

FAITH WITHIN REASON by Herbert McCabe OP (*Continuum*: London, 2007). Pp. xii +184, £14.99 pbk.

This is a book by the late Fr Herbert McCabe OP, of the English Province of the Order of Preachers; the fifth, I think, to be published since his death. If it is surprising that so many works should be published after his death, it is explained at least in part by his intense caution about putting his thoughts into print. This is in contrast to the exuberant conversationalist that he was, an exuberance often enough overflowing into recklessness, that we his fellow Dominicans and his numerous friends knew. Herbert (I refer to him by his first name, as a fellow Dominican would), is an excellent example of how the personality of the writer, and the personality displayed in writings can radically diverge.

Herbert the writer was exact, sometimes agonizingly so, he hesitated over every word that he was to deliver in print, and when he preached, he would need at least a week to prepare his sermon. Despite this, when he did preach, he preached with such verve that many who did not know him would afterwards praise him for his spontaneity. A minor reason for this hesitancy in writing may have been the scrapes he got into through a lack of caution in his earlier writings, in particular for *New Blackfriars*. The main reason though, it seems to me, was his desire, not so much to be accurate and exact in saying what he believed to be true, but more than that, it was a desire to convey that truth.

Herbert never forgot that he was a preacher, that it was his role in life to convey truths to those around him. To convey those truths, he first wished to understand what it was that others might believe, or assume, which could stand in the way of accepting these truths. So the first essay in the book, is called, 'Is belief wishful thinking?' turning a statement which he must have heard many times about belief, into a question, and a question which he answers by agreeing that faith is indeed a kind of wishful thinking, the point being that there are in fact more than one kind of wishful thinking. Chapter four, is entitled, 'Why God?' a question which he is, in effect, asking on behalf of the unbeliever, who is liable to feel that asking such a question would reduce his or her own disbelief to wishful thinking.

Where Herbert the speaker and Herbert the writer come together is in his love of paradox, a love which the editor of this book, Fr Brian Davies OP, speaks of in reference to Herbert's admiration for G.K. Chesterton. In conversation, Herbert could be willful in his use of paradox. The first time I met him, he was delighting in his thesis that Catholics in Northern Ireland quite enjoyed the 12th of July because they liked the music and felt quite unperturbed because they were sure of their final victory. Basically Herbert liked to annoy, and trusted his fellow conversationalists to come back at him. But in writing it is not so easy to respond, so it might seem that he would do well to avoid paradox. Yet paradox is more than a truth which seems untrue. It seems untrue for a reason, and for Chesterton the reason is that we were trying to understand the truth from the wrong direction. Chesterton's hero is St Peter who, being crucified upside down, sees the world from the right direction, where the sky is vaster than the earth, because it is. When Christ cures the paralysed man in Luke 5:26, the crowd say that they have seen *paradoxa* which means 'paradoxes'. The Pharisees ask a question ('How can this man forgive sin? Only God can forgive sin') not realising that they have answered their own question. This man can forgive sin because he is God, and God is forgiving sin because he is a man. In Chesterton's *Man Alive*, a character cables that a man has been found alive to his friends who struggle to understand the cable, because the one thing they don't accept that the cable could mean is that a man has been found alive. So they look everywhere for the meaning except where it is to be found.

How well then do the paradoxes in Herbert's writing work? There are certainly plenty of them. 'For St Thomas, God as creator makes no difference to the world,

for to exist is not to be different from not existing', from the fifth chapter, 'Causes and God' is a good one. Only things that exist can be different from one another. Yet we have a tendency to think that if there is a word, there is a thing which it refers to. So we think that nothingness must be a sort of something. Herbert puts it this way, 'All differences are formal and can be adequately accounted for by created causes'. This leads him to state that science can and should continue to do its work without reference to God. 'St Thomas does not drag God in because scientific explanations are unsatisfactory and unnecessary. He drags them in because they are satisfactory'. Here I think that Herbert is going a little off beam. It is possibly true that St Thomas thought of science as satisfactory in its basic methods, but later science from Newton onwards was to be guilty of treating something as nothing, namely space, a nothingness which they tried to avoid by invoking the pseudo-nothingness of the ether. Science cannot simply be satisfactory on its own, because metaphysical considerations always re-emerge in science. In the field of human science, in the ninth chapter, Herbert describes any theory which tries to explain human culture in terms of physics or chemistry as a 'metaphysics'. In this essay he explains the problems in using the term 'human soul' but insists that human life is simply too different to explain in scientific terms, without having to develop some theory of why it is unlike the world of science. The uniqueness of human beings among the animals is not in doubt for Herbert. Human culture is composed of free acts of meaning, but these acts of meaning pervade the physical reality in which we live, right down to those aspects of life otherwise understood by science.

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