

Reviews

GOD STILL MATTERS by Herbert McCabe OP, *Continuum*, London, 2002, Pp. 264, £16.99 pbk.

Though he had a fair claim to have been the most influential – and (not the same thing) also the best English Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, Herbert McCabe was essentially an essayist, who published very little in hard covers. Two marvellously coherent and eloquent books in the 1960s were intellectual milestones for many who read them – a study of the sacraments, *The New Creation* and an exploration of Christian ethics, *Law, Love and Language*. For all their coherence, however, both were stitched together from separate essays, and originated in the lectures and addresses to student and mixed audiences which, then and always, were the main business of his life. Twenty years on, in 1987, a third collection, containing much of his most characteristic writing but far more miscellaneous than the earlier books, appeared as *God Matters*.

In a sense the miscellaneousness was not a problem. McCabe spent a lifetime reflecting on God, church, language and justice: his thought, shaped and sharpened by engagement with his two intellectual touchstones, St Thomas and Wittgenstein, developed and deepened, but it had a remarkable consistency throughout. So an essay by McCabe is like Chesterton's description of a novel by Dickens, 'simply lengths cut from the flowing and mixed substance called Dickens'. The marvellously flowing and mixed substance called McCabe was chopped up into lengths to do duty as essays, sermons and lectures, as needed. Whole sections of any of these might even be interchangeable, as he pursued ideas through multiple ramifications, or came at the same insight from a different angle, or in relation to a different problem.

This was partly intellectual consistency, partly (dare one say it) laziness, partly the expedience of a busy teacher and popular public lecturer forced to recycle material. He was a dab hand with scissors and paste, and one of the most assiduous users of the Blackfriars photocopying machine, as he recast material from one context into another. He published reluctantly, not out of intellectual modesty, but because an essay once in print ceased to be recyclable. Happily, he was also tidy-minded, and a systematic employer of the filing cabinet. New essays and lectures, whether or not they reworked older material, were carefully typed, and slipped into envelopes or folders, usually with a pencil date at the top of the first page noting when they had last been used, before being salted away for further recycling. The method could

backfire. Invited once to lecture at the Leicester University Newman Association (a regular venue), he gave a strategically vague hold-all title for the advance publicity, and on the day itself snatched what he thought might be a suitable offering from the filing cabinet, before roaring off to Leicester on his motorcycle. When he got to the podium and took the lecture from its envelope, however, he was horrified to see pencilled at the top of the page the previous year's date, together with the location – 'Leicester Newman Association'! There was nothing to be done: a brilliant but a nervous speaker, he felt helpless without a text before him, and had to repeat last year's lecture; if anyone noticed, they were too kind to say so.

McCabe aficionados will therefore recognise some old friends in this new and very welcome selection of treasure-trove from that filing cabinet, while newcomers to his writing will find here some of his most characteristic themes, explored with all the wit, freshness and sometimes piercing lucidity which were his hall-mark. The collection is divided into four sections each containing six items, except the last, which has seven. These clusters are headed respectively, God, Incarnation and Sacraments, People and Morals, and Sermons. In fact, however, themes run across the sections, and this book has a remarkable unity of tone and preoccupation, derived from its central theme, that of the life of the Trinity revealed in the ministry and death of Jesus. McCabe derived from his reading of St Thomas the conviction that the heart of Israel's (and our) faith lay in the affirmation that God was in no sense whatever one of the Gods, that there *are* no Gods in the world, and God himself is not a being, not an item in the world he creates. Hence, in its proclamation of a world set free from enslavement to the Gods, Christian faith has in some respects far more in common with atheism than with polytheism. Secondly, because God is totally other than his world, he is wholly mysterious, beyond all our knowledge and imaginings, and hence 'in Christ we are joined to God as to the utterly unknown'. Everything we affirm of God must therefore be affirmed in relation to his self revelation in Jesus Christ. (This is not a position often thought of as a feature of Thomism) For McCabe, Christ, the eternal Word or self-understanding of God, came into the world in order simply to be human: it was Jesus' embodiment of what real humanity was, a life lived in perfect harmony with the will of God and in perfect love for his fellow human beings, which made his death inevitable. Sin, not God, demands the death of Christ, for his murder is the response of a fallen world to God's self-revelation. The world and the church are therefore always at odds, the Gospel is in that sense always a politics of opposition. Calvary is thus what the life of the Trinity looks like when lived out within (Herbert preferred the formula "projected on to") our fallen world. The redemption which Christ offers, by contrast, is neither more nor less than friendship with God. This is a deceptively simple-sounding formula which for McCabe embodied a breath-taking and audacious claim. In the life of the Spirit, that

overflowing love and delight by which God lives in us, we become more than the beloved creatures of a good God, we become his equals and friends, not merely valued and cared for, but loved as he loves his consubstantial Son. And the shared life of love which flows from this friendship is simultaneously the mission of the church as sign of the unity of all humankind in Christ, and our present experience of the Spirit.

