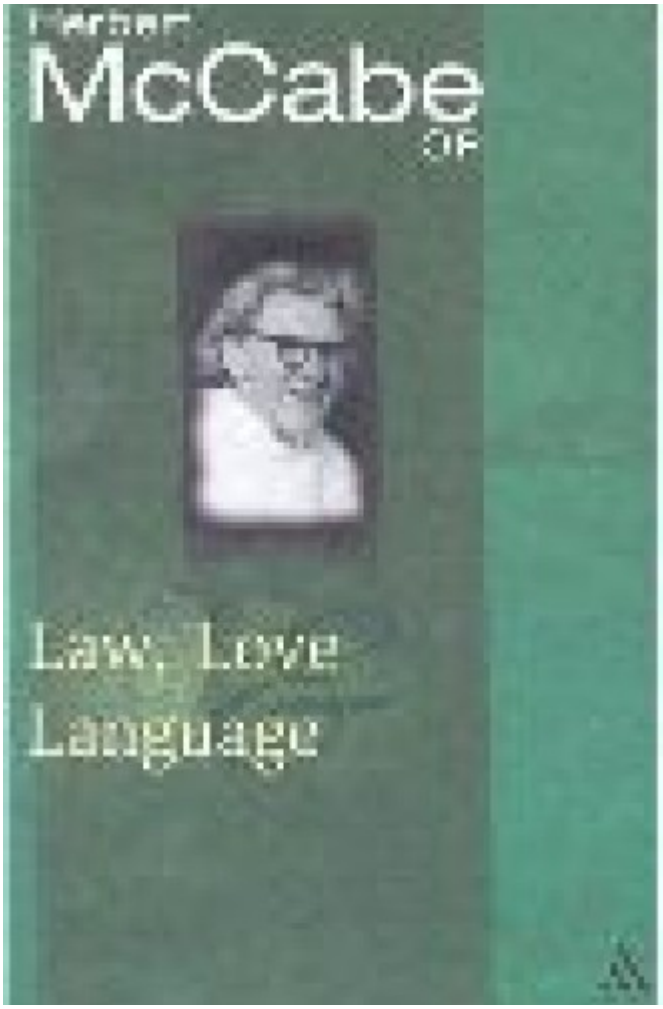
Don't talk nonsense

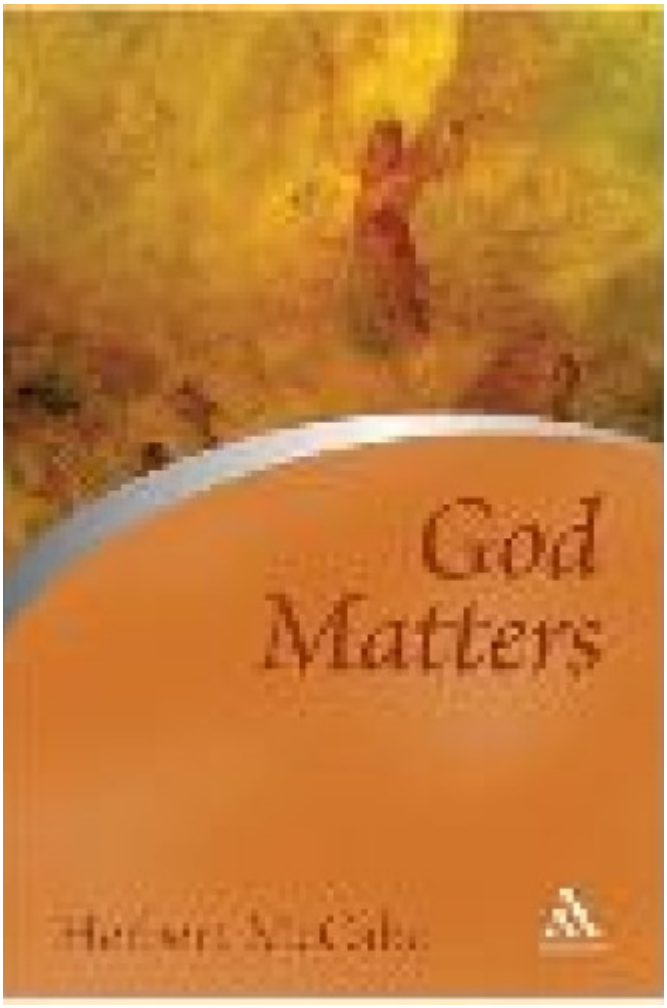
By L. Roger Owens in the January 25, 2005 issue

In Review



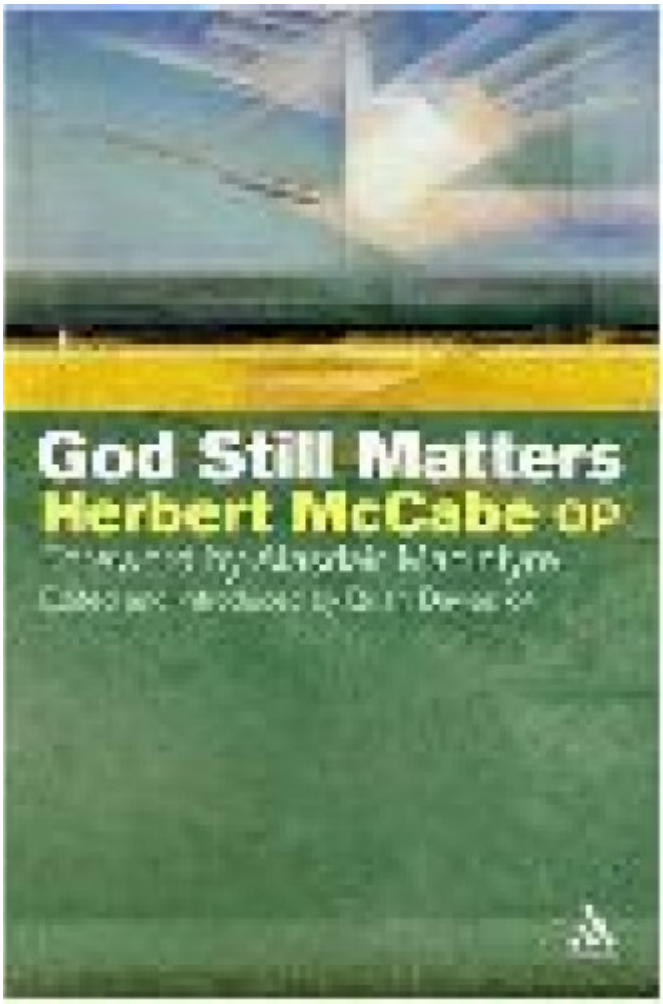
Law, Love and Language

Herbert McCabe
Continuum



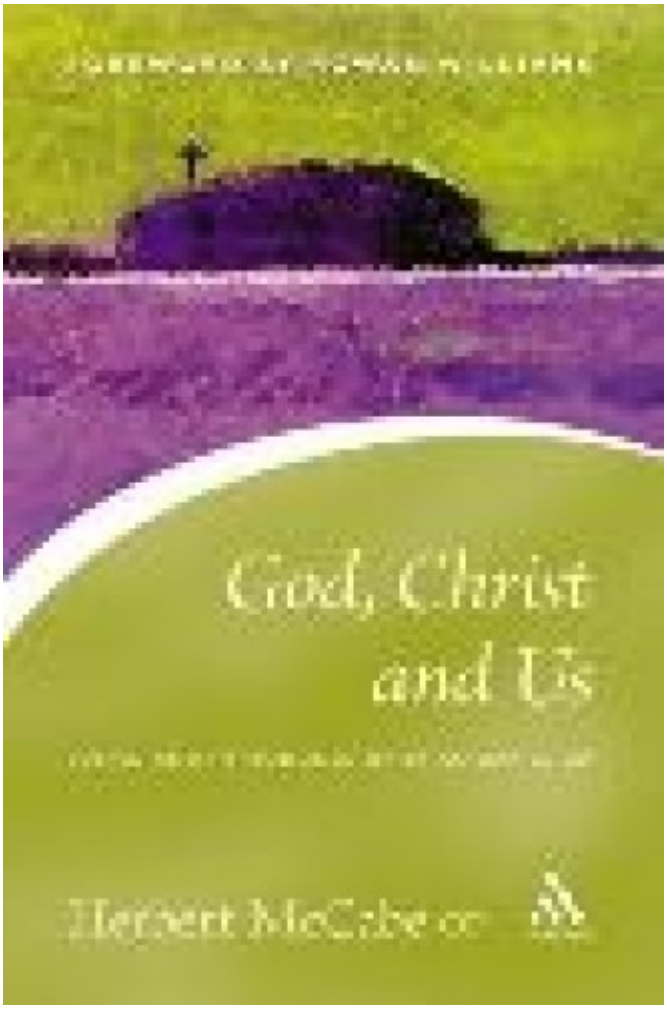
God Matters

Herbert McCabe
Continuum



God Still Matters

Herbert McCabe
Continuum



God, Christ and Us

Herbert McCabe
Continuum

Though he was one of the most significant English theologians of the 20th century, influencing such figures as Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and literary critic Terry Eagleton, Herbert McCabe, O.P. (1926-2001), has had relatively little impact in the U.S. That may be about to change with the republication of two of his early books, *Law*, *Love and Language* and *God Matters*, and the posthumous publication of a collection of essays, *God Still Matters*, and a book of sermons, *God*, *Christ and Us*.

Those of us on this side of the Atlantic have every reason to be glad. McCabe's theology merits attention not only because of its wit ("The reason why it is hard for me to envisage a Coke and frankfurter becoming the body of Christ is that I have

difficulty imagining them as food in the first place") but also because of the care and precision with which he treats difficult questions. Theology needs such precision of language if it is going to do what McCabe thinks it should do: theology "is not concerned with trying to say what God is but in trying to stop us talking nonsense."

McCabe joined the Dominican order, the Order of Preachers, in 1949 at age 23. Having studied chemistry and philosophy at Manchester University, he was ready for the rigorous training he received under the tutelage of Victor White and other Dominican scholars. From his teachers and from his own careful reading of Aquinas, McCabe learned that there "is no God who is a being, an item in the universe, a rival person; there is just the unknown beyond and behind the whole universe itself, the mystery at the heart of my being myself. In Christ, says St. Thomas, we are united to God as to an unknown."

The next two decades were a time of rapid cultural change. The situation in Northern Ireland was increasingly tense. Liberation theology was beginning to blossom in the Third World. The tragedy (and the sin, from McCabe's perspective) of the war in Vietnam loomed on the horizon. By 1965, when McCabe became editor of *New Blackfriars*, the Dominican journal of culture and philosophy, he had begun to combine his knowledge of Aquinas with a commitment to radical politics on behalf of the poor—a kind of politics he learned from both Marx and Jesus. He was sacked as editor of *New Blackfriars* in 1967 for remarking in one of his widely anticipated monthly editorials that the church "is quite plainly corrupt." After his reinstatement three years later he began his first editorial, "As I was saying before I was so oddly interrupted."

