

## The Price of Truth: Herbert McCabe on Love Politics and Death

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*Nil hoc verbo veritatis verius*, “Truth itself speaks truly, or there’s nothing true.” Thus, in the translation of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thomas Aquinas’s hymn, *Adoro te devote*. I am greatly honored by the invitation to assist with the celebration of the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Order of Preachers, whose motto is *Veritas*, Truth. I am especially gratified to be doing so in this place named after that great sixteenth century Dominican, Bartolomé de las Casas, thoughts of whose commitment to the Dominican mission, at once intellectual and moral, caused me to reflect personally on what in my own experience of the Dominican order connects it distinctively with that motto. And right away one is caused to wonder why it is that, of the two, the good and the true, the true is always worsted on a scale of warmth and energizing bite, reputed to be a cold, hard, static, and, as they say, merely intellectual thing, less sensually motivating than the good. “What is truth?” said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.” Well, all I can say is that a native Maya in 1540 would not, I imagine, be inclined to see anything “merely intellectual” in the difference between a goody-two shoes who supposes that the truth is something of interest only to people invested in what get so easily dismissed these days as “abstractions,” and someone like Las Casas for whom the truth was inseparable from “the way” and “the life.” And, these days, which fashionably dogmatic anti-essentialist (they used to be called less-approvingly “nominalists”) truly wishes to deny Las Casas the one ground on which he could count in defense of the Maya people, namely that they were *essentially* human and could not be defined into enslavement in an abuse of power founded in an abuse of truth. For whom, then, is “the intellectual” something “mere”? Not, I think, for Dominicans.

Within the contemporary English Dominican community committed to those intimate conjunctions between the truth, the way and the life, there are many who have had and continue to have a transforming intellectual and moral influence on many of us, a former Master of the Order being one of them and here present; but I think also of that older generation of English and Scottish Dominicans that includes Laurence Bright, Simon Tugwell, Roger Ruston, Fergus Kerr, and,

just so you know that I do not put all Dominicans together as of a common theological mind, Thomas Gilby and Aidan Nichols. Of course there was another of that company who embodied the distinctively Dominican commitment to the pursuit of truth—he was one of the greatest theologians of the English-speaking world in the late twentieth century—and you will know that I mean Herbert McCabe. Much influenced as he was by some combination or other of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Thomas Aquinas and, on occasions, Karl Marx—could he ever tell which was which in his own mind?—it was from that conjunction that Herbert offered his distinctively *practical* take on “truth.” To put it as simply as I can, if, for Herbert as for Christians commonly, it is the truth that will set you free, it was also for him that same truth that is likely to get you killed. In one of Herbert’s more eccentric sermons (the one on the genealogy of Jesus as recounted in Matthew’s gospel) having enumerated the succession of murderers, rapists, adulterers, tyrants, thieves and prostitutes who, together with a few rather more savory souls, formed the ancestry of Jesus, he remarks on how this shows that Jesus “belonged to us and came to help us, no wonder he came to a bad end, and gave us some hope.” The truth, death, and, connecting the two, love, formed the core of Herbert’s theology. It is some thoughts on his distinctive construal of their connections that I propose to offer you this evening.

### **Hot dogs, coke and the Eucharist**

It was in Dublin, and probably in 1966, that I first heard Herbert speak. Unsurprisingly, his topic was the Eucharist. Even in those good old days shortly after the end of the Second Vatican Council, when more or less anything could get a run theologically, and did, Herbert was sometimes aggressively intolerant of loose theological talk. And when after his lecture he was asked by some common theologically liberal Catholic (of the sort Herbert could not abide) why it was that in that day and age we persisted in celebrating the Eucharist with the archaic elements of bread and wine, and would not a menu of, say, hot dogs and coke be more meaningfully eucharistic in our times? Herbert replied in that nasal Northumbrian drawl of his, “I had always thought that the Eucharist had something to do with the meaning of food. Hot dogs and coke, however, are without meaning. Anyway, they aren’t food.” Herbert often made you laugh, as on this occasion I did, even though shamefully I am myself rather fond of hot-dogs if not of coke. But witty as he was he was rarely joking, and his serious theological point went something like this.

Understanding the Eucharist requires an understanding of the meaning of food—giving life, sharing the gift, celebrating the giving, gratitude in receiving, and all wrapped up in the meaning of Jesus’

death. Essentially, the Eucharist is a form of eating together and its meaning is generated from an experiential basis in those social transactions which we call meals. No doubt meals vary in style from one culture to another. But hot dogs and coke aren't a cultural variant. They are just universally deviant. That, of course, is the main reason why hot dogs and coke won't do for the Eucharist. For, like them or not, hot dogs and coke are fast food consumed on the trot, and corresponding with their nutritional deficiency they are empty of human sociality. A fast food joint is, indeed, full of sound and fury, but it signifies nothing. Hot dogs and coke just don't make a *human* meal. So they can't make a Eucharistic meal either.

But, he went on, just as the Eucharist has to have some human meaning as food, so food is shown by the Eucharist to have a meaning that transcends the human. If no theology of the Eucharist can get going except on the basis of humanly meaningful practices of eating and drinking, the Eucharist shows those practices to be *sacramental* in that it reveals, and makes real, something divine about the meaning of eating and drinking of which otherwise we could not know. In short, through the Eucharist our human practices of eating and drinking are drawn into the eschatological mystery of the Trinitarian life itself. The Eucharist shows meals to have a depth of meaning which altogether transcends, just as it depends upon, the human power to signify. And that again is why hot dogs and coke won't do for a Eