

# Priesthood and Paradox

Terry Eagleton

Sometime in the late 1950s, Herbert McCabe found himself in Salford, sitting opposite a De La Salle brother whose only memorable feature was a pair of enormous hands. Like most loquacious strangers one encounters in public places, the brother held a deteriorationist view of history, and grumbled away to Herbert about the state of present-day youth. Why, he complained, there was even a boy in the college he taught at who sported a beard and a CND badge. The lad was off to Cambridge, where Herbert was bound too; maybe, the huge-knuckled brother intimated, he'd care to keep an eye open for him, knock a bit of sense into him. Herbert was indeed eager to make a note of the student's name, though not at all for the reasons the heavy-pawed brother had in mind; and later at Cambridge he bumped into this bearded leftist loon, who turned out to be none other than myself.

By then, *Slant* and the Catholic left were under way, launched by a group of mainly ex-working-class Catholic students in Cambridge in the turbulent backwash of Vatican II. *Slant* had the high-toned earnestness of most publications produced by late-adolescent leftists, but there was a dash of self-parody about it too: essays on Benediction and Reification tumbled hard on the heels of pieces comparing the priesthood to a Leninist vanguard. Some of the clergy, strangely enough, were bemused to hear their parish fund-raising compared to the work of a goatee-bearded Mongolian-looking Bolshevik. All of this was exciting, some of it coruscated on thin ice, parts of it were potently suggestive and a surprising amount of it was even true. But it all predated both Latin American peasant militancy and the Northern Irish Troubles, contexts in which radical theologies could find a material habitation and so avoid the risk of disappearing up their own dialectical subtleties. It was harder to make sense of the relations between *eschaton* and communism on Stafford railway station, or when addressing the Knights of St. Columbus in Maidenhead.

Laurence Bright was Dominican *eminence grise*-in-chief, spouting a casually outrageous radicalism in his cooing, mocking, patrician-aesthete tones, like a Bolshevik version of Waugh's Anthony Blanche. He had started off as a right-wing Tory agnostic, and like most ruling-class renegades to the left was able to donate to us ontologically insecure ex-proles the breezy self-assurance of his background. But a

whole raft of other Dominicans were vital to us too, not least Herbert McCabe, who, as is his wont, was at once more radical and more sceptical than we were. More radical, because as far as revolution went he would settle in his obstinate ultra-leftist way for nothing less than the resurrection of the body; more sceptical, because he didn't believe that workers' control or colonial independence was sufficient answer to the human condition disclosed by the death camps. The *Slant* group did some formidably original work, even if its fate, like that of many such vanguards, was to live a ghostly aftermath between the covers of postgraduate theses. But we were just too young not to fall prey to the hubris of humanism, just hadn't knocked around enough to appreciate the limits of the political as well as its necessity. Whereas Herbert offered us a critique of the political, not from the usual boring Christian middle-class vantage-points (the primacy of the personal, the hegemony of the inner, the darkness of human hearts, the need for reconciliation: we could take care of all *that*), but from the considerably more disruptive position of one who took socialism and unilateral disarmament for granted but was committed to an even more transformative depth within it. His stance towards *Slant* thus combined his familiar twin personae: custodian of orthodoxy and joker in the pack. (Or, as the Dominican Provincial more colloquially put it, when McCabe was scandalously suspended from the editorship of this journal for telling the truth, 'a burr on the arse of the church').

He was, in short, way out ahead of us just by being so rigorously unfashionable. He was never of course a 'progressive': a euphoric, exhaustingly cheerful, endlessly open-minded Vatican II groupie, full of theological correctness and a penchant for the Interpersonal. He was a full-blooded Thomist traditionalist, which why he was far to the left of those who would seize your hand in both of theirs and gaze meaningfully into your eyes. Someone suggested that SLANT should stand for Society for the Liquidation of All Non-Thomists, and though it wasn't, as it happens, Herbert, it was just the kind of joke he might have cracked. Among his two thousand or so satirical anecdotes, there is the story of the working-class Geordie priest who ran into him one Easter Sunday, all scathing and indignant, and told him how he'd just passed the Anglican vicar on the street. 'Ay, 'Erbert', said the priest. 'Do you know what 'e did? 'E put up his hand and said "Christ is arisen, father". *Silly bugger*'. If this is a quintessential McCabe tale, it's because it cuts so beautifully both ways, against the piously progressive Anglican and the benighted papist at a single stroke.

