



Dominican Ditchling and Herbert McCabe's Sacramental Politics: Backwards to a Radical Future

Nick O'Brien 

Abstract

This article reconsiders the lay Dominican community of artisans which gathered in Ditchling, Sussex, in the 1920s. It does so by situating Ditchling in its distinctively Dominican context and by relating it to a form of sacramental politics powerfully evoked in the work of Herbert McCabe OP. In this way, it aims to reaffirm the continuing political-theological relevance of aspects of Ditchling, and to assert a measure of continuity with the Catholic New Left of the 1960s, with which Herbert McCabe is associated. The article identifies Ditchling's distinctively Dominican charism in a concern for contemplation, liturgy, and the regular life, alongside an aesthetic that brings together art, sacrament, and preaching, and relates such priorities to wider debate within the Dominican Order. These concerns are related to themes in McCabe's work on the relationship between Church, world, and community within the broader context of a theological politics that is both radical and sacramental. The article concludes that Ditchling's perceived 'otherworldliness' deserves re-evaluation, and that in the light of McCabe's sacramental politics Ditchling was not, in fact, quite 'otherworldly' enough.

Keywords

Ditchling – Dominicans, McCabe, sacramental politics, Catholic New Left

Introduction

The Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic, established in 1920 on Ditchling Common in Sussex by Hilary Pepler and Eric Gill, still attracts widespread interest as a cultural phenomenon. The sculpture of Eric Gill continues to be well represented in London collections and exhibitions; appreciation of the painting and poetry of David Jones, who moved to Ditchling in 1921 and became a postulant in the Guild, has

been enhanced by a recent biography; and the renovated Ditchling Museum of Arts and Crafts has heightened awareness of less well known figures, including Pepler and Valentine KilBride, whilst also securing the community's relevance for a new generation sympathetic to 'the simple life'.¹ Literary evocation of figures associated with Ditchling has also gathered pace: novelists A.S. Byatt and Owen Sheers have depicted characters based on Gill and Jones, and American writer Rob Magnuson Smith has conjured a fictional Ditchling replete with ghostly visitors from times past and macabre local eccentricity.² These various treatments of 'the Ditchling thing' point to its contradictions and its enduring fascination. Ancient and modern, innocent and tainted, retrospective and futuristic, 'Ditchling' is revealed as 'a concept or mystique', not just 'the place-name it co-opted'³, whose metaphorical reach extends far beyond the Sussex Downs, even to Vincent McNabb OP's 'Babylondon', the very heart of metropolitan culture.

By comparison, the political and theological significance of Ditchling attracts relatively little attention. Insofar as it does so at all, it is largely cast as a late and otherworldly manifestation of the Arts and Crafts movement with a neo-scholastic and Distributist gloss, a curious coalition of Ruskin and Morris, Chesterton and Belloc, and Jacques Maritain.⁴ Yet the recognition of Ditchling as the serious attempt of a community of Catholic laity to engage 'spiritually' with the material world deserves renewed consideration. Such renewal can be achieved by a narrowing and a widening of focus: the narrowing of focus entails the placing of Ditchling in its Dominican context; the widening, its interpretation as a form of sacramental politics that is not easily confined within a simple church-world dichotomy, nor easily labelled conserva-

¹ Judith Collins, *Eric Gill: the Sculpture* (London: Herbert Press Ltd, 1998); Thomas Dilworth, *David Jones: Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017); Joanna Moorhead, 'Back to the Future', in *The Tablet*, 19 October 2019.

² A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book* (London: Vintage, 2010); Owen Sheers, *Resistance* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007); Rob Magnuson Smith, *Scorper* (London: Granta, 2014).

³ Mary Ellen Evans, 'Man Out of Balance: Some Problems with Gill and the New Gill Biography', *The Chesterton Review* 8(1982), p. 317.

⁴ On Ditchling, Fiona MacCarthy, *Eric Gill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989); Donald Attwater, *A Cell of Good Living: The Life, Works and Opinions of Eric Gill* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969); Robert Speaight, *The Life of Eric Gill* (London: Methuen, 1966); Aidan Nichols OP, *Dominican Gallery: Portrait of a Culture* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1997), pp. 343-352; 'The English Dominican Social Tradition', in Francesco Compagnoni OP and Helen Alford OP (eds.) *Preaching Justice: Dominican Contributions to Social Ethics in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2007) pp. 407-416; *Redeeming Beauty: Soundings in Sacral Aesthetics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 125-142; Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 45-90; Timothy Wilcox (ed.), *Eric Gill and the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic* (Brighton: Hove Museum and Art Gallery, 1990); Ruth Cribb and Joe Cribb, *Eric Gill and Ditchling: the workshop tradition* (Ditchling: Ditchling Museum, 2007); Derek Shiel (ed.) *David Jones in Ditchling* (Ditchling: Ditchling Museum, 2003).

tive or progressive. A valuable resource for such a task is the sacramental politics of Herbert McCabe OP: although the Catholic New Left of the 1960s with which his name is associated scarcely acknowledged any serious continuity with Ditchling, McCabe's concern with communication, politics, and sacrament resonates with Ditchling's attempt to construct meaningful community, and in a way that maintains solidarity with the Dominican tradition of social and political critique.⁵ Ditchling on this account, instead of being too otherworldly, turns out to have been not otherworldly enough.