Christianity is not just about saving souls, McCabe insisted, recalling Aquinas's claim that "my soul is not me." Humans are embodied creatures, and God's future kingdom will be no less bodily. And for McCabe, ethics is not about distinguishing between right and wrong—a model still popular in areas like medical ethics and Catholic moral theology. Ethics, rather, is more like literary criticism. It helps us to grasp and thus live the deeper meaning of our embodied lives, lives which find their fulfillment in sharing the life, the bodily life, of Jesus.

In the late 1960s McCabe challenged the influence of situation ethics (see *Law*, *Love and Language*, first published in 1968). For the situationists, moral rules are simply rules of thumb, rules which should be broken in favor of doing the loving thing in the concrete situation. Love trumps any rule. Situation ethics opposes any absolutist

ethic that might say, for example, “It is always wrong to lie no matter what the situation.” Obviously, said the situationists, one should not lie habitually; nevertheless, in some situations, lying is the most loving thing to do. For example, it is right to lie in order to save Jews from the Nazis. (Most of the time the arguments weren’t about lying but about sex.)

McCabe’s response to this approach to ethics shows the importance he gave to language. He notes with regard to the language of moral absolutes that “it is quite important to notice that being absolutely wrong is not the same as being very very wrong. A man might hold that lying is absolutely wrong while at the same time regarding it as often a rather trivial offense. All that ‘absolutely’ says is that whatever makes it wrong is independent of circumstances.” Whether *these* kinds of absolutes exist was (and still is) precisely the debate.

It is true, McCabe says, that love is a basic moral concept. And he agrees that the word “love” is in some sense related to context. What counts as a loving act and how we recognize one will depend on our own biographies—whether, for instance, we were loved as a child. “Love” is a word one learns to use over the history of one’s life, and in this respect it is unlike the word “tree.” Once you’ve got “tree” down, you’ve got it.

Yet there is one crucial qualification McCabe wants to make. There must be something the word “love” can never mean if the word is to have any meaning at all. McCabe compares this view of words to the place of dogma in the Catholic Church. “It must be possible for a Christian to say ‘I don’t know how they will be formulating Christianity in the 24th century, but at least I know they won’t be Arians or Nestorians.’” Similarly, there must be some kinds of human behavior which could never be called “loving” if the language of love is to remain meaningful.

