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Version: Accepted Version

Article:
Hewitt, S (2018) Not Crying “Peace” The Theological Politics of Herbert McCabe. New Blackfriars, 99 (1084). pp. 740-755. ISSN: 0028-4289

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12401

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Not crying "peace"
The theological politics of Herbert McCabe*

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Author accepted draft. Final version in *New Blackfriars*.

Herbert McCabe was, by widespread acclaim, one of the greatest Catholic thinkers in the English speaking world during the final quarter of the last century. He was also deeply committed to radical left-wing politics. What is the relationship between these two facts? There is a temptation, especially in a climate not favourable to the marriage of radical politics and Christianity, to suggest that they are at best accidentally related. Thus after McCabe's death one got the impression that he was for many a brilliant theologian and philosopher, with numerous important things to say about topics such as creation and the eucharist, who just happened to have rather eccentric political opinions. These, ran the implication, were best passed over in silence.[1]

This is a mistake. Not only are McCabe's political ideas interesting in their own right, and an important corrective to current trends in both theology and analytic philosophy, but at crucial points his understanding of central theological topics (creation, God, idolatry) is emeshed with his politics, such that any attempt to separate the two is bound to distort McCabe's intentions in writing. In this article, I will lay out what I take to be the key themes in McCabe's politics before arguing that, in contrast to significant strands in present day political theology, he had a keen sense of the respective roles of faith and reason in guiding political action. This allowed him to commit himself to a politics which was more radical than much of what has followed him, whilst having a clear sense of how Christian faith ought to be allowed to condition political engagement. The article concludes by drawing out lessons from McCabe for thinking about faith and politics. Not least of these is that we ought to avoid the lure, often articulated in terms of the 'unifying' role of the Church, to eschew conflict. At the moment there is a lot of pressure to echo those condemned by the prophet Jeremiah, proclaiming peace where there is no peace.[2] McCabe cautions us against this constantly, and for theologically interesting reasons.

*Thanks to Peter Hunter OP, Rachel Muers, and Tasia Scrutton for discussion of themes covered here.

[1] Important exceptions here are Denys Turner's lecture [32], with which I disagree at points (as will become apparent), but which is essential reading, and Terry Eagleton's enduring interest in McCabe – see especially [4], [3], and [5] for works which show his influence.

[2] 'They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.' Jeremiah 6:14, *NRSV*. See below for the same theme in Ezekiel.

1 God, the gods and oppression

Above all else, McCabe was a theologian in the thomist tradition, understanding the purpose of his discipline (whether pursued as a branch of philosophy, or as taking its lead from biblical revelation) as being to speak of God (STh Ia, Q1, a.7). Schooled in analytic philosophy, however, and in particular in the work of Wittgenstein, he was attentive to questions about the limits of sense and was acutely aware that these pressed themselves with particularly urgency around theological language. His particular contribution to the recasting of thomism in the light of analytic philosophy,[3] was the description of a way-in to talk of God which made comprehensible the severe limits of our capacity to speak of God. Since McCabe considered the observation of these limits to be of supreme importance for politics, it is worth outlining here McCabe's approach to God-talk.

'For a *large* class of cases of employment of the word 'meaning' – though not for all - this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language' [34, 43]; thus Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*. In a late 20th century context where the meaningfulness of the word 'God' had been the object of doubt,[4] McCabe undertook to demonstrate that it had an intelligible use, and therefore a meaning.[5] Moreover, his favoured way of doing this gives us reason to believe that God exists. In this way, he refashions Thomas' natural theology for the age of linguistic philosophy.

How is the word 'God' used?[6] For McCabe, in line with the thomist instinct that we talk about God through talking about God's creatures, its paradigmatic use is in supplying an answer to a question: 'why is there something rather than nothing at all?' [19, 5]. So, assuming of course that this question is in good order,[7] we are entitled to say that God exists just in case there is something rather than nothing at all, which of course there is. In spite of an appearance of theological bravado, McCabe's claim here is modest, for God is an *answer* to the question of existence only in a certain sense. The word 'God' has a use in our language, namely designating *whatever it is* which is the reason why there is something rather than nothing at all. The nature of whatever that may be is hidden from us. As McCabe writes, 'By 'creation' we mean the dependence of all that is, in so far as it is. We do not know what it is that it depends on, we do not know the nature of God' [20, 10]. Here he is entirely in line with Aquinas' insistence that we cannot know what God is but only what he is not (STh Ia *pr.* Q3).[8]

Behind this apophaticism lies a realisation that in order to adequately an-

[3] On which, see [27] and [8]. McCabe is often counted part of the loose movement known as 'grammatical thomism'; see [25] on this, although the details of Mulhall's exegesis of McCabe are criticised in [].

