



HERBERT McCABE  
FAITH WITHIN REASON

Edited and introduced by BRIAN DAVIES *OP*  
Foreword by DENYS TURNER



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# Faith Within Reason

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## *Foreword*

Bearing in mind the current state of all too much theological writing, I sometimes advise students contemplating their semester papers above all to avoid writing just 'more stuff about stuff'. Herbert McCabe had an abhorrence of theological 'stuff' – that surplus production in theology which has much the same inflationary outcomes as in the economic, a vacuity of thought wrapped up in a theological tribal dialect, a *patois* doing poor duty for the absence of creative imagination. And he had a similarly healthy contempt for the sort of nonsense in which much theological writing can find itself entangled, usually, as he supposed, as a result of conceptual muddles about God. Much of the sheer energy of his own writing was motivated by a Wittgensteinian goal of conceptual therapy, sorely needed in a field in which, to be fair, the distinction between the sublime and the ridiculous is in the nature of the case unusually difficult to detect.

You did not expect always to agree with Herbert. Least of all did he expect it, whether in the pub, arguing with him, in the study, or reading a collection of his papers and sermons such as is contained in this further posthumous volume. And by the way, for all that Herbert genuinely believed that good theology was possible only as the outcome of good company – and friendship was his model for 'good company' – he could be on occasions quite frighteningly aggressive in argument. But never for a moment did he imagine that friendship could be threatened by the cut and thrust of debate, however hot it became. In fact he once said that what characterized 'Dominican' obedience was its commitment to settling community questions by means of what he called the 'palaver' of debate. And you nearly



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always knew what you disagreed with him about, for Herbert had perfected to an unparalleled degree – in my experience of theologians – that clarity of writing which is to the intellectual life what humility is to the moral: namely a vulnerability to counter-argument and contrary evidence. A horror of obfuscation meant that Herbert never wrote ‘stuff’ – which meant that you could always see for yourself when, if you so thought, he was writing nonsense.

Herbert published little in his lifetime. His style was not generally that of the extended monograph. And this is because Herbert was above all a teacher: oral communication was his preferred *métier*. Luckily, however, he never extemporized, and he would always write out in full even the briefest and most occasional sermon, and many of these texts have survived, even if Herbert himself was frequently careless of preserving them (his friend Enda McDonagh tells of how the first page of Herbert’s celebrated lecture on the politics of John’s gospel was eventually retrieved from his shoe where it was plugging a leaky sole). In all of them Herbert wrote as a teacher speaks, and those who ever heard him in person can still hear through the written word that faintly Northumbrian drawl, the throwaway (if contrived) casualness of his most challenging paradoxes, the abrupt shifts from extreme conceptual exactness to an equally exact but tellingly homely example. These were the conscious but never self-consciously ‘arty’ skills of a true rhetorician, of a Dominican preacher who enacted in his practice that love of language as the most distinctive of human characteristics, because it is in and through language that we make or break human communities. Herbert, the Dominican, above all wanted to *share* the treasures he found in Thomas Aquinas, Wittgenstein and, first and foremost, the gospels. *Contemplata aliis tradere* was no pat slogan for Herbert. It was his life, for as he used to say, ‘Dominicans don’t pray. They teach.’

Herbert was perhaps the cleverest man I ever met. And some of the essays in this new collection are distinctly ‘clever’ in the

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sense that they challenge the reader's brains with a subtlety in which theological minds are often, alas, unpractised. Not all readers will find the chapters on 'Evil and Omnipotence' and on 'Soul, Life, Machines and Language' as easy a read as are some others: clear as they are, their clarity is a challenge to our conceptually sloppier styles of doing theology. But if he acquired much of that skill in making dauntingly precise distinctions from his constant reading of Thomas Aquinas, he followed Thomas in this above all, that he thought of himself as engaged in a task which was really very simple: explaining the gospel. And perhaps it was something even simpler that he aimed for, for he always said that all he tried to do was to remind his audiences of what they could already know for themselves from the gospels, if only they could be got to clear their minds of a sort of semi-pagan, and idolatrous, understanding of God which had no place in them. Again and again, in these essays Herbert returns to that Augean task of clearing away philosophical and theological clutter, 'stuff'. And if that might seem an excessively negative way of characterizing his theological role, I recommend readers of this collection that they begin by reading his very brief, but intensely moving, sermon on 'Forgiveness' – the more moving because Herbert makes absolutely no 'homiletic' attempt to 'move' – and then consider how a man could preach that sermon who had not first settled conceptual accounts with the 'Free-Will Defence' in Chapter 6, or with the determinist materialists in Chapter 9. That goal, and that capacity, to liberate the gospels so as to speak for themselves has the effect of an ancient picture restored: there is a freshness to how things seem when Herbert has done with them, and that word 'freshness' is no bad translation of the Latin *claritas*, which, as Thomas says, is one of the chief characteristics of the beautiful.

