

Hearing the Music in the *Festschrift*: A “Listening Guide”

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In music, a listening guide points the listener toward the sounds that may be heard in a composition. In this introduction to the *festschrift* honoring Christopher Morse, I offer a “listening guide” to hearing the music of his theology as it resonates in theme and variation throughout this volume. Well-known to Union as a theological virtuoso who plays a doctrinal Stradivarius, Morse invites all people to rehear the Gospel as news, and has, himself, served as a guide to listening to hear its resonances. His reimagining of dogmatics as a radically critical discipline worthy of academic study, the “antidote to dogmatism” for church and society, and his pastoral presence as a teacher and mentor who deeply respects the God-given integrity of each person, mark the central themes of the music in this written celebration of his towering contribution to theology.

Trevor Eppheimer notes Morse’s one volume dogmatics *Not Every Spirit* contains a “treasure trove of insights and methodological ingenuities that wait patiently for other theologians to encounter and critically engage in print.” This *festschrift* is merely a start on that critical engagement in print of Morse’s work and gathers current and former students, esteemed colleagues and friends in ministry, each of whom sounds a harmonic to the note that is Christopher Morse. Part tribute, part reflection, part demonstration of influence and statement of gratitude, this compilation evokes Dr. Morse’s sense of humor and his seriousness about “testing the spirits” so that false prophets can be disbelieved and God’s will and way more clearly discerned. Each contributor takes up Morse’s work in uniquely personal ways, and yet one can listen to hear the music beyond the notes.

In “The Difference Christopher Morse Makes: A Dogmatics for the Practice of Ministry,” Thomas L. Brunkow describes his relationship with Morse, from their time as seminary roommates at Yale Divinity School and continuing through over fifty years of friendship as Brunkow served United Methodist parishes in the Baltimore-Washington area and Morse left parish ministry in Virginia to become a professor at Union Theological Seminary. Brunkow, who paints a vivid portrait of Morse as person, pastor, and theologian, cites Morse’s early work on Jürgen Moltmann and Karl Barth as a particular influence on his own perspective and Morse’s later dogmatics of disbelief and insight into “the difference heaven makes” as crucial for mentoring pastors.

Highlighting Morse’s profound influence on his life and approach to dogmatic theology, in “Testing the Spirits,” Trevor Eppheimer, Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Hood Theological Seminary in Salisbury, North Carolina, presents Morse’s vision of theological education and method to “test the spirits” in the 2014 Closing Convocation address to his students. He

asks students to consider how they have changed, and not changed, and for what purpose, during their time in seminary. Eppheimer shows they have not gained faith or salvation (which only God confers) but the ability to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1-2)—as human claimants—for what is and is not of God, in order to recognize false testimony in their churches.

Further testifying to Morse’s teaching of critical theological thinking and its import for pastoral ministry, Larry R. Hayward’s “Tribute to Dr. Christopher L. Morse” shares his experience of becoming a pastor and the impact Morse has had on his life and ministry. Hayward, a Presbyterian, grew up in the south, like Morse, and similarly awoke to the sin of racism. Hayward finds Morse a counter-cultural leader in church and society who encourages thought in a time when dogmatism abounds and thought is seemingly discouraged in Christian culture. With gratitude, he attributes to Morse his understanding of Jesus Christ, which has helped him bridge divides—political and otherwise—in the parish, and how to engage difficult ethical questions theologically.

In “*Sed Contra, Ergo, Responsio: Honoring the Legacy of Christopher Morse as a Teacher of Christian Theology*,” Daniel Spencer and Mary Beth (MB) Walsh, demonstrate *how* to critically test theological thinking by engaging Morse’s *utrum* method of theological disputation, following Thomas Aquinas. Spencer and Walsh, a professor and peer counselor, respectively, pay tribute to Morse, and to their time as tutors for his ST 104 foundational theology course, each by testing his and her current work via this method. Spencer, in his work on ecological issues, and Walsh, in her work with children with disabilities, test what the church should be saying and doing, according to what it has been called to say and do in the Gospel, as Morse teaches.

James F. Kay, Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs and Joe R. Engle Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics at Princeton Theological Seminary, revisits his sermon “The Coming Cloud” based on Morse’s section of the same name in his chapter “The Life to Come” in *Not Every Spirit*. Kay wanted to see if Morse’s work on scriptural apocalyptic framed as “promissory narration” would preach. He gave his sermon in 1989 on the 44th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. More than twenty-five years later, while current events have changed, our dread of catastrophe remains, as does God’s promise that what will greet us in the coming cloud of Jesus Christ *apocalypsed* (*Gk* “revealed”) is not disaster or death, but the love of God and our ultimate redemption.