[4] For an overview, see [6].

[5] Theology, for McCabe, is concerned with 'trying to stop us talking nonsense' [16, 215]

[6] For more details on McCabe's approach to the word 'God' see my []

[7] Doubt about this was voiced by Russell in debate with Coppleston [28], which McCabe references.

[8] In emphasising Aquinas' apophaticism McCabe, along with other thinkers in the 'grammatical thomist' tradition, such as Burrell and Davies, is an important corrective to the downplaying of its importance by prominent analytic readers of Aquinas, e.g. [30].

swer the question of existence, anything picked out by the word 'God' would have to lie beyond the ordinary reach of our language, devised as it is for use within the created order. God 'is always dressed verbally in second-hand clothes that don't fit him very well'. In particular, the conditions under which we can assign everyday objects to categories or assert significantly about their internal structure, are never satisfied in the case of God. Moreover inferences that would be routine from claims about creatures are blocked in the case of God, precisely because God is the reason creatures exist over and against nothing:

> If God is whatever answers our question, how come everything? then evidently he is not to be included amongst everything. God cannot be a thing, an existent among others. It is not possible that God and the universe should add up to make two. Again, if we are to speak of God as causing the existence of everything, it is clear that we must not mean that he makes the universe out of anything. Whatever creation means it is not a process of making. [19, 6]

Now: use the word 'world' to mean the created order, which we perceive with our senses and grasp with our minds, and which we use our language to navigate our way about.[9] God is not an item in the world. This fact is taken by McCabe to be of crucial political importance. The Creator is not an item in the creation: God cannot be contained within our conceptual frameworks and so, if we are to speak of him faithfully, cannot be manipulated with ideological purpose, fitted neatly into an account of the world in order to serve the interests of dominant interests. Nor does God compete causally with creatures, so appeal to the divine cannot properly be made in order to mystify worldly injustice. In these respects, McCabe holds, the Creator God who is the object of both natural theology and biblical faith contrasts sharply with *the gods*:

> [I]t is the God of the Hebrews (who in the Jewish interpretation comes to be seen as creator) who is hailed in the decalogue as liberator; it is the gods (parts of history) and the whole religion of the gods that is seen to stand for alienation and dependency. 'I am the Lord[10] your God who brought you out of slavery; you shall have no gods.'

> God the creator, who is not one of the participants in history but the mover of Cyrus and of all history, is the liberator fundamentally *because* he is not a god, because there are no gods, or at least no gods to be worshiped. This leaves history in human hands under the judgement of God. Human misery can no longer be attributed to the gods and accepted with resignation or evaded with sacrifices. The long slow process can begin of identifying the human roots of oppression and exploitation, just as the way now lies open for the scientific understanding and control of the forces of nature. [23, 43]

[9] This is something like Wittgenstein's sense of the word in [33]. Contemporary analytic philosophers are prone to be unsettled by assertions that God is not an item in the world, since they tend to hear the word 'world' as meaning all that exists. Clarity here is important.

[10] The original fills out the tetragrammaton; I've modified it in accordance with current Catholic practice and congruously with the subject matter.

We are set free to understand the histories we inhabit in order to change society for the better. In the next section we'll see how McCabe applied this insight to the concrete reality of modern capitalist societies.

2 Seeing the class struggle clearly

'The criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth', wrote Marx signalling his own turn from the criticism of theology to the critique of the social relations which, he believed, are both a precondition of and provide an impetus to theological speculation [13]. Similarly for McCabe, possession of an adequate theology of creation enables us to go about understanding the social order in a manner that is, in a certain sense, non-theological. For sure, our societies are part of God's creation and (as we will see) subject to God's eschatological judgement. However, it is not the case that God lies behind every machination of the state or the stock market as a worldly cause, nor did God assign the rich man to his castle and the poor man to his gate. To hold otherwise would be to misunderstand God as being a god.