Dominican Ditchling

Contemplation, liturgy and the regular life

An account of the Dominican shaping of Ditchling begins, and frequently ends, with the central role of Vincent McNabb OP, whose 'back to the land' version of the good life combined support for *Rerum Novarum* 'with bucolic Romanticism of the English literary tradition'.⁶ Gill's meeting with McNabb in Edinburgh in June 1914, shortly before he became Prior of the Dominican study house at Hawkesyard, has been described as both 'momentous' and 'providential'.⁷ The influence was reciprocal, the impact of Gill and Pepler on McNabb every bit as important as his on them. Yet Gill was clear also about the significance of the Dominicans more generally in shaping the Ditchling vision: 'the influence of the Dominicans and of their teaching must take a decisive place', he remarked in his *Autobiography*.⁸ Later observers have shared that assessment: it was 'the Dominican vocation that was central to Ditchling'.⁹

A guide to Dominican life for the early members of the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic was a short book held in the Guild's library,

⁵ On Herbert McCabe, Nichols, *Preaching Justice* pp. 426-435; Jay P. Corrin, *Catholic Progressives in England after Vatican II* (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 2013), pp. 302-316; 'The English Catholic New Left and Liberation Theology', in *Journal of Church and State* 59 (2015) pp. 43-58; Denys Turner, 'The Price of Truth: Herbert McCabe on Love, Politics and Death', in *New Blackfriars* 98 (2016), pp. 5-18; Simon Hewitt, 'Not Crying Peace: The Theological Politics of Herbert McCabe', in *New Blackfriars* 99 (2018), pp. 740-755; Eugene McCarragher, 'Radical OP: Herbert McCabe's Revolutionary Faith', in *Commonweal* 8 October, 2010, pp. 12-16; 'We Communists of the Old School', in Adrian Pabst (ed.) *The Crisis of Global Capitalism: Pope Benedict XVI's Social Encyclical and the Future of Political Economy* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), pp. 89-120.

⁶ Aidan Nichols, 'Vincent McNabb 1868-1943, an Anniversary Commemoration', *New Blackfriars* 100(2019), p. 392.

⁷ Fiona MacCarthy, op.cit; Donald Attwater, op.cit.

⁸ Eric Gill, *Autobiography* (London: Lund Humphries, 1992), p. 213.

⁹ Mary Ellen Evans, 'Man Out of Balance: Some Problems with Gill and the New Gill Biography', *The Chesterton Review* 8(1982), p. 317.

entitled *The Conventual Third Order of St Dominic* (1923), introduced by John Baptist Reeves OP, author also of *The Dominicans* (1929).¹⁰ In both, Reeves emphasises the primacy of contemplation in the Dominican life. St Dominic was ‘a contemplative primarily and by choice’: although preaching (i.e., ‘the communication of contemplation to others – *contemplata aliis tradere*’) might be the *distinctive* characteristic of the Dominican vocation, its *fundamental* characteristic is by contrast the ‘contemplation of Divine Truth’.¹¹ The laity of the Third Order may live ‘in the world’, but they are nevertheless ‘included in a true participation of the graces of the monastic state’.¹² The ‘tendency’ in the Dominican Tertiary towards the ‘regular life’ is therefore a ‘powerful means towards the end – contemplation’.¹³

This prioritisation of contemplation and the regular life reflects a broader internal debate about the identity of the Dominican Order in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That the community at Ditchling was well aware of that continuing controversy is apparent from Gill’s reference in correspondence to *Ex Umbris* (1920), a collection of letters and other Dominican materials edited by Raymund Devas OP at Hawkesyard.¹⁴ *Ex Umbris* tells the story of the division within the re-established Dominican Order in France in the mid-nineteenth century between the supporters of the liberal Henri-Dominique Lacordaire OP and those of Alexandre-Vincent Jandel OP, who as Master General advocated a form of strict observance. As Devas makes clear, his sympathies lie with Jandel and his *Primitive Constitutions*. There are lessons, Devas suggests, for ‘all monastic orders’: the world may want ‘accommodation and compromise’, but what it needs is ‘just the plain example of religious life’.¹⁵

As Allan White OP has observed, in the nineteenth century the whole English Province had sided with Jandel. Whilst Lacordaire wanted to modify observance so that the friars could respond more freely to other demands, Jandel ‘clung tenaciously to the ideal of the *Primitive*

¹⁰ John Baptist Reeves OP, ‘Introductory Note’, in *The Conventual Third Order of St Dominic And its Development in England By a Dominican of Stone* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1923); *The Dominicans* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1929); Ewan Clayton, ‘David Jones and the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic’, in Shiel (ed.) *David Jones in Ditchling*, p. 19.

¹¹ John Baptist Reeves OP, *The Conventual Third Order*, p. vii-xiii.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Walter Shewring, ed. *Letters of Eric Gill* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), p. 154; Raymund Devas OP ed., *Ex Umbris: Letters and Papers of Lacordaire, Jandel, Danzas* (Hawkesyard: 1920).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 10.