I once asked Herbert (knowing his love of paradox) what he thought of Chesterton. He replied that Chesterton was his model of good theological writing. Josef Pieper, in what in my view

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is the best short introduction to the spirit of Thomas Aquinas's theology, says that in his view Chesterton's is the best short introduction to the spirit of Thomas Aquinas's theology. Not, in my view, is Herbert's 'A Very Short Introduction to Aquinas' (Chapter 7) the best contribution in this volume, since it tails off, somewhat perfunctorily incomplete. I think this is symptomatic of something important about Herbert's relationship to Thomas Aquinas. He was too close to Thomas – and too impatient of pedantry – to be a good detailed expositor of him. In any case Herbert was no 'Thomist' if a Thomist is someone who thinks *about* Thomas. He thought *with* Thomas, and Thomas came alive in Herbert's theology. Paradoxically, it is often just when Herbert is thinking most closely with Thomas that it is least easy to annotate his texts with accurate referencing to their 'source'. And therein lies another paradox. It is not just that Thomas comes alive in Herbert, but that through Thomas Herbert came alive. I think, in the end, this is what chiefly characterizes Herbert's sense of vocation, as theologian and as Dominican priest: that, for him, intellect, in its own nature as a simple human power but above all as a power to which God has disclosed something of his own self-understanding (which in us Herbert called 'faith'), is a way, and in the end the only way, of being alive. For it is only through that disclosure of God's inner life to our human minds that we can know of the one, primary truth from which all Herbert's theology derives, and to which it always returns, as every essay in this volume witnesses: not that we ought to love God but that we are able to do so because from eternity God has loved us first. And that is the only 'gospel' that Herbert ever preached.

Denys Turner  
Yale University

## *Introduction*

Though one of the most gifted thinkers of his generation, Herbert McCabe, who died in 2001, published relatively little in his lifetime. He did, however, leave behind a number of unpublished essays, talks and sermons, some of which have now appeared in three volumes: *God Still Matters* (Continuum, 2002), *God, Christ and Us* (Continuum, 2003), and *The Good Life* (Continuum, 2005). All of these books have been very favourably reviewed and I have therefore ransacked McCabe's remains so as to offer readers yet another collection by him. Those familiar with McCabe's writings, and appreciative of them, will not, I think, be disappointed with what follows, since it shows him at his best while concerned with what interested him most.

For many years now there has been a notable rift between philosophers and theologians. Typically, philosophers have not engaged with theologians (even in the rare cases when they have been sympathetic to them), and theologians have displayed little interest in (and often little competence for) detailed philosophical analysis. Things were quite different in the Middle Ages, when professors (or masters) of theology were normally very well read in philosophical texts and anxious to show the relevance of philosophy for what they maintained as religious believers. Aquinas is, perhaps, the classic example of such a professor. He formally lectured on biblical texts and wrote treatises on matters of Christian dogmatics. Yet he constantly seeks to argue on the basis of reason and to engage both with philosophical arguments and with philosophers as such.

Aquinas is the writer whom Herbert McCabe most admired. His influence on McCabe can be seen in almost everything

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McCabe wrote. This includes the essays in the present work, many of which are therefore not easily classifiable as examples of philosophy, on the one hand, or theology, on the other. Perhaps they can be labelled 'philosophical theology'. At any rate, readers will find in them an attempt to marry the best we can think on our own with the content of divine revelation (McCabe always believed that truth could never contradict truth). Can we think of faith as reasonable? What is faith? How far can reason take us when it comes to things divine? Do we have grounds to believe in God? What can we know of God without recourse to revelation? What are credal statements saying? How are people constructed? How do they differ from other things? What makes for meaning or significance? What is our place in God's scheme of things? How do we best relate to God? All these questions, and others, get discussed in the present book. They also get treated with the clarity and wit characteristic of McCabe's other writings. Philosophers and theologians are not always noted for tackling such questions without recourse to jargon and without getting bogged down in details that can befog rather than illumine. Herbert McCabe, however, had the enviable ability to make his points crisply without sacrificing depth. This skill of his is as evident as ever in this new volume.

All biblical quotations below come from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. For assistance in preparing this book for publication I am grateful to Adam Wood, who turned some pretty illegible typescripts into a form that I could work on for editorial purposes. For expert copyediting, I am grateful to Timothy Bartel. For assistance with proofreading, I am grateful to Michael Moreland.