If God's action is not a substitute for creaturely causes within human societies, the prospect lies open for developing an immanent understanding of the workings of our society in order to transform it for the better. Such an understanding, with respect to capitalist societies, McCabe found in Marxist thought.[11] It is important to be clear about McCabe's relation to Marxism in order to grasp adequately how he thinks social theory might inform a theologically-inflected politics. His affirmation of key Marxist claims is not a matter of striking a radical pose, nor of following intellectual fashion (in fact, by the time McCabe began to engage with Marxism, academic fashion was shifting away from it in the direction of postmodernism). McCabe thinks that these claims are *true* [18]. It is common enough, of course, that the inhabitants of capitalist societies do not recognise the of truth those claims; such is the effect of ideology, without which no exploitative social system could survive.[12] That these claims are true, however, means that they cannot simply be ignored, still less denounced as un-Christian (truth, after all, cannot contradict truth).[13] Instead, what is the case about capitalist society, as disclosed by Marx, has to be taken as the basis for political action within that society. If our efforts on behalf of a better world are not grounded in the truth about the present world, they will be shaky indeed, for it is out of the present that the future will be built.

The truth of Marxist claims is, of course, a matter to be settled *a posteriori*, by investigation of and theorising about the world,[14] and McCabe relies on

[11] Marxism is typically claimed not simply as a theory of capitalist societies, but of class-based societies in general, having a particular explanatory aspiration with respect to the transition between modes of production. Whilst McCabe mentions the contrast between capitalism and feudalism in passing, his focus is on the former.

[12] For an interesting take on ideology in relation to Christian-Marxist dialogue, written during the same period as McCabe's key political writings, see [31].

[13] It would be interesting to explore the manner in which McCabe's concern for truth, however discovered, is characteristically Dominican.

[14] Which is compatible with Marxism's own insistence that such theorising can only be adequately undertaken in combination with *praxis* within a working class movement, an instance of what Marx terms 'practical-critical activity' [9]. For a useful overview of epistemological

other people having done that work successfully. His work is not then the place to look for an argument for the truth of a Marxist account of capitalist society. But what *are* the truths that McCabe takes the Marxist tradition to have uncovered about the kind of society we inhabit? In *The Class Struggle and Christian Love* he foregrounds the class division within capitalist society between a majority of workers and the owners of capital. The former must sell their labour-power to the latter, yet it is only through the work performed by the former that value, and therefore profit, is created. Here McCabe is communicating ideas which Marx develops throughout his corpus, from the early *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* up to the mature development of the labour theory of value in Volume One of *Capital* [10][11]. Importantly, given the understandable tendency of radical Christian social thought to organise itself around the biblical concept of *the poor*,[15] on this understanding class is not a matter of differences in wealth or of social status, but rather of differing positions within the system of relations by which economic activity is organised,

> On this fundamental difference between worker and employer the whole class system rests. The worker is whoever by productive work actually creates wealth. The employer is not simply anyone who makes overall decisions about what work shall be done and how; he is the one who takes the surplus wealth created by the worker and uses it (in his own interests of course) as capital. Capitalism is just the system in which capital is accumulated for investment, in their own interests, by a group of people who own the means of production and employ large numbers of other people who do not own the means of production but produce both the wealth they receive back in wages and the surplus wealth which is used for investment by the owners. [18, 188]

The organisation of economic activity in this fashion builds antagonistic relationships between human beings into the very structure of society. In passing McCabe mentions the competition between capitalist firms, which lends the system its dynamism, and the frequent wars between capitalist states. Most fundamentally of all, however, capitalism sets the interests of workers and those of employers in opposition: profit is value which is not paid out in wages. All other things being equal one side of industry can only better its condition at the expense of the other. This is not, emphasises McCabe, the result of greed, or rabble-rousing, or the failure of people to live together harmoniously. Rather the lack of economic peace is built into capitalism itself,

> [T]he class war is *intrinsic* to capitalism. It is part of the dynamic of the capitalist process itself. It's not as though somebody said: 'Let's have a class struggle, let's adjust the imbalance of wealth by organising the poor workers against the rich capitalists'. Nothing of the kind. The tension and struggle between worker and capitalist is an essential part of the process itself. [18, 190]

At this point McCabe holds that a clear view of how things *are* in capital-

questions around Marxism, see [2]