Everything McCabe has to say to us about God, church and salvation is articulated in terms of this Trinitarian framework. Discussing the apparent difficulty of understanding how prayers work (do we change God's mind?) he reminds us that prayer is not an external attempt to influence God, but God's chief means of influencing *us* — it is God who is praying, and our prayer simply *is* the utterance in us of the Holy Spirit, part of the divine dialogue between Father and Son. Or again, exploring the paradoxes of predestination and human freedom, he reminds us that the doctrine of Creation is the insistence that God makes everything that there is, including my free decisions — our freedom and God's creative power are therefore not rivals for space in the world, our freedom is part of the way in which God's total control of the world expresses itself. Though there is perhaps no single paper in these two sections devoted to God and Incarnation which is quite as memorable and exciting as the essay on 'The Involvement of God' in *God Matters*, just as there is no sermon in this book which is quite the tour de force of that book's sermon on the Genealogy of Jesus in St Matthew. Nevertheless, cumulatively the essays here offer a wonderfully rich and coherent Trinitarian theology which stays close to the Gospel accounts of Jesus, makes clear why the doctrine is *the* central Christian belief, and never degenerates into celestial maths or theological word-games.

McCabe's gifts as a theologian are all on display in these reflections on Trinity and Incarnation. His brilliance as a philosopher emerges in the essays on 'People and Morals', and here again the influence of St Thomas is paramount. Herbert disliked being called a Thomist — for him Thomas was not the founder of a school, but a companion and an endlessly resourceful and quizzical interlocutor in the search for truth which he saw as the heart of a Dominican vocation — 'my colleague Thomas Aquinas'. He employs hints and questions from St Thomas to brilliant effect in the most purely philosophical essay in the book, 'Sense and Sensibility', in which he explores the qualitative difference between linguistic and non-linguistic animals, in the process offering a robust and devastating critique of Hume on Human Understanding. Our moral capacity and the quest for virtue are explored, with the help of Jane Austen, in 'Aquinas on Good Sense' (McCabe's translation of *prudentia*). This discussion of the virtue of 'prudence' is taken up and extended in essays on 'Teaching Morals' and 'The Role of Tradition', into which he distils a lifetime's experience as a teacher into a discussion of the practice of moral theology. En

route, he throws a flood of light on what Catholic tradition really is, and lands passing but heavy blows on Newman's account of the faculty of conscience, (McCabe did not believe we had a separate faculty describable as a 'conscience') and, by way of contrast, on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church's* account of authority in morals. These essays perfectly embody his distinctive brand of fearless intellectual iconoclasm pursued from rootedness in a deeply Catholic tradition. His editor Brian Davies has done us all a huge service in getting these inimitable essays and sermons into print. More please.

EAMON DUFFY

RABBIT PROOF FENCE

Rabbit Proof Fence is a stunning movie both for Christopher Doyle's photography which plays lovingly over the brooding landscape of Outback Australia and for Peter Gabriel's sound track which follows the human emotions and the evokes Dreaming themes of the story. The movie is about the forced removal of three young mixed-race Aboriginal girls from their tribal family in accordance with the policy of the Australian state governments in 1920's, '30's, '40's and beyond. The forced removal of aboriginal children from their parents is a complex problem, but the Director (Phillip Noyce) following the screenplay of (Christine Olsen) wisely refused to get involved with side issues and focused squarely on the essential issue — the trauma of separation of children from parents and the yearning of the children to get back to their parents and live once again in their home community. By sticking to basic story of Molly, Gracie and Daisy walking a thousand miles and more to get back home while eluding the police sent out to catch them, Noyce allows the movie gains strength and universality.

In the opening scenes we are given first hand experience of the government's policy as we watch three young mixed-race aboriginal girls, Molly (Evelyn Sampi), Gracie (Laura Monaghan) and Daisy (Tianna Sansbury), two sisters and a cousin, being dragged away from their mothers and grandmothers. Significantly, there are no aboriginal men in this scene or much in evidence in any scene. Why? The girls' fathers were white men and long gone. The abduction scene is short, but violent. The girls (8 to 14 years old) are weeping, screaming, kicking and resisting, their maternal parents helpless as the girls are packed into a motor car by white policemen coming from the distant city of Perth. White male station hands and workers building the *Rabbit Proof Fence* stand passively by allowing Western Australian law to take its course. The time and place is 1931 at Jigalong, W.A.

When the girls are driven away the women return to their bush camp, defeated. Each huddle in their blanket and begin making that aboriginal keening cry associated with death. One woman elder repeatedly hits her head with a rock as is typically done at funerals. Incidental touches like this one which pepper the movie, actions so