of helping people to want to see heaven differently if the frame of reference is small. And so I even hope people will read this commentary without a church pew—perhaps in a subway or on a bench in a temple or on a mat in a mosque.

To make this book manageable, I have sought to narrow my mandorla pursuit of heaven on earth. If the reader seeks more analytical surveys of the concept of heaven, I suggest works such as Huston Smith's *Why Religion Matters* or Robert Orsi's *Between Heaven and Earth*, especially to address the challenges of studying religion. Also, Robert Wuthnow's *After Heaven* could give some sociological and theoretical context for concepts of heaven.<sup>3</sup> These works seriously entertain other

perspectives of heaven (all the while trying to *understand* why these other perspectives have worked for so many people). These authors also show how American Christians have related to and imagined heaven, and they are models of sound and original scholarship. I provide more of a confessional work than these authors because I consciously write as a Christian theologian and practitioner of Christian faith.

I believe in heaven, but I do not want to go on a crusade or inquisition. Heaven is too dangerous for that. I do not want to use heaven on earth for those with power to justify their own political and personal favor. Because of this confession, my work on heaven is not analytical in the sense of tracing a theoretical concept. It is not my intention to analyze the notions of heaven by tracing its existence across long periods of time and diverse cultures. After all, heaven cannot be analyzed without recognizing how its subjective nuances might differ in varied cultural contexts. Therefore, I have provided this reference point to not only show the problem with heaven that I have located but also explain why it is a problem. In this way, I appreciate the candor of one reviewer who saw an early draft of this book and wrote that I “would do much better if [I] were to step down from [my] soapbox a bit.” And so I look seriously at what others are saying about heaven—because after all, the Western, individualistic perspective of heaven and classical

Christian eschatology has worked for so many people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

The same critic also reminded me that one’s argument, however strong, is weakened by a failure to look at the other side’s position. It is not enough to say the other perspective is wrong. By doing so, I

Long before Mahatma Gandhi in India or Martin Luther King Jr. in the American South, John of Patmos asked his people to engage in a testimony . . . non-violent resistance.

—Brian Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*

would defeat the very purpose of writing this book—trying to imagine a heaven on earth for us all. I am in debt to reviewers of this book because they forced me to confess that I cannot write about heaven in an analytical way—that I am always standing on a soapbox as long as heaven comes out of my mouth. This is why I rely a great deal on King and Tutu. King contended with the shattering of hope as many in the civil rights movement began to view his utopian vision as unproductive and idealistic. King states: “Yes, I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes, but in spite of that I close today by saying I still have a dream, because, you know, you can’t give up in life. If you

lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you to go on in spite of all, and so today I still have a dream.”<sup>4</sup>

It is in the face of shattered hopes and dreams that recourse to heaven on earth is made all the more powerful. King states, “Let us be dissatisfied until rat-infested, vermin-filled slums will be a thing of a dark past and every family will have a decent sanitary house in which to live. Let us be dissatisfied until the empty stomachs of Mississippi are filled and the idle industries of Appalachia are revitalized. . . . Let us be dissatisfied until our brothers and sisters of the Third World—Asia, Africa and Latin America—will no longer be the victim of imperialist exploitation, but will be lifted from the long night of poverty, illiteracy and disease.”<sup>5</sup> King is helpful here as we must pay historical attention to why the book of Revelation was written in the first place to address how hopes and dreams shatter.