[15]The obvious example here is liberation theology.

ist society leads to a realisation that things are not how they *ought* to be.[16] Writing for a Christian audience he frames the ethical objection to capitalism in terms of Christian revelation, but this should not be taken as implying that the problems with capitalism can't be seen by any suitably situated person of good will, on a purely 'natural' basis.[17] The problem for Christian ethics is particularly apparent, since Christianity holds that human beings were created and redeemed, and destined for, the life of charity[18] – the life of friendship with God and with one another. To the extent that we live in antagonism with one another we are not being what we are called to be [18, 192]. Under capitalism we cannot but live in antagonism with one another, therefore there is an imperative to bring about a non-capitalist society.

There is a sense in which it follows from this that McCabe agrees with conventional thought that class struggle is in tension with a Christian vision of society.[19] That there is class struggle is a reminder that we do not yet inhabit the Kingdom in its fulness, that – like the rest of creation – human societies are still '[waiting] with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God'[20]. The mistake, according to McCabe, is to conclude on this basis that Christians ought not to consciously engage in class struggle. On the contrary, they ought to deliberately take sides within it, in order to win it and end it.

To understand his reasoning here it is important to grasp two components of his view of capitalist society. First, as we have already seen, he holds that class struggle is inherent within capitalism and, since it permeates our entire economic lives, we cannot abstain from engagement it: we either explicitly choose sides or, by inaction, side with the dominant party. Second, following Marx, he takes there to be an asymmetry in the class struggle: whilst the bourgeoisie struggles in order to maintain its position within capitalism, the working class can only win the class struggle by doing away with capitalism, and thereby class society.[21] 'The only way to end the class struggle is to win it' [18, 195]. Since Christians cannot, by the nature of the case abstain from involvement in class struggle, and since capitalism injures human flourishing by setting people against each other, Christians ought to actively align themselves with the working class. After all,

> Christianity is not an ideal theory, it is a praxis, a particular kind of challenge to the world. Christians, therefore, do not, or should not, stand around saying, 'What a pity there is capitalism and the class war'. They say, or should say, 'How are we going to change this?' [18, 193]

[16] Here he deviates from the dominant conviction in moral philosophy since Hume, that there is a clear distinction between *facts* and *values* . For McCabe's moral philosophy more generally, see [17] and [22].

[17] On secular ethical objections to capitalism within Marxism itself, see [1].

[18] In the medieval sense of *caritas*, reflected in current Catholic liturgy, rather than the degraded modern sense.

[19] He begins *The Class Struggle and Christian Love* with the wry remark that (where revolutionary liberation is understood in terms of class struggle) '[that the] Christian gospel is incompatible with revolutionary liberation [is] one of the few positions shared by the International Marxist Group, Mrs Thatcher and Joseph Stalin' [18, 182].

[20] Romans 8:19, *NRSV*.

[21] See here Marx's early notion of the proletariat as a universal class, whose interests are universal human ones, insofar as they include the end of class society [12].

Set free by a non-idolatrous theology to think systematically about human society, McCabe thinks that we can see how capitalist society is permeated by dehumanising antagonism. He also believes that we can do away with this by participating in the struggle to move beyond capitalism. In the next section we will see how he thinks Christians ought to comport themselves in that struggle.

3 Politics in the light of the Kingdom

That capitalist society functions in the fashion described above, and that working class agency can provide the basis for transcending that society are positions to be justified on the basis of reflection on social experience, not to be deduced from Christian doctrine.McCabe says that he wants Catholics to be socialists, not because he is a Catholic but because he is a socialist [14, 90]. *Given*, however, that a Christian is a socialist, McCabe thinks that there are important constraints on how she ought to conduct herself in political struggle and on how she ought to understand that struggle and its outcomes in relation to salvation history. His reflections on these matters are likely to be interesting even to those who do not accept his empirical claims about capitalism and class.