Like a lot of other people, we on *Slant* needed Herbert to tell us the truth. You could be living it up round the pub table (he usually was), spouting the kind of modish half-truths which most people would

sloppily let pass, when he would suddenly swoop. And you knew from the wicked glint in the glasses, the ominous scratching of the leg, the chillingly mirthless chuckle, that you were about to be impaled on the sharp end of his logic, still moist with the sweat of others. He is as allergic to the right-on cliché or windy self-deception as he is to pompous bores, being eternally cloistered with whom would certainly be as much his idea of hell as listening to Irish music over a whiskey with his friends would dimly approximate his notion of heaven. I remember the carnage one evening in Cambridge, when in a breathtaking Dominican lecture he dissected the Bishop of Woolwich's situation ethics piece by exquisitely embarrassing piece in the presence of the pinkening prelate himself. I have never encountered anyone who could be at once so intellectually devastating, so ruthlessly dedicated to truth, and so entirely a stranger to malice. Not, I mean, as though he were charitably suppressing it, but as though he didn't know the meaning of it. Nor, for that matter, have I ever met anyone who combined such steely demystification with such wit and warmth, or such conceptual subtlety with such sheer human straightness.

He must be, surely, the funniest theological writer since the author of the Book of Jonah, and the nature of the wit demands some analysis. Stylistically speaking, he trades in paradox, epigram, estranging inversions, sudden semantic subversions, all of which disruptive activity lurks beneath the cover of a breezily colloquial tone. The style strikes up a pact with the reader in its very button-holing lucidity, only to leave her routinised assumptions as upended as with the reader of Swift. As such, it is a form of writing which mimes the contradictions of Christian faith, its simultaneous reinforcement and disruption of common perceptions, its pivoting of unthinkable paradoxes around the aporia of the cross. 'If you don't love, you're dead; if you do, you'll be killed'; 'No document talks more about love than St. John, and none is more unlovely': such is McCabe's chiasmic reading of the good news, which might at least wipe the smile from the faces of the clap-happy. His own brand of humour has always been, in Irish style, dark-edged, needling, sardonic, covertly aggressive, in contrast to the bland heartiness of a familiar kind of English middle-class Christian. For him, the sickest joke of all is that when God finally got round to putting in a personal appearance, he did so as a political criminal.

I mention Swift in relation to Herbert's prose-style because his writerly ironies and inversions really spring from a venerable Irish tradition. 'Two thinks at a time', as Joyce put it in *Finnegans Wake*. It's a very Shavian mode, though it blends the crisp, pointed paradoxes of Shaw with something of the racy geniality of a Chesterton, and mixes that in turn with the exuberance of the Dublin epigrammatist Oscar

Wilde. The Wildean epigram takes a piece of conventional English wisdom and turns it on its head, rips it inside out, estranges the drearily familiar with a sudden shaft of semantic illumination. Like Herbert's own mode of writing, it combines cognitive force with self-delighting jest, displaying that capacity of language to dismantle and transfigure the world which we know among other things as wit. Shaw's wit is more terse and cerebral, Wilde's more perverse and self-pleasuring, Swift's more shatteringly subversive than either of them; and McCabe's writing draws on something of all of these modes, terse, teasing, devastating and delightful together. There's a productive perversity about his writing, which illuminates orthodoxy by putting an idiosyncratic spin on the commonsensical. It's hardly accidental that he was the first semiotic theologian in this country, the first to grasp how a certain anti-Cartesian understanding of the sign could be used to explore the mystery of the sacramental. 'Christ is present in the eucharist as the meaning is present in a word' is, one might claim, a *bon mot* about a *bon mot*.

Dismally few people, when you come to weigh it up, really change your life, even those who are traditionally supposed to. My supervisor at Cambridge changed my life about as much as Vera Lynn did. But without my long friendship with Herbert McCabe I wouldn't be at all what I am. So you can blame it all on him.

## Thomas: After a Fall

Another voice has come to inhabit my house.  
The window on the west side lets in sounds  
which flow out everywhere: noises like water  
running south, or east, or fingers of branches  
rubbing together, the words that leaves let slip  
when torn from their bough and set adrift.  
What it says impossible

to answer, except to wake and then to walk  
and then to eat and then to pray and doze.  
A sound that strains on its own axis like a tree.  
A voice sharpening its accent as a carpenter  
at daybreak going about his workshop makes  
ready for the long day's darg. Odd word.  
A sunshaft turns the hewn planks into gold.

James McGonigal