He thinks killing children is a good candidate for being that something which can never be called loving. However one describes an act—and every act will have a multitude of relevant descriptions—if the description “killing children” applies to it, then we can know the act isn’t loving.

A second critique McCabe makes of situation ethics applies to any type of quandary ethics, which focuses on the moral rightness of individual acts. (Quandary ethics is practiced, for example, by Randy Cohen, resident ethicist of the *New York Times Magazine*.) Situation ethics says that all the relevant circumstances must be taken

into account before an act can be called right or wrong. But how, McCabe asks, can we know when we have all the relevant information? How do we know where to draw the frame around a situation? Without absolutes we can't know what love is, and without a frame we can't know where the act in question ends.

These are not quaint reflections. In the context of Catholic moral theology, they anticipated John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* in which the pope condemns Catholicism's own version of situation ethics, proportionalism. Some acts, John Paul asserts, are intrinsically evil. No account of relevant circumstances can justify certain kinds of behavior. (The pope and McCabe would disagree, however, about which acts belong in this category. McCabe has in mind methods of war that kill children; the pope has in mind the use of birth control.)

McCabe wrote *Law*, *Love and Language* during the Vietnam war, and his reference to the killing of children reflects his awareness that dropping napalm on villages roasts children alive. We are currently in a situation in which the language of "war" and "terrorism" seems to be changing to suit the interests of those in power. Something is called "war" and something else "terrorism" in order to justify military actions or decide whether the Geneva Convention applies.

But McCabe's point about the word "love" can be applied to "war." The language of war can be extended metaphorically, as in "war on drugs" and "war on poverty." But if there are not some things that can't be called war, then the just war tradition becomes as hollow as "all you need is love." Before a war can be justified we have to be able to say it is a war. Is a war against a military *tactic*, like the war on terror, sufficiently war to be judged by just war criteria? McCabe's approach to ethics helps us ask these kinds of questions.

If McCabe's approach to ethics centers on questions of language—how we use the word love and how we describe a situation—even more so does his approach to questions about God. Talking nonsense in ethics can lead us astray. Talking nonsense about God can make us idolaters.

McCabe spent most of his life in Oxford at Blackfriars, the Novitiate of the English Dominicans and the intellectual center of the order. He continued to edit *New Blackfriars*, traveled to teach and preach, and instructed the novices. Most of the essays written in these years have been published in the books *God Matters* and *God Still Matters*. In these essays he wrote, "I am only trying to say two not very

original things: that the only God who matters is the unfathomable mystery of love because of which there is being and meaning to anything that is; and that we are united with God in matter, in our flesh and his flesh." Not original, perhaps, but worth reiterating.

Since God is this mystery, we must be very careful about how we refer to God. Perhaps the greatest mistake a theologian can make is to talk about God as if God were a part of the universe, as if God were the biggest thing around.

In talking of such a mystery, of the "unknown beyond and behind the whole universe," all we have, it seems, are metaphors. It is clear that language about God is metaphorical when we say things like "God is a rock" or "God is a mighty fortress." But what about when we say, "God is angry" or "God changed his mind" or "God is sympathetic"? These words give us appropriate pictures of God, McCabe says, but the language cannot be taken literally.

God, for instance, cannot literally have compassion or sympathy. This does not mean that God is unsympathetic, if by that we mean God is stoical. But words like "sympathetic" and "unsympathetic" cannot literally apply to God. If we think they do, we begin to turn our appropriate pictures of God into idols, mistaking the God beyond the universe for one of the gods in the universe.

To have compassion, McCabe reminds us, means to suffer alongside of. Compassion makes up the gap that exists between people. But because God is not a part of the universe, there is no gap between us and God. "In our compassion we, in our feeble way, are seeking to be what God is all the time: united with and within the life of our friend."

Many recent theologians, especially process theologians, have been fond of critiquing "classical theism." They have asserted—wrongly, according to McCabe—that the God of the classical theists is a stoic God, impassible and immutable. Because these theologians have believed that we need a God who feels our pain, they have rejected the so-called static god of classical theism and opted for a god who is one agent among others, tirelessly at work within the world.