The Christian revolutionary must, of course, be informed by the teaching of the gospels. McCabe finds the Sermon on the Mount especially instructive for political conduct. Far from impeding struggle he holds, attention to this makes for mature and commited action:

> Who, after all, wants a comrade in the struggle who is an arrogant, loudmouthed aggressive bully? The kind of person who jumps on the revolutionary bandwagon in order to work off his or her bad temper or envy or unresolved conflict with parents does not make a good and reliable comrade. Whatever happened to all those 'revolutionary' students of 1968? What the revolution needs is grown-up people who have caught on to themselves, who have recognised their own infantilisms and to some extent dealt with them – people in fact who have listened to the Sermon on the Mount. [18, 195]

Such people will be 'loving, kind, gentle, unprovoked to anger'. If the description is not one conventionally associated with a revolutionary activist, that is not because McCabe advocates a watered-down radicalism made safe for the Christian gospel. Instead, as the quotation above indicates, he takes the gospel to be the best guide to living through the tensions and frustrations which attach to political action in a world where the very structures and forces which render such action necessary make it difficult to engage in it with human integrity.[22] The precarious situation of the person trying to live out the demand of Christian love, in a context where that demand requires radical engagement, is also in

[22]This tension is captured well in Brecht's *To Posterity*:
For we knew only too well:
Even the hatred of squalor
Makes the brow grow stern.
Even anger against injustice
Makes the voice grow harsh. Alas, we
Who wished to lay the foundations of kindness
Could not ourselves be kind.

the foreground of McCabe's insistence on forgiveness in political life. Against a misunderstanding of the concept of forgiveness which views it as reconciliation to injustice (here a good deal of work by feminist theologians could supplement what McCabe has to say), he views it as parallel to, and not incompatible with, the struggle for justice. That I forgive my enemy in no way implies that I may not have to fight him. How can sense be made of this?

The answer lies in McCabe's understanding of the Kingdom of God, which at once belongs to the eschatological future and is yet already present, inaugurated through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Christians therefore consciously inhabit two realities: the broken, class-ridden world shot through with exploitation and oppression, and God's Kingdom of justice, love, and peace. Because we do not *simply* inhabit the former McCabe holds that a 'Christian cannot fully accept Chairman Mao's saying that there is, as yet, no brotherhood of man, that it must wait until the establishment of communism' [18, 197]. Equally, though, the Christian *does* inhabit a fractured world lacking the prerequisites for flourishing human community: she cannot pretend that the Kingdom is fully realised, or sign up to liberal optimism about the extent of already-existing human fellowship. Instead, she has to inhabit the tension, living in the world as a citizen of the Kingdom. Her forgiveness of her enemies is a concrete witness to her occupying these dual realities: that she has enemies shows that she has not abandoned the call to live in the present, she has faced up squarely to current conflicts and has taken sides in them; yet her *forgiveness* of those enemies is a wager on those conflicts not being the last word about humanity. It anticipates the reconciliation of the Kingdom, already present by grace,

> Through grace, through the life of Christ in him, the Christian is able, in an odd way, to adopt the perspective of God, who loves both the just and the unjust. This does not make the unjust any less unjust; this does not in any way diminish the need for the strugge, the need for smashing the power of the exploiter and oppressor, but it does, in the end make hatred impossible [18, 198]

The presence of the future Kingdom is particularly focused, and rendered sacramentally present, in the Church. McCabe has important things to say about the collective political role of the Church in the light of this coming Kingdom. In *Christ and Politics*, he sketches four models for how the Church should relate to society: as *alternative*, as *model*, as *social cement*, and as *challenge* [14, 87]. Finding problems with the first three, McCabe advocates the fourth. The Church as such does not seek political power, however, like Christ himself, its very existence poses a threat to those in political power in any age (or at least it does if the Church is being true to its calling). This is because the Church's proclamation challenges the ultimate importance of any political set-up. So,

> The preaching of the gospel (although of course it takes place at a particular juncture in history) has its perspective not on an immediate and particular objective but on the *eschaton*, on the ultimate destiny of human beings and humankind. That is why, unlike socialism as such, the gospel is not a programme for political action: not because it is too vague and general or too private, but because

> it is also a critique of action itself, a reminder that we must think on the end. [14, 90]

A Christian who agrees with McCabe in his analysis of capitalism and his support for socialism, nonetheless *as a Christian* must relativise both her political action and its desired outcome in the light of the coming Kingdom. She cannot give her whole self to the struggle, which does not make her any less effective but which does serve as both a sign and a warning to those for whom the immediate future holds the last word on human society.