In “Jesus and the Divine Name,” R. Kendall Soulen, Professor of Systematic Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., provocatively argues that Jesus’ fulfillment of the law does not render obsolete the Jewish law of not speaking the divine name. Exegeting the New Testament, he finds avoidance of speaking the divine name. For instance, he shows how Jesus speaks, and does not speak, the divine name in a “now here” and “not yet” of the eschaton. Rather than purge Christian practice of this continuity with Jewish tradition, Soulen suggests we embrace it under the rubric *lex orandi est lex credendi et agenda* (*Lt*

“the rule of prayer is the rule of belief and action”), which would be for Morse the doctrinal test of “consistency with worship.”

Turning to Morse to locate the role of academic theology in a global capitalist society, in “Faithful Disbelief: Christopher Morse Between Foucault and Barth,” Marvin E. Wickware, Jr., a Ph.D. student at Duke University, contends that between Michel Foucault’s critique of power and Karl Barth’s explication of the Word lies Morse’s method of faithfully disbelieving speech which is not of God. For Barth, God’s Word is an event, is speech in action, and using Foucault, there is no space into which false prophets, peddlers, or pastors can insert power grabs to manipulate the Word of God as an object rather than a happening. In Morse’s terms, the biblical Rachel’s refusal of consolation would refuse a word without action as misuse of God’s communication.

A doctoral candidate in Christian Thought and History at McGill University, who once did a 200-page summary of John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* as an S.T.M. student with Morse, Richard Paul Cumming offers his paper on “The Problem of Universal Salvation in the Theology of Emil Brunner.” Following Morse as one to deeply interrogate a thinker, and on the topic of universal salvation, which has occupied Morse’s reflection, he investigates whether, and in what way, Brunner finds universal salvation possible. While Cumming commends Brunner’s attention to history and human response to God, he concludes that Calvin, with his providential God who cares for all, (despite humans being “double-predestined”), provides a better approach to the problem.

In “Apophysis and the Trinity: on the enduring significance of revelation for theology,” Gabriel Morgan, Ph.D. student at Lutheran Theological Seminary and former student of Dr. Morse, offers a historical dogmatics on the fact that revelation, or what God is doing in us and for us, remains the most salient method by which to do theology. Current constructive trends suggest because theology is apophatic (we can only say what God is not) it is only talk about ourselves. Morgan engages patristic to contemporary sources to counteract this claim and show we do not justify ourselves, but are justified by God. The graciousness of the economy of the Trinity is that God comes to us through Jesus Christ as *person* so that we might know God and be known.

God’s coming and its significance for theology and Christian ethics is taken-up by Nancy J. Duff, Stephen Colwell Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary in her 2013 convocation address, “The Strange Worlds of Apocalyptic, Christian Ethics, and Princeton Theological Seminary.” A take-off on Barth’s “The Strange New World Within the Bible,” Duff weaves her work on Pauline apocalyptic and Christian ethics with the theologically and politically diverse community that is PTS. Duff asserts that while God’s coming is experienced as new and sometimes strange, and there is no easy path to life together, God’s reconciliation calls us to “live within that new space created by God’s revelation in Christ and become living parables of divine action.”

In “*Moving Heaven and Earth: A Womanist Dogmatics of Black Dance as Basilea*,” Eboni Marshall Turman, Assistant Research Professor and Director of Black Church Studies at Duke Divinity School, dogmatically tests Morse’s *The*

Difference Heaven Makes with Womanist thought to determine what makes the difference for justice for black women in the black church (and beyond) today. Turman, a minister at Abyssinian Baptist Church and a former Alvin Ailey teaching artist, finds incarnational embodiment in Morse's work, but holds his theological feet to the fire, so-to-speak, on whether being "on hand" for what is "at hand" is enough to counteract the legacy of racism and sexism in the church. She says black women cannot merely "rehear heaven" but must *move* heaven and earth through the liturgical dance of social action.

Seeking a faithful rendering of what it means for God to be "at hand, but not in hand," Heather Wise's "Beyond Consolation: The Significance of Failure for Faith," first presented for an interdisciplinary seminar of non-theologians at Columbia University's Teacher's College, takes a theological, philosophical, and psychoanalytic look at faith and failure to discover resources to help the suffering and inconsolable. She asks, when even faith fails, what can people of faith do? With experience as a hospital chaplain in the foreground, Wise sees, following Morse and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that it is not our success that defines us in relation to faith, but God's faithfulness to us. Wise uses Morse's dogmatic theology to build a bridge between theology and religious studies.

In "Faith for Faithful Disbelievers: Christopher Morse as Systematic Theologian," D. Seiple, philosopher and professor at City University of New York presses Morse on what exactly faithful disbelievers are called to *believe*, not just *disbelieve*. Framed in conversation with Williams James, he adjudicates Morse's method to determine to what doing dogmatics ultimately amounts. Seiple sees a "reciprocal interrogation" with the Holy Spirit: one "tests the spirits" and is tested by God, as the Holy Spirit brings new "dogmatic formulations and their contexts of application." Thus, the "real test is not of doctrine, but of the interrogator." He concludes each person must make his or her own stand in faith and, like James, the final test for Morse is "consonance with experience."

In "The Humanity of Divinity," Philip G. Ziegler, Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology at the University of Aberdeen, brings together John Calvin and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, two primary figures Morse has taught for decades, to illumine how for them the study of divinity inseparably speaks to right understanding, and living, of humanity. Christology and theological anthropology take center stage, as for Calvin, Bonhoeffer, and Morse our humanity is only fully understood as we are made human, restored to our true humanity, through God become human in Jesus Christ. Zeigler shares with Morse the joy of the Gospel in knowing we are not left to random choice and self-identification, but deeply cared for and provided for by God who chooses and identifies with us.

Listening to the music in the essays of the *estschrift*, a melody line begins to emerge. *God is for us*, sings Morse in his life and work, and this volume is an "Ode to Joy" to God for Christopher Morse. For an encore, the music continues with two pieces of Morse's that have never before been published. These two essays are quintessential Morse, and taken together, resonate the symphony of who he is and his vocation. The first is "Approaching Calvin Today in 'The Spirit of the Explorer,'" an address delivered at the Stated Meeting of the Salem Presbytery, High

Point, North Carolina, on the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth, in 2009, and the second is an address in James Chapel to the Union seminary community on the eve of the start of the Iraq war, March 25, 2003.

For Morse, approaching theology means to engage the quality of provocation for our current situation. With clear eyes for what is objectionable in Calvin, Morse sees him as humanizing—God elects and loves us, which is how we know God and ourselves. Further, Morse's timely use of Calvin on issues of sexuality and ordination, showing how God's grace never violates but establishes us in our integrity, breaks ground for future generations to explore. On the eve of the Iraq war, Morse asks with Bonhoeffer, "What should the student of theology do today?" He says we are called to oppose credulity and cynicism and remember that the most crucial word comes through us, not from us, as "we have no power to raise the dead." But with Rachel, and with Morse, we hear a word, "there is hope for your future," and we stand "on trial for hope in the promise."

To end this "listening guide" I share the lyrics of the song I wrote for Dr. Morse for his retirement chapel service on May 2, 2013. We sang his theology in four-part harmony and the room erupted in laughter and tears with the recognition of his teaching and ministry, which has deeply touched thousands of people. I invite you to listen for what you hear in the *estschrift*, and in the tremendous legacy of Christopher Morse. For Morse, if the music of the Gospel in any way resonates through his theology, he would attribute it to God, whose song we are.

Test the Spirits

By Heather Wise

Do not believe everything you hear
For many false prophets will appear
Don't lose your way, it'll be alright
Heaven's at hand, drawing nigh

Beloved, test the spirits for which are from God
Do not believe every spirit
Beloved, test the spirits for which are from God
Not every spirit's from God

By this you know the spirit of God
Every spirit which confesses Jesus Christ in the flesh
God comes to earth to reconcile the world
Through the spirit we are refreshed

Refrain

Is it crucial, comprehensive? Is it consequent, coherent?
Does it conform with your conscience?
Is it catholic—universal? Consonant with your experience?
Consistent with your praise of God?
Is it congruent with the Word? Does what you've heard continue
the Gospel witness?

Refrain

Do not believe everything you hear
For many false prophets will appear
Don't lose your way, it'll be alright
Heaven's at hand