Brian Davies OP

# 1

## *Is Belief Wishful Thinking?*

Some people think that religious belief is wishful thinking. They mean that we persuade ourselves that religious doctrines are true because we find it comforting to believe them. We would like it to be the case that the good are ultimately rewarded and the wicked punished, and so we persuade ourselves that this will really happen. We would like it to be the case that there is a wise God in charge of the world, and we cannot stand the psychological strain of doubting this, so we take up religious faith. Perhaps this does occur sometimes. Whether or not it does, I am quite sure that religious disbelief is often wishful thinking in this sense: I think that many people cease to believe because they find it too uncomfortable to think that certain doctrines are true. And, of course, whether you find the doctrine that the good and the wicked finally receive their deserts a comforting one or an uncomfortable one depends on your estimate of yourself.

But this discussion does not seem to me to be a very important one. The fact that some people get married for money is not a very important fact about marriage; it only becomes interesting if someone maintains that nobody ever gets married for love – that everybody really marries for money even when they don't admit it or even realize it. Similarly, the fact that for some people religious belief or unbelief is a matter of wishful thinking does not become interesting until someone maintains that religious belief always has to be a matter of wishful thinking – that it cannot be anything else. This stronger proposition

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is, I think, interesting and false. The weaker one is perhaps true but tedious.

The proposition, then, that someone who has a religious belief holds it simply because he or she wants to seems to me to be false. But, on the other hand, there is, I think, a sense in which religious belief, like all belief, is wishful thinking. What I want to try to do here is to disentangle two senses of 'wishful thinking': a bad sense, in which I think religious belief isn't necessarily wishful thinking, and a good, or at least harmless sense, in which I think it is.

Perhaps I had better begin by explaining that I think that religious belief is at least a matter of accepting certain propositions as true and their contraries as false. It is true that religious beliefs are rarely simple factual beliefs of the kind that scientists might deal with, but this does not seem to me to mean that they are not true or false. They are mostly matters of fact plus interpretation, and so in any case the greater number of Christian beliefs do entail certain simple factual historical beliefs, and in their case it is certainly possible to show what scientific evidence would count against them.

Thus, for example, faith in the resurrection of Christ is a very deep and complex thing, and a great deal of theology consists simply in exploring its depths. It is not possible to comprise it in a neatly tailored formula. But whatever else it implies, it certainly entails that Christ's body did not remain in the tomb, nor was it stolen by the Apostles or anyone else, but Christ came back to life and left the tomb of his own accord. If it were shown scientifically somehow, for example, that Christ's body did in fact rot away in the tomb, then it would be shown that a proposition implied by the doctrine of the resurrection is false and therefore it would be shown that the doctrine of the resurrection is false. And, of course, part of belief in the resurrection is belief that no such scientific discovery could be made – just as it is part of the belief that the earth is round that it cannot be scientifically proved to be flat. There are, of course,

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other Christian beliefs which do not entail scientific facts about the world, but these also, I think, are true as opposed to being false.

It is necessary to say these things because some philosophers have held that we cannot properly use 'true' and 'false' of any propositions except those of a class known as 'empirical propositions' – roughly, the kind which can be tested by a scientific experiment or (perhaps) by observation. Some of these philosophers (who were called 'logical positivists') maintained that if it is impossible to point to the scientific evidence upon which a proposition is based, then unless it is a useful tautology (like the propositions of logic or mathematics), it is meaningless and worthless, or as they put it, 'metaphysical'. The difficulty with this view is, of course, that it is impossible to point to the scientific evidence upon which is based the logical positivist's own proposition that only empirical propositions can be true or false. Thus, by their own account their own philosophical propositions are meaningless and worthless, and even, alas, metaphysical.

Most of the people who held logical positivist views were quite happy to see the traditional religious doctrines going down the drain as meaningless and metaphysical, but there were some of this cast of mind who still wanted to retain the use of the traditional religious sayings. They formed the theory that since these did not express empirical propositions, they were acceptable not because they were true but for some other reason. They carried the public school taboo on discussing religion to its extreme limit. To argue about religion was not only bad form but bad philosophy. They protected their religious doctrines from sceptical attack at the cost of emptying them of any assertive character at all.

There are no logical positivists left these days, and philosophers no longer place these narrow limits on the proper use of 'true' and 'false'. But it is still slightly suspect in some religious circles to claim that the articles of faith are just simply true.