4 The politics of faith and reason

In the final two sections, I'll explore the lessons that can be learned from McCabe for today's politically engaged Christians. In the present section, I'll address the relationship between faith and reason, and the extent to which there can be a distinctively *Christian* politics. Then, in the following section, I'll suggest that his acknowledgement of social divisions and partisanship with respect to them presents an important alternative to a common Christian approach to politics.

There is a temptation to think that any Christian who is both involved in political action and serious about her faith ought to combine the two commitments by espousing a distinctively 'Christian' form of politics. Certainly history provides no shortage of examples of attempts at Christian politics in all sections of the political spectrum: think about Christian socialism in Britain, or the tradition of Christian Democracy on the European continent. The former tradition is particularly relevant to our purposes, both because one might suppose McCabe to have been sympathetic to it and because it has been placed on the contemporary agenda by political and intellectual movements alike. With the British labour movement, for example, the current known as *Blue Labour* has appealed to the community-forging potential of religion [7],[23] whilst within academic theology the *Radical Orthodoxy* tendency has advocated an explicitly theological politics and rejected the secular nature of contemporary socialism [24] [26].

Mccabe rejects any such Christian exclusivism in politics; he takes it as read that Christians will be engaging in secular political movements with understandings and immanent world-views which in no way depend on Christian faith. Whatever distinctively Christian contribution members of the Church make to those movements it will not be in terms of political *content*. Instead, as we have seen, McCabe thinks that Christians bring with them a characteristic ethical comportment and a capacity to both interpret and relativise political action in terms of God's saving eschatological action in Christ. This way of being both Christian and political expresses a characteristically thomistic conviction of the possibility for harmony between faith and reason, grace and nature: if my purely human capacity to understand the world (exercised properly) tells me that capitalism impedes human flourishing, the Christian gospel is not going to tell me otherwise, nor is the life of grace going to lead me to do anything

[23] Note that the Blue Labour vision for the Church would be as *social cement* in the fashion discussed in the previous section.

essentially injurious to humankind.

So McCabe has a principled basis for thinking that the political commitments of Christians needn't themselves be explicitly Christian. The role of the Christian in secular politics is to live *as Christians*, as people called to love as Christ loves, within them, counting them as less than ultimate in the light of the coming Kingdom. As Schillbeecx describes a similar view,

> The Christian sees the autonomous morality of humanity concretely in the context of a practice in accord with the kingdom of God on which he or she has set his or her hope. The spirituality of the ethics of Christians, which as ethics really does not add anything to an autonomous reality focused on men and women and their worth, lies in theologal life: in a warm relationship with God; life in faith, hope and love which is celebrated in the liturgy, meditated on critically in faith in contemplation and practised in the everyday life of Christians. [29, 50]

As Christians we commit ourselves to the cause of humanity, which those who do not share our faith are able to identify, but we do so in the belief that God has declared himself for that cause and will bring it to fruition. At this point we should at least take note of an objection with which a position such as McCabe's is likely to be met by adherents of *Radical Orthodoxy* and similar movements (here is not the place to *meet* that objection adequately, but I can at least suggest how I think McCabe can be defended).[24] Isn't talk of 'human flourishing' or 'the cause of humanity' as though these are things which can be identified by those with Christian faith, and those without, alike and pursued together by both fundamentally mistaken? For isn't all human reality already transformed by grace, such that a purely secular view of it is simply mistaken, and an account of human flourishing constructed in these terms inevitably wanting?

There's an extent to which McCabe can agree with almost all of this. He certainly does not reject the insight of *nouvelle theologie* thomism that human existence is already graced. And because of this he does think that any secular account of human flourishing is going to be missing something crucial, namely our need to be transformed through the death and resurrection of Christ so as to come to participate in the life of God. It simply does not follow from this, however, that there is not overlap between secular and Christian accounts of flourishing (grace, after all, does not destroy nature), nor that there can't be complete agreement about the action needed here-and-now to make the world liveable, nor that Christian thinkers can't talk about purely natural human goods.[25] Moreover the distinction between faith and reason is not the same distinction as that between grace and nature; the latter concerns *reality*, the

[24] Within a Catholic context – which is not that of most of the *Radical Orthodoxy* authors – I'd also want to emphasise the conherence between McCabe's position and that of the Vatican II constitution *Gaudium et Spes*.