Constitution'.¹⁶ In the end, such rigour proved uncongenial to the English Province's leadership under Bede Jarrett OP and impractical except 'in the houses of study, which were tucked away in the country, shielded from the demands of the modern world'.¹⁷ One such was Hawkesyard, which wholeheartedly supported the reforms of Jandel and 'became almost Cistercian in its way of life and outlook', retaining into the twentieth century a strong commitment to conventual structure, with the chanting of the divine office throughout the day culminating in compline and procession to the accompaniment of the sung *Salve Regina*.¹⁸

Gill's correspondence, his conversion to Catholicism after hearing Gregorian chant at the Benedictine Abbey of Mont Cesar in Louvain in 1912, and his later dalliance with the Benedictines of Caldey Island in 1922, confirms his attraction to the regular monastic life. The Dominican charism he considered the 'bringing back of the world' to St Benedict.¹⁹ In February 1922 he revealed that he was reading *The Ideal of the Monastic Life (1914)* by Dom Germain Morin OSB and finding much interest there in the contrast drawn between ancient and modern spirituality.²⁰ Morin regrets in particular the way in which 'the nearer we come to modern times, the less we find the liturgical life understood'.²¹ He is therefore at pains to discount any modern tendency towards utilitarianism in liturgical matters and to reinstate the centrality of communal chant, gesture, and ritual.²² In speaking more specifically of the difference between ancient and modern spirituality, Morin explains that contemplation is mistakenly considered in modern times 'only the exceptional privilege of certain souls in a higher state of grace', and by implication not readily available to lay people.²³ This rigid system, with its hierarchical structure, was not the way of St Benedict.²⁴ Morin makes 'contemplation' available to all, 'the state to which God, in certain measure, calls every soul that seeks Him'.²⁵

Gill was especially impressed by the close relationship disclosed by Morin between conventional forms of spirituality and art. Morin, Gill suggests, offers a 'very good comment on our thesis: that modern

¹⁶ Allan White OP, 'Fr Bede Jarrett OP and the Renewal of the English Dominican Province', in Dominic Aidan Bellenger, *Essays in honour of Godfrey Ansthruther* (Downside Abbey Trustees: Downside, 1987), p. 220.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid; Nichols, *Dominican Gallery*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Gill, *Letters*, p. 181.

²⁰ Gill, *Letters*, p. 154; Dom Germain Morin, *The Ideal of the Monastic Life Found in the Apostolic age* (tr. C. Gunning), (London: R & T Washbourne Ltd, 1914).

²¹ Morin., p. 107.

²² Ibid. p. 114.

²³ Ibid. p. 129.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 134.

spirituality suffers in a way precisely parallel to that in which mod. art suffers'.²⁶ Just as 'conventional' art is preferable to 'representative' or naturalistic art, so 'conventional' prayer is preferable to 'representative' prayer. Yet, as with art, so with prayer, the contemporary situation is a reversal of that order of priority. As a result, 'it has come to be supposed that the conventional, the hieratic, the formal, is a dead thing and that there is life only in the naturalistic and idiosyncratic'.²⁷

The analogy with artistic practice holds true: just as it is impossible to paint a good picture by learning a 'method' and instead necessary to 'fall in love with God first and last', so in spiritual matters it is impossible to 'walk with God' by adopting a 'method'. Instead, the way to know God in prayer is to wait upon Him in contemplation 'as upon a lover - singing beneath His window - waiting for Him in the snow'.²⁸ For Gill, the connection with the Dominican charism is clear and a necessary prompt to ensuring that in Ditchling the recital of the Divine Office is 'more firmly established'.²⁹

Crucial to the proposed realisation of the regular life at Ditchling was the establishment of the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic in 1920 as a medium of community and 'holy work'.³⁰ Having first encountered McNabb in 1914, Gill, his wife Mary, Pepler and Desmond Chute, were admitted as Dominican Tertiaries in July 1918, with Gill and Pepler making their final profession at Hawkesyard in January 1919 (in the presence of a rather reluctant Stanley Spencer).³¹ In Leicester, McNabb had already pioneered in 1908 a lay community of women, which eventually became the *Guild of Corpus Christi*.³² When the Guild was founded at Ditchling in 1920 it was a requirement that all members should also become Dominican Tertiaries.

In keeping with the contemplative and liturgical vision, most of the early work of the Guild was devotional, hieratic in style, for liturgical use: wood engravings of Dominican saints; the printing of mass sheets, ordination cards, psalms, and canticles. Pepler even published a play based on the life of St Dominic.³³ At the heart of the community was the chapel, quickly built to replace the Gills' kitchen which had formerly served for community worship. Each day the community said the *Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary* according to the Dominican rite. For Gill, the religious life was in essence the monastic life, 'a

²⁶ Gill, *Letters*, p. 154.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 154.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 155.

³⁰ Wilcox (ed.), *Eric Gill and the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic*.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 126.

³² Reeves, *The Conventual Third Order*, p. 8.