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This, however, is the position I want to maintain. If then you think, as I do, that to believe a doctrine, to have faith in it, means at least to hold that a certain proposition is true and not false (it means a lot more than this, but it means *at least* this), then you have a certain question to answer: how is this way of holding a proposition to be true different from and related to other ways of holding a proposition to be true? How is faith in a proposition different from or related to having reasons for holding a proposition?

Here people might take up one of two opposite positions, both of which I think are wrong. They might say (a) that having faith in a proposition has nothing whatever to do with having reasons for it, or else they might say (b) that it is exactly the same as having reasons for it.

Let's look at (a) first: to hold a proposition by faith is entirely unlike holding it for good reasons. I think that if people said this we should be inclined to wonder what they meant by saying that they held a proposition by faith as *true*. How, after all, do they *know* that they hold it as true? What is the difference between using a sentence as an assertion and using it to express an emotion? We are sometimes inclined to suppose that the difference is immediately evident to us when we use the sentence. In the one case we use it and have an assertive feeling inside us, and in the other case we use it with an expressive feeling inside us. But this is certainly not the case. Imagine people who say, 'The only thing to do with hooligan teenagers is to flog them.' These people may genuinely feel that they are making an assertion which they believe to be true. Yet what happens if their friends succeed in introducing into their minds the suspicion that they may be simply voicing their indignation at the behaviour of certain youngsters? It begins to worry them. They ask, 'Do we really think this is true, or are we merely expressing a feeling?' How do they answer this question? Certainly not by introspecting their feelings. They ask themselves, 'Have we paid much attention to the studies of ways of preventing

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crime?', 'Have we asked ourselves what we should flog people for?', and so on.

If people were totally indifferent to any possible reasons for asserting or denying their proposition, we should think that they didn't really hold it as true, but perhaps just liked the sound of the words used in expressing it. Thus someone might seem to assert the proposition that there was a young man of Calcutta who coated his tonsils with butter, thus converting his snore from a horrible roar to a soft oleaginous mutter. But, as soon as it became evident that the person saying this did not care at all about the evidence for or against this being the case, we should realize that he or she merely liked saying that kind of thing (enjoyed reciting limericks). In the same way, if somebody holds a doctrine on faith and is totally indifferent to any evidence for or against it, we should think that he or she did not hold it on faith as true.

At the other extreme, if someone is so concerned with reasons for and against holding his or her proposition that the holding of it is *entirely* dependent on the *reasons*, we should begin to wonder why he or she claimed to have faith in it. Faith in a proposition must surely mean more than simply estimating that there is good reason to think that it is true.

It seems to me that there is a middle way between holding, on the one hand, that faith has absolutely *nothing* to do with reasons and argument, and, on the other hand, that it is nothing *but* a matter of reasons and argument. The first extreme makes the notion of truth inapplicable. The other makes the notion of faith inapplicable.

I have already suggested that there is at least this much connection between faith in a proposition and reasoning about it: that part of belief in a proposition is belief that there is no genuine knockdown argument to *disprove* it. If I believe that Christ is God, then I must believe that he cannot be proved not to be God. At the very least, believers must hold that their beliefs cannot be shown to be logically inconsistent: thus for example

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to believe *both* that God is omnipotent and that human beings are free and responsible is, among other things, to believe that these two propositions cannot be shown to be inconsistent with each other. For if they are inconsistent, then at least one of them is false, and my holding them by faith couldn't be called holding them *as true*. It is therefore perfectly fair for an atheist determinist who accepts neither of these propositions nevertheless to attack the Christian on the ground that if one is true the other cannot be. It is necessary to say this, because there are some Christians who say that beliefs can, and indeed must be, absurd in the sense of repugnant to reason, logically inconsistent. For these theologians the whole point of genuine faith is that it supersedes mere human reason and defeats it. I do not think that these people take sufficiently seriously the point that faith means holding something as *true* – they think of faith as more an act of courage or trust in a very general sense.

It is not merely by showing logical inconsistencies, however, that an opponent may attack believers in their beliefs, for of course, one may try to show simply that the beliefs are contrary to fact. To believe a proposition, then, is to believe that both these kinds of attacks will fail. Of course, this belief that the attacks will fail is a belief about the proposition, not about the believer. Believers do not predict that they or anyone else will always be able to see through the arguments brought against their belief. They merely believe that the arguments in question shall be, in principle, soluble. Suppose that I believe that I am in Paris. Part of this belief is that there is no genuine proof that I am not – though I think that if someone bought me enough beer I could fairly easily be convinced that I was in London or Istanbul. Believers do not even predict that they will personally be unconvinced by specious arguments against their beliefs; they merely believe that they would be in error if they were so convinced.

All this that I have said could be the case if that actual content of our faith, the propositions which we believe, concerned