[25] One confusion at play here often seems to be the thought that because there is *actually* no such thing as pure nature, we cannot talk about pure nature. But this simply misses the possibility that we can talk *counterfactually* about pure nature (and that there might be a use in so doing).

former our *talk and thought* about that reality. Now, even if we cannot point to some aspects of our lives or polities and assign them to the box 'nature', whilst putting others into a tub marked 'grace',[26] it may still be – indeed it obviously is the case – that I can talk truthfully about human societies in purely rational terms, without appeal to the contents of revelation. It is just true that racism is wrong or that the dollar/ stirling exchange rate is presently unfavourable. The fact that I don't need to have read the Bible to say or do these things is neither here nor there. And that is enough of a basis for me to have conversations, and make common cause, with people outside the Church, just as McCabe suggests.

5 Dwelling with the struggle

It is a commonplace observation that politics in Western capitalist societies are polarising. Movements of the far-right are on the rise in much of Europe. Extreme nationalists have access to governmental power in Poland and Hungary, for example; meanwhile Donald Trump won the US presidency on a right-wing programme described by many as populist.[27] On the left, figures such as Corbyn and Sanders, and movements such as Podemos and Syriza, have put forward programmes well to the left of traditional social democracy, whereas parties pursuing more centrist programmes have suffered at the polls. Within Britain, beyond the left-right split, division on the basis of how people voted in the EU referendum continues to define positions and dominate debate.

In circumstances such as these it is unsurprising that there have been calls for Christians to act as a unifying force, bringing people together and dampening down tensions. It can almost go unquestioned that this is the proper Christian response to times like the present. The enduring value of McCabe's writing on classs struggle is precisely to question this. It is *not* obvious that Christians ought to attempt to pacify social struggle, both because in so doing they risk abandoning legitimate movements for justice, but also because conflict might be intrinsic to a particular social order, so that attempts to quieten it function to shore up the position of dominant groups. In such situations the role of the Christian, committed to human flourishing and the ending of relationships of domination, is to take sides, joining with the dominated group in the hope of ending the struggle through winning it. Whilst doing this, of course, the Christian must also hold view her fight as relative, to be seen in the context of God's coming Kingdom. In the end, human salvation comes as a gift, secured through the death and resurrection of Christ. Far from depriving the urge for social change of motivation, however, this promised gift assures us that God has declared himself for humanity and gives us every reason to fight for its flourishing.

McCabe's insight that joining this fight will very often involve taking sides in human conflicts is an essential one at a time like the present. Of course - to an-

[26] Which we assuredly cannot because, as McCabe tirelessly insisted, God is not an agent within the world such that we could neatly delineate his gracious action.

[27] In actual fact, I think the label 'populist' is at best unhelpful and at worst dangerous, but that is how Trump (and, for that matter, Sanders) are often described.

ticipate a criticism at this point – it can sometimes be difficult to identify *which* side is the correct one to side with. It is perhaps rather less difficult, however, than some people suggest (and remember that McCabe, following Marx, didn't throw in his lot with the working class because he thought they were better people, more deserving, or otherwise morally noteworthy, but rather because he believed that their victory uniquely would end the class struggle). But at the end of the day, such is political life: one has to reflect, throw oneself into the struggle, reflect some more, and so on: 'beautiful souls' exempt themselves from this process at the cost of serving the *status quo*.

Yet it is not the details of McCabe's social analysis and prescription that are most valuable to us, profoundly sympathetic to them though I am. Instead the aspect of his legacy which we most urgently need to receive consists in undermining a certain picture of Christian political engagement, one which has become increasingly commonplace in churches in recent years. McCabe talks us out of supposing that the role of Christians in politics must always be to work for immediate cohesion, calling on people to give up their disputes and come together. He reminds us that peace is an eschatological gift; he invites us to look carefully at our society and see that conflict is intrinsic to it. In other words he urges us to see the truth about the Kingdom and the truth about the world. Other voices might sound more comforting, but if they are not truthful that comfort is hollow.

The theme of false prophets crying peace where there is no peace recurs in the Old Testament, not only in Jeremiah but also in Ezekiel. McCabe's view is much like Ezekiel's; those proclaiming an easy peace are not to be trusted. Indeed their counsel will lead to ruin:

> They have misled my people, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear whitewash on it. Say to those who smear whitewash on it that it shall fall.[28]

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