According to McCabe, this approach involves an illicit theological move. When the tradition has said that God is impassible it has asserted that God does not literally suffer; when it has said that God is immutable it has asserted that God does not literally change. But it is wrong to assume that if God does not suffer then God must

be unsympathetic, or that if God does not change then God must be static. Such an analysis applies language too literally, McCabe thinks, and is idolatrous.

So does God feel our pain or not? The fall 2003 issue of my denomination's quarterly journal was devoted to God's providence and sovereignty, and it included several essays that presented a process perspective on God and evil. These essays tried to reimagine God in a way appropriate to our dire situation. They abandoned the allegedly static God of Augustine, Aquinas and McCabe and talked instead about a god who suffers with our suffering but who is impotent against evil (constrained as this god is by the metaphysical principles enunciated by Alfred North Whitehead).

McCabe reminds us that we do not need to reimagine God. We need to remember that classical Christianity gives us a way to talk about God's suffering. God walked dusty roads, sweat, ate and drank (with sinners), was tortured, and died a brutal death on a cross. This is all true of God because it is true of the man Jesus. We do not need to imagine a God who feels our pain because God really did feel it.

The dual emphasis on God's utter inaccessibility to our language and on the literal suffering of God in the person of Jesus marks almost every page of McCabe's essays. The theological point is not easy to grasp, but it is the whole point of the incarnation:

> Part of the doctrine of the incarnation is precisely that Jesus was and is a human person; the other part is that this same identical person was and is divine. The adjectives 'divine' and 'human' express *what* Jesus is (his nature), the name 'Jesus' refers to *who* (which person) he is. In virtue of his human nature certain things can be asserted or denied about Jesus; in virtue of his divine nature certain other things can be asserted or denied of him, but all these assertions are about one person (*God Matters*).

God lived a human life. God died on a cross. God felt our pain.

September 11, 2001, did not present a new situation for the world that required a rethinking of God. It should have sent us searching for theological clarity, the kind of clarity given by McCabe, who describes the God who created the world out of nothing and who suffered in the world as the man Jesus, the God about whom it is easy to talk nonsense if you are not careful.

Those who knew McCabe best say that he was a preacher at heart. Appropriate for a member of the Order of Preachers, every aspect of McCabe's work was a kind of

proclamation. Whenever he challenges our language about ethics, whenever he reminds us that God is a mystery hard to talk about but made visible in Jesus Christ, whenever he is performing this task of carefully expositing the faith, McCabe is fulfilling his vocation as a Dominican.

He was also a real preacher, a man who crafted sermons with exquisite care, harnessing the sometimes complicated debates among theologians to present the mystery of the gospel in language both simple and beautiful. *God*, *Christ and Us* contains 27 sermons that are worthy models for preachers, who stand on the front lines of theological discourse.

When preachers find that time is running out or when they get lazy, they run the risk of talking theological nonsense. McCabe's sermons are examples of ways to talk about God so listeners can come to see the incomprehensible mystery of God as profoundly good news.

In a sermon on the Trinity, for instance, he suggests that our listening to talk about the Trinity is like a child listening to conversation in a room full of grown-ups. The adult conversation is peppered with humor, wit and irony. The child hears the adults laugh and knows this banter has some kind of purpose. She knows they are not mad. But she is baffled by what is going on. The child has not yet entered the lives of adults so as to understand their jokes. "The child is on the way to sharing the life of her parents who made her. We are all on the way to sharing the life of God who made us." Though often perplexed, we can sometimes glimpse what this adult life with God will be like:

> Just as the child gets glimpses of what adult life can be from the interest that grown-ups take in her, so all human beings can get glimpses of what divine life can be from the interest that God takes in us. That interest, that care and attention, is the whole story that is told in the Bible, from the creation of humankind to the sending of God's son to be one of us, to die for us, to be raised from the dead, and to send his Spirit of love and joy amongst us (*God*, *Christ and Us*).

More than one of McCabe's sermons ends with something like this summary of the heart of the Christian faith: "For God the Father, through his Son, is even now sending us the Holy Spirit so that we shall ourselves live that life of love and joy for eternity."

That formula returns us to the main point of McCabe’s ethics. Ethics does more then help us make choices in difficult situations; it helps us to discover the deep meaning of life, a meaning deeper than our superficial wants and desires. The job of ethics is to aid us in discovering and living out the deepest desires of our fleshly, human hearts. And that deepest desire, the end of all our lives, turns out to be nothing other than sharing the life of God available to us through the body of the man Jesus and the Spirit whom he sent. A great mystery, yes; nonsense, no.