³³ Hilary Pepler, *Saint Dominic: Scenes from the life of the saint in the form of a play* (Ditchling: St Dominic's Press, 1929).

self-consciously arduous programme', with no lay equivalent in the history of the Dominicans in England.³⁴ Hilary Pepler's son, Conrad Pepler OP, later observed of his Ditchling childhood that the community life there resembled as much as possible the regular life of a Dominican priory.³⁵ As Gill remarked, a 'healthy life is a religious life, and a religious life is a conventional life – a liturgical life'.³⁶

Art, sacrament and preaching

Ditchling was first of all a community of artists and craft-workers – sculptors, engravers, carpenters, weavers and printers. Their chief aesthetic inspiration, under McNabb's guidance, was Jacques Maritain's *Art et Scholastique*, translated by Fr John O'Connor and published by *St Dominic's Press*. In Gill's favoured vocabulary, meaningful creative work is 'heraldic' rather than naturalistic. 'Heraldic' work entails the maker's immersion, objectively, in the tradition rather than subjective self-expression. Heraldic work is in turn symbolic and participates in God. Such participation cannot be achieved except 'heraldically' or 'conventionally'.³⁷ A creed is 'an intellectual convention' in just the same way as liturgical worship is 'conventional worship'. In art, 'convention' is sacramental, the 'enshrining of the universal in the particular, so that in a conventional rose all roses are resumed'.³⁸ All works of art are 'acts of worship in which it is necessary that both the artist and beholder take part'.³⁹

David Jones, who joined the Ditchling community in 1921, would later offer in his *Art and Sacrament* the most comprehensive, and influential, account of this burgeoning aesthetic theory and its intimacy with a distinctively sacramental sensibility, with particular appreciation of the importance of art as 'sign': a work of art is not an act of representation but rather the '*re-presentation*' of one thing under the form of another, such as paint or stone (or indeed bread and wine); and to that extent it shares in the sacramental economy, as a sign that makes real what it signifies.⁴⁰ When receiving the Hawthornden Prize for *In Parenthesis* in 1938, Jones summarised the objective of the post-Impressionist artist, like that of the priest, as the 'making of an object

³⁴ MacCarthy, *Eric Gill*, p. 146.

³⁵ Nichols, *Dominican Gallery*, p. 345.

³⁶ Eric Gill, 'Songs without Clothes' (1921), in *Art Nonsense and Other Essays* by Eric Gill (London: Cassell & Co., 1929), p. 58.

³⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 31, 53.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 53.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 58.

⁴⁰ David Jones, 'Art and Sacrament: An Enquiry', in ed. Elizabeth Pakenham, *Catholic Approaches* (London: Ebenezer Bayliss & Son Ltd., 1955).

with its own way of behaviour; not so much to describe, imitate, or represent, but rather...to show anew under another species some already existing reality'. The creative act, like the sacramental act, makes 'substantially and really present in one's medium what already is', completing 'in a ritual manner what has already been done...'.⁴¹

Gill's *Introduction* to O'Connor's translation of Maritain announces the surprising social therapy at the heart of the Ditchling project and on which his own later 'preaching' is centred: the English people, 'heated by... the White Man's Burden of over production' require 'cooling medicine' to recover from 'the appalling results of industrialism' and factory production.⁴² As Gill concedes, a 'book about Art would seem to be an ineffectual drug with which to combat so mortal a disease'.⁴³ Yet the Ditchling conception of 'art' is more capacious and democratic than supposed, 'for the whole business of Making is involved'.⁴⁴ Instead of fetishizing individual genius in the manner of the Renaissance, Ditchling finds in community and traditional forms of 'making' a complexity of aesthetic space. By valorising both maker and thing made, it resists the reduction of the creative project to one of mere 'representation'. The human vocation as one of 'making' rather than 'doing' or 'representing' is central to Ditchling: the artist is not a special kind of person but rather every person a special kind of artist.

For Gill and Pepler in their different ways, there lay ahead a vocation of preaching, in stone and word, a creed of freedom and responsibility in 'making'. From the Ditchling understanding of human creativity there follows a rich appreciation of work, boatbuilding as much as the making of a poem or a sculpture. Gill argued that 'the factory system is unchristian primarily because it deprives workmen (*sic*) of responsibility for their work'.⁴⁵ Instead of following the Christian precept that life and work exist 'primarily in order that we may glorify God', in a factory, where the division of labour holds sway, 'men (*sic*) simply work for their wages, the masters (*sic*) for their profit'.⁴⁶ Workers become 'slaves' and the 'modern factory system' just as 'servile' as 'the pagan system of slavery'.⁴⁷

Pepler's first collaboration in Hammersmith with Gill, even before 'the exodus' to Ditchling, was *The Devil's Devices or Control versus*

⁴¹ Dilworth, *David Jones* p. 200.

⁴² Eric Gill, Introduction, in Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays* (tr. Joseph O'Connor) (Ditchling: St Dominic's Press, 1921), p. i.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. ii.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Eric Gill, 'The Factory System and Christianity', in *In a Strange Land: Essays by Eric Gill* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944), p. 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Service (1915), for which Gill provided woodcut illustrations.⁴⁸ There, Pepler, who had been one of the first of London County Council's new breed of social workers to be deployed in supporting neglected children, expressed the anti-state feeling that led him to abandon his career and that animated much of the Ditchling project, making it fertile ground for adoption of McNabb's distinctively rural form of Distributism. The 'devices' of the title attributed to the Devil include all the encroachments on individual freedom supposedly perpetrated by the Education Act of 1902 and by Lloyd George's Insurance Act of 1911. State-funded education, state welfare, state pensions and state healthcare are rejected by Pepler as sources of 'slavery' characterised by committees, forms, centralised organisation and regulation. Within these structures bureaucratic 'slaves' will do everything on behalf of the state, from digging graves to 'watching cradles', all with the effect of creating an 'efficient life' for ordinary folk – state bureaucracy, not religion, as the opiate of the people. Gill (with strong echoes of Ruskin, whose example he acknowledged in a speech in Ruskin's memory in 1934)⁴⁹ expressed similar sentiments in his *Slavery and Freedom* (1918): the free person is the one who 'does what he wants at work and what he has to do in his leisure time', precisely the opposite of the system under the 'leisure state'.⁵⁰

