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Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology

by Timothy Morton, New York, Columbia University Press, 2024, liii + 245 pp., £22.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780231214711

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invented language to each other that takes us away from a concern for nature, if that is the case, but engagement with environmental justice, including gender, class and identity politics, is perhaps a dimension missing from Mynott's account in this book.

An encyclopaedic undertaking such as this book is always going to fail to satisfy all its readers. But this will be outweighed by their huge gains and, indeed, by the continuing debates that it will hopefully provoke, not least in the exchanges of ecocritics and their students. Mynott's last word is 'The story is not yet over' (316). It certainly isn't in the classrooms of ecocritics where this very book should be found as a catalyst for extending the story of how we conceive and act upon what 'nature' is, both outside and inside the room.

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Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology, by Timothy Morton, New York, Columbia University Press, 2024, liii + 245 pp., £22.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780231214711

As a household name in the Environmental Humanities, Timothy Morton is known for their ground-breaking, yet sometimes controversial ideas. From *Ecology Without Nature* to *Hyperobjects*, Morton has introduced multiple useful conceptual frameworks for engaging with the environmental crisis. In their newest book, *Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology*, Morton does the same, exploring how recognising Hell on Earth may allow us to change our ways of relating to the more-than-human world – an intriguing suggestion akin to arguments that reconceptualise our planet as 'eaarth' and *Solaris* by thinkers such as Bill McKibben and Amitav Ghosh. As the book explains, Morton has found their religion, not the Zen Buddhism they have long claimed to practice, but religion of the born-again evangelical-Christian kind – sort of. In *Hell* they also return to their origin as a romanticist, employing William Blake as their guide and offering analysis of selected stanzas and images from across the poet's oeuvre. The book opens with an epigraph from Blake's *Milton*, 'I will not cease from the mental fight', which introduces Morton's core argument that a spiritual-intellectual reckoning is necessary to face the state of our planet.

Hell begins with an extensive 'exordium' that according to Morton 'is the book', meaning that after these initial 53 pages everything important has supposedly already been said (xxxix). In this, Morton outlines their spiritual journey from childhood belief in Jesus but not God, their young adulthood as an acid-house-not-entirely-atheist, their last twenty or so years as a Buddhist, up until their self-described 'born again' experience in 2023 (xxviii). This experience, which Morton only describes in an end note one of the book's last pages, is one point of motivation for the text. The other is 'the simple fact that Earth is burning as if becoming Hell' (xxviii). These starting points produce a strange form of auto-theory that reads somewhat similarly to an Augustinian Confession. Morton claims that humans have created Hell on Earth – evidenced in part through the climate crisis but also through systemic racism, colonialism, patriarchy – by 'ignoring or denying or overwriting [the] phenomenological beyond' (84). In reflecting on the climate crisis and their recent conversion, Morton accordingly

suggests that, if an ignorance of divine immanence has brought us to this hellish world, only an embodied sensing, or 'feel of the sacred' can lead us through it. The fluidity of the text's form and main motivations, which are neither entirely personal, nor entirely academic, enable Morton to critique both secular academic and religious thought systems, while still playing within them.

The bulk of *Hell* is divided into three sections each titled 'Holy', 'Holy' and 'Holy', echoing the calls of angels as described in the biblical book of Isaiah and repeated in Revelation. With this allusion, each section of the book is meant to be read as a joyous shout of praise and an invocation of apocalypse. But apocalypse here is not understood as a world-ending judgement, for Morton calls on the Greek understanding of apocalypse as 'unveiling' or revelation (70). Though these identical section titles do little to guide the reader through Morton's meandering thoughts, they do hint at the main goal of the text: to reveal how 'The biosphere is the body of Christ' (liii). This theological statement, reminiscent of the 'universe is the body of God' metaphor used in Panentheism, forms the crux of Morton's Christian Ecology (Keller 2023, 104). Compared to pantheism in which everything is God, Panentheism suggests everything is *in* God. This perspective is consistent with Morton's belief that 'God's energy is default, the nonzero ground state of the phenomenon called 'alive' (26) and that '*the divine suffuses the physical*' (42). This approach which extends the body of Christ beyond the church, and beyond the human, challenges the boundary between the sacred and secular, inviting everything to participate in the divine. Quoting Blake, Morton reiterates that 'every thing that lives is holy', (150) because everything is 'vibing' in the energy of the divine (103).

But still, even as Morton explores the presence of the divine in *Hell*, they remain critical of various approaches to belief. For Morton, it is not religion itself that is the problem, but the ways in which people believe. Throughout *Hell*, Morton repeats what they consider to be the slogan of phenomenology: 'the how is the what', (4). Christian ecology, then, does not exist as the result of the believer's 'search', but is 'the search itself' (5). The search then according to Morton is 'a way of being in the world' or 'a feel' (5). The *how* of Morton's belief is what allows them to imagine a Christian ecology. However, as Morton presents it, the wrong 'feel' or way of believing, not only in God, but in science and academia, is how humans created hell. Morton considers both science and religion to be infected with 'angelic demons' (42) or the 'religiose', that is, anyone who considers themselves better than others, or admits that they are corrupt while believing they can be rid of corruption in some decisive way' (7). Morton argues that the environmental movement also has a 'religiose aura', explaining that 'Eco-Eeyore tells you that you've been getting it very wrong, that there are no words for how disappointing your behaviour is' (71). Unfortunately, this perspective ignores the many joy-filled co-creative efforts already present in both activist movements and environmental criticism – just think of adrienne maree brown or Nicole Seymour.

Nevertheless, the most intriguing insights in Morton's search for a Christian ecology are developed in response to their perception of an ongoing 'you dirty fucker moment' in environmentalism (xxxviii). To counteract such religiose 'Old Testament vibes', Morton argues that we need to inhabit the affect of Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' (27). For Morton, 'I have a dream' is the ultimate statement of belief; it is 'every mystical tradition compressed into one sentence' (211). Belief happens in 'the realm of the middle subjunctive' and is neither active nor passive' (28). Here, Morton's ideas on belief come to reflect the Blochian notion of hope, which is likewise 'neither passive' nor active. The affect, 'feel', or 'vibe' of Morton's 'how of belief', MLK's 'I have a dream', and Bloch's *Principle of Hope* incite those experiencing these affects 'to throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong' (Bloch 1986, 3). If we untangle Morton's Holy web, it becomes clear that to survive our current hell, they believe we must have a form of faith, which enables joy, envisions a beyond and moves towards the possibility of another mode of being. Thus, what Morton is arguing for is

a flat, but vibrating ontology of now-not-yet, something that is already present, though perhaps differently understood, in most Christian theologies.¹

These ideas are stimulating, but they require considerable work on the reader's part. The text as a whole, though creative in its form, is difficult to follow, as Morton characteristically leap-frogs from topic to topic and back again. Additionally, for readers who may want to engage with Morton's theological ideas, the limited citations and critical engagement with other contemporary work in this tradition is frustrating. Despite promoting joy and praise as important components of the 'how' of belief, moreover, the tone of *Hell* is frequently angry, particularly towards its academic audience. Morton taunts the readers by telling us to 'continue to bray in that hungover way you do in the editorial section' (xxxix), or calling the tradition of ecocriticism 'mealy-mouthed not-quite-fascism-lite' (xxxvii). In other places, Morton offers a jarring combination of literary analysis and twitter speak. They use Blake's 'Little Girl Lost' and 'Little Girl Found' alongside the metaphor of Orpheus as a Jedi and an explanation of 'pedophilically violent QAnon' to explore human (dis)connection to the rest of the biosphere (125–28). The incoherence in such sections distracts, if not detracts from the book's goal of expanding the feel of the sacred. And yet, if one is willing to wade with Morton through this hell, one will also find what appear to be moments of honest, humble spiritual yearning. Morton's endeavour to engage with what evangelical Christianity might offer, and their re-consideration of hell, sin and the divine is a radical approach that provides a thought-provoking scaffold for scholars eager to reconnect spiritual considerations to mainstream ecological discourses and ways of navigating the world(s).

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Note

1. For more on now-not-yet ontologies see Thompson, Peter. 'Bloch, Badiou, Saint Paul, and the Ontology of Not Yet'. *New German Critique*, no. 119, 2013, pp. 31–52.

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All Biblical citations are taken from the King James Version, as this is the primary translation Morton uses in *Hell*. Bloch, E. 1986. *The Principle of Hope. Vol. 1* Translated by Basil Blackwell, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
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Twelve Words for Moss, by Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, Allen Lane, Dublin, Ireland, 2023, 178 pp., £16.99 (paperback), ISBN 978024155683-2

Twelve Words for Moss is an extended prose-poem in twelve parts, celebrating a range of British moss species and their habitats, into which the author immerses herself physically, emotionally and linguistically. The book fluctuates between different registers, with prose that is a mixture