The political creed expounded by Pepler and Gill amounts to rejection of both capitalism and secular socialism, of those who 'accept the capitalist system as an unpleasant necessity', and those who favour its conversion into 'that still more impersonal and nebulous system called State ownership'.⁵¹ In their neglect of self-mastery as an ambition, social reformers had settled for too little, squandering outright the possibility of freedom from state control, ownership of the means of production, and the exercise of responsibility in 'making', settling instead for the drudgery of 'doing'.⁵² As Gill consistently emphasised, the remedy was revolution, not mere reform; and the revolution he had in mind was Christianity.⁵³

Gill and Pepler were throughout their lives occasional contributors to *Blackfriars*, an aspect of their persistence in the lay Dominican vocation, long after the early dream of Ditchling had faded and Gill had moved on. Gill's first contribution in 1920 was an essay on his recently completed *Stations of the Cross* for Westminster Cathedral. His last

⁴⁸ H.D.C. Pepler, *The Devils Devices, or Control versus Service* (London: Hampshire House Workshops, 1915).

⁴⁹ Eric Gill, 'John Ruskin', in *In a Strange Land: Essays by Eric Gill* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944).

⁵⁰ Eric Gill, 'Slavery and Freedom', in *Art-Nonsense and Other Essays* (London: Cassell & Co Ltd, & Francis Walterston, 1929), p. 1.

⁵¹ Pepler, *Devil's Devices*, p. 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Donald Attwater, *Eric Gill: Workman* (London: James Clarke & Co Ltd, 1941), Ch.2.

contribution, in 1937, was in effect a final restatement of his manifesto for the relief of the 'social problem', published more widely later as *The Stations of the Cross and Social Justice*.⁵⁴ It is a diatribe against 'hypocrisy' and 'privilege', against the rich who sought power by 'grinding the poor', 'defrauding the labourer', 'buying cheap and selling dear', 'producing for profit rather than use', putting 'money before good work'; nor does it spare church leaders, bishops in particular. It is, in other words, vintage Gill. At its centre is a collapsing of time and space, a summons to shared participation in, and contemplation of, an event, the Crucifixion, which is 'not merely a thing of the past' but which 'is as much happening now as then'. The space into which Gill invites the viewer is complex, since 'we must act bodily as well as spiritually' and not just 'see intellectually': it is, as he puts it, 'the sacramental act'.⁵⁵

Herbert McCabe's Sacramental Politics

Slavery, freedom and communication

Although Herbert McCabe OP has been identified as a forerunner of liberation theology, before he ever discovered Marx he was familiar with Belloc's *The Servile State*.⁵⁶ As Fergus Kerr OP observed in *Slant* in 1966, the chief limitation of the Distributist movement was that it simply was not 'total and radical enough'.⁵⁷ McCabe's analysis of the failings of industrial capitalism, not surprisingly, therefore, has strong echoes of Belloc, and indeed of Ruskin and Gill. As he explains, the Christian 'reaches out beyond this world towards a future world of freedom, towards real communication... and... full human life'.⁵⁸ The freedom he has in mind is not the 'individual autonomy bestowed on us by the industrial society', where 'the field of obligation has been reduced to that of work'.⁵⁹ In the secular city, the citizen must do whatever is required during work time but remains free during non-work 'leisure' time to do whatever she pleases. In such a society, the city or state 'takes no official notice of anything except secular work-relationships and professes indifference to how its citizens play or paint or love or pray or speak with each other'.⁶⁰ All these non-work

⁵⁴ Eric Gill, *Social Justice & The Stations of the Cross* (London: James Clarke & Co Ltd, 1939).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Jay P. Corrin, *Catholic Progressives*, p. 364.

⁵⁷ Fergus Kerr, 'Christianity and the liberal vision', in *Slant* 9 (1966), p. 15.

⁵⁸ Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love and Language* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 156.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p. 157.

activities are both free and sacred, insofar as they transcend activities that are regulated by social utility.

Under such a state of affairs, ‘progress’ amounts merely to reducing as far as possible, by such means as automation, the proportion of a citizen’s life that is spent in ‘the slavery of work’. For McCabe, this negative notion of freedom, ‘freedom from restraint’, is not enough. Instead, ‘Freedom fundamentally means being able to give oneself and thereby realise oneself; a free society is a set of media in which people are able to be open to each other, to love each other without fear’.⁶¹ The liberal society, by contrast, protects certain leisure activities from interference, but ‘at the cost of separating them off from the other media of communication in the society’, such as production and government.⁶² The challenge is not to extend the areas of autonomy, ‘which in the end means irresponsibility’, but rather to ‘transform media of domination into media of communication, media of self-assertion into media of self-expression’.⁶³

Politics, sacrament and eschatology

It would be naïve, McCabe argues, to suppose that such a task can be achieved in full without a ‘revolution’, a form of ‘transfiguration’ that ‘reaches down to the depths of our bodily life’.⁶⁴ It does not follow that Christians have no political role in ‘the world’ and should instead ‘retire into themselves and cultivate their inner lives’.⁶⁵ On the contrary, the social revolution needed to transform the media of communication is a precursor to the final revolution of death and resurrection, the final emptying out of self. The ‘relevance of Christianity’ to human behaviour is not so much a matter of ‘individual salvation’ but of politics: it is concerned first of all with ‘media of communication, the structures of relationship’ within which human beings live.⁶⁶

As McCabe frequently insisted, the best image of such a society based on communication rather than domination is not the market but ‘friendship’, involving what Aquinas calls *communicatio* (sharing), and the New Testament calls *koinonia* (sharing a common life). Friendship is quite simply ‘a matter of being *with* others’.⁶⁷ Yet friendship (*philia*) is not the end of the story: the earthly *polis* can only ever be ‘a shadow

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 158.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid. pp. 158-9.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 159.

⁶⁵ Ibid. pp. 159-60.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 162.

⁶⁷ Herbert McCabe, *On Aquinas* (ed. Brian Davies), (London: Burns & Oates, 2008), p. 54.

of the Kingdom', which is also based on friendship but in this instance *agape*, 'the friendship that God grants to us in his grace'.⁶⁸ *Philia*, and other expressions of political friendship, such as human rights, are not on this account diminished in their importance but rather validated as expressions of value in human history, the 'time in-between',⁶⁹ the time *in parenthesis*: and so, for example, human rights 'foreshadow' in a 'non-sacramental way the coming of the Kingdom, as the Church does in a sacramental way'.⁷⁰ Moreover, what is foreshadowed is the future unity of humanity, not the unity of the Church, or of a particular human society at any point in history: 'if the sacramental life is the social cement that binds together a particular society, it is merely in the way that festivals and games and a common culture bind it together'.⁷¹

The binding together of a particular society in a common culture was indeed one of the chief ambitions of the secular New Left. As Terry Eagleton explained in 1968, Raymond Williams' notion of a common culture did not, as with T.S. Eliot, entail the imposition of a monolithic 'high' culture, but rather common participation in the creation of a culture that is also to be held in common.⁷² Such is the task of the secular socialist. For the Christian socialist, McCabe observed, things are not so simple and require the transcendence of that limited horizon: 'The Christian socialist, as I see her, is more complex, more ironic, than her non-Christian colleagues, because her eye is also on the ultimate future, on the future that is attained by weakness, through and beyond the struggle to win the immediate fight'.⁷³

The way in which the Christian socialist has contact with that future eschatological horizon is by participation in the sacramental life. At the heart of the sacramental life, at the 'centre of sacramental language', is the Eucharist, which 'displays the revolutionary character of social life', the true 'significance of all eating and drinking together, all sharing of life, all community'.⁷⁴ More than that, this 'realist' understanding of the Eucharist both 'proclaims the revolutionary significance of all human efforts towards community' and, crucially, entails that 'the future world is made present to us'.⁷⁵ As McCabe concludes, 'To speak of the real presence to us of Christ, our future life, in the Eucharistic meal, and to speak of our presence to our future life, is to present two

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 105.

⁶⁹ Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters* (ed. Brian Davies) (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 91.

⁷⁰ McCabe, *On Aquinas*, p. 156.

⁷¹ McCabe, *God Still Matters*, p. 89.

⁷² Terry Eagleton, 'The Idea of a Common Culture', in eds. Terry Eagleton and Brian Wicker, *From Culture to Revolution* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), pp. 35-57.

⁷³ McCabe, *God Still Matters*, p. 91.

⁷⁴ McCabe, *Law, Love and Language*, p. 148.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 149.

aspects of the same truth'.⁷⁶ The intensifying, or complexification, of time and space is fundamental to this 'parenthetical', sacramental human era: 'The things that are said *metaphorically* of Israel and *literally* of Christ are said *sacramentally* of the Church'.⁷⁷ To that extent, the Church is 'nothing but the community which sacramentally foreshadows the life for which God has destined' the human race, a 'living picture of the unity that God has in store'.⁷⁸ Yet just as for Gill a work of art is more than a photographic 'representation' of a present reality, so too the Church and its sacraments, the 'mysteries' of the Church, 'do not simply show forth something in the future, they also partially realize something that is present'.⁷⁹

Community, Church and world

These reflections, drawn from McCabe's published sermons and essays over many years, circle around the underlying question of how the Church relates to the world, and of how the sacraments are not just channels of grace but constitutive of the life of the Church. That underlying question is addressed in especially concrete form in McCabe's earlier published writings, in the journal *Slant*.⁸⁰ There, that question finds expression in the practical problem that Christians seem to belong to two communities - the Church and the human race - and can become confused as a result. Whilst it is true that the Church is a community, it is only so in a secondary sense and as a 'movement' within another community, the community of humankind.⁸¹ Furthermore, shared space, or shared activity, are not enough to establish community: there is, for example, no such thing as a community of dominoes or of wolves.⁸² What is required is a common use of signs. The signs that constitute the community that is the Church are the sacraments, and the Church is the 'custodian' of those signs, like a poet is the custodian of the English language. Such custodianship, however, can, like poetry or Eliot's high culture, become a minority affair just for those who appreciate it: in that case, the Church can slip into the illusion that it exists for the sake of Christians.⁸³

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 150.

⁷⁷ Herbert McCabe, *The New Creation* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 25.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. xii.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Herbert McCabe, 'Politics and Community', in *Slant* 5 (1965) pp. 9-11; 'God the Future', in *Slant* 26 (1969) pp. 3-9; 'Priesthood and Revolution', in *Slant* 27 (1969) pp. 3-11.

⁸¹ McCabe, *Priesthood and Revolution*, p. 5.

⁸² McCabe, *Politics and Community*, p. 9.

⁸³ Ibid. p. 10.

As a result of this confusion, Christians may simply try to solve the problem by manoeuvring so that both communities consist of the same people, like in an Irish village in the 1950s, or by creating artificial social groups of Christians which can falsely be ‘correlated with the Eucharistic community’, Christian associations of various sorts that simply duplicate secular ones. It becomes a matter then either of ‘Prayers for the Conversion of England’, or ‘Prayers for Our Schools’.⁸⁴ The real solution, McCabe suggests, is something more difficult to achieve: ‘a more sophisticated sense of belonging to one social community’, of being able to feel we belong socially to the strangers we meet, whether at church or elsewhere, ‘because they are members with us of one political community’.⁸⁵ In that case, the Eucharistic community can be seen to be correlated ‘not with any local grouping whether regional or professional, but with the political unity of a whole society’.⁸⁶ It follows that ‘the bishop or priest is not a man with a special job to do in the church; he is a man with a special job to do in the world’, a world moreover which is the *kosmos* of St John’s Gospel, a ‘dominative style of society’ rather than a society yet based on *philia* and *agape*.⁸⁷ That future society, ‘God the human future’, will be realised primarily in the *anawim*, the dispossessed and outcasts, and otherwise by self-dispossession and the acceptance of death.⁸⁸ The sacraments are the imagery in which the Church speaks of and symbolises that future, and provides a foretaste of it.

In these earlier publications, McCabe in effect sums up the essential elements of what would become a more nuanced political theology in his later preaching. The interpenetration of nature and grace, spirit and matter, Church and world, theology and politics; the future unity of humankind; the sacramental economy, especially the Eucharistic community, as the sign and foretaste of that future – these then are the primary marks of McCabe’s sacramental politics.

McCabe Sings The Blues: Re-Narrating Ditchling

Evasion, division and otherworldliness

It is easy to dismiss Ditchling as an anachronism, even in its own day an expression of pastoral nostalgia, otherworldliness and self-delusion. In sociological terms, Ditchling appears a dissident enclave, scandalously

⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 11.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ McCabe, *Priesthood and Revolution*, p. 6.

⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 8.

convenient cover for patriarchal and sexual exploitation.⁸⁹ Hilary Pepler's daughter, Susan Falkner, recalls the way in which the men sat around discussing ideas whilst the women made do and tried to feed and clothe their families.⁹⁰ Her own mother, Clare Pepler, a talented artist, was excluded from membership of the Guild and from any form of creative activity.⁹¹ When the children went to school they found themselves ill-prepared for the outside world.⁹² Even the village of Ditchling was socially distant from life on the Common, where superior attitudes prevailed and the liberal non-Catholic mores of the village were anathema.⁹³ The distinguished calligrapher Edward Johnston had been an early casualty of the religious exclusivism of the Common, abandoning Gill and Pepler for the less religiously febrile village. As Susan Falkner has recalled, most of the 'Ditchling wives' could not have cared less about Thomism and Distributism. Typical in that regard was Mrs Maxwell, who had made the reluctant exodus from the industrial Midlands to the rural retreat of Ditchling - but husband George Maxwell, carpenter and weaver, was 'a great one for St Thomas'.⁹⁴

From a theological perspective, Ditchling at first glance appears to conform to a standard narration of pre-Vatican II Catholicism and its flight from the world. Such a narrative portrays enclaves like Ditchling as a huddling together in Catholic ghettos of like-minded folk, in retreat from pluralistic and democratic society, expressions of a 'sect-type' mentality in contrast to the 'church-type' that prevailed after Vatican II.⁹⁵ The latter by contrast seeks to live in the world, credited with its own autonomy, and to influence existing social structures from within. To such a mentality, Hilary Pepler's abandonment of a career as a social worker for a life as the Reeve of Ditchling Common, as printer and dramatist, appears little short of evasion. From the vantage point of progressive theology in the 1960s, the Catholic neo-scholastic culture which such experiments expressed more generally looked like 'the old mixture of Proudhonian mutualism and Maurassian hierarchy served up with papal sauce'.⁹⁶

⁸⁹ Susan Falkner, *A Ditchling Childhood 1916-1936* (Suffolk: Iceni Publications, 1994). On Gill's sexual activity, see MacCarthy, *Eric Gill*.

⁹⁰ Falkner, *Ditchling Childhood*, p. 25.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 25-26.

⁹² *Ibid.* p. 34.

⁹³ *Ibid.* pp. 34, 59.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 24.

⁹⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, *Field Hospital: The Church's Engagement with a Wounded World* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmann, 2016), pp. 39-40.

⁹⁶ Adrian Cunningham, 'Culture and Catholics: a historical analysis', in (eds.) Terry Eagleton and Brian Wicker, op.cit. p. 133.

Sacramental politics and the revolutionary human future

Yet such a narrative is in danger of discounting altogether concrete attempts in the past to connect religion to daily life and to resist dominant corporate systems, whether of the market or the state. Ditchling, despite its many serious limitations and evasions, represents such an attempt in a way that partially realises aspects of McCabe's sacramental politics and, when it fails to do so, nevertheless illustrates that falling-short in a way that is instructive.⁹⁷

First, Ditchling represents an unavoidable interweaving of theology and politics, of grace and nature, spirit and matter. From a form of neo-scholastic aesthetics in the work of Maritain, Gill in particular worked out a totalising interpretation of human purpose that engaged mind, body, and spirit in the quotidian and routine tasks of making. Such an approach entailed something of what McCabe called an 'overall view', a totalising critique that asked questions not just about what it means to be a good plumber or doctor, but about what it means to be a good human being, a person.⁹⁸ Moreover, Ditchling recognised that the answer to that question entailed concern with more than the individual and personal, and required instead an understanding of a whole society, an entire 'system', its work and play, its art and religion, its modes of production and consumption. Although Ditchling's expression of a particular monastic emphasis within the Dominican Order of the day looked at times like the implausible transference of religious perfectionism to the messy terrain of ordinary life, the adoption of the contemplative ideal and liturgical rhythms helped express aspects of sacred community that would otherwise have remained elusive.

Secondly, Ditchling was to that extent the realisation of genuine, albeit imperfect, community, of a culture shaped by shared networks of sign and friendship. Furthermore, the sacramental quality of that culture, its striving for participation through material sign in a deeper reality, amounted to more than the social cement of a particular society and instead pointed beyond itself to a future era of freedom and responsibility, of creative self-realisation, that would ground the transformation of a whole society, not just of the local gathering on Ditchling Common. Ditchling's vision was one not of the reform of industrial capitalism but of its revolutionary transformation. Within the tradition of English radicalism, it was an expression of 'Romantic sacramentalism'⁹⁹ of the sort articulated by Ruskin and Morris, Blake and Carpenter. Within the

⁹⁷ On sacramental politics, William T. Cavanaugh, 'Ecclesial Ethics and the Gospel Sine Glossa: Sacramental Politics and the Love of the World', in *Modern Theology* (2020), pp. 1-23.

⁹⁸ McCabe, *God the Future*, p. 4.

⁹⁹ Eugene McCarragher, *The Enchantment of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2019).

context of Christian engagement with politics conceived as something more than control of the state and democratic parliamentary elections, it was a foreshadowing of radical encounter that achieved later expression, albeit scarcely full realisation, in the Catholic New Left of the 1960s and in Liberation Theology.

Yet, thirdly, the concrete reality of Ditchling's endeavour remained one of division and exclusion, on grounds of gender, status and religion, a failure to achieve a genuinely connected society that reached beyond the workshop and the Common. The confusion about the nature of community to which Herbert McCabe alluded ensnared Ditchling as much as any other attempt to create a common culture that was not also a culture in common. Ditchling's pre-Vatican II vision ultimately rested upon theological foundations too fragile to support a sacramental politics rich enough to contain local division, let alone the future destiny of humankind. To that extent, its sacramental economy remained to some extent impoverished, the settling for a vision of the Church as a particular self-contained community first and foremost, rather than as a movement within a larger community that is nothing less than the future destiny of humankind itself. Ditchling's sacramental politics failed to go far enough: what it lacked, even in its sacramental and revolutionary aspects, was an 'overall' account of the world and the human condition capacious enough to transfigure the true depths of alienation; what was missing, in other words, was a fully eschatological framework.

In one of his *Slant* articles, written in 1969, Herbert McCabe observed that when Bessie Smith sang the Blues she was giving expression to a form of tragic humanism that eventually found full revolutionary expression in the Black Panther movement.¹⁰⁰ Yet it would be a mistake, he suggested, to think that the Blues were just a diversion from revolutionary activity and therefore devoid of enduring value. The Blues express a form of 'otherworldliness', a 'horizontal' form that is constrained to *create* another world, not a 'vertical' form that seeks to *think up* another world above this one as a means of consolation.¹⁰¹ The social absurdity to which the Blues are a response simply requires stronger medicine than the Blues can possibly administer. In a similar way, the social and political therapy offered by Ditchling was not quite strong enough. In its refusal to settle for social reform, Ditchling had indeed, and contrary to first impressions, rejected the blandishments of easy consolation and escapism. Yet its utopian vision, although a response to the tragic alienation it witnessed as a consequence of industrial capitalism, lacked fully redemptive power. The problem with Ditchling was not that it was too otherworldly; rather, in McCabe's sense, it was not otherworldly enough. Yet just as the project of

¹⁰⁰ McCabe, *God the Future*, p. 5.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* p. 6.

reaching deeper into the appreciation of the Blues remains valid, so past forms of radical community, however flawed, retain the power to provoke, and to affirm. Ditchling stands solidly within that radical tradition, as sign, and as partial but flawed realisation, of the future that it glimpsed.

Nick O'Brien
School of Law and Social Justice,
University of Liverpool

nick.obrien@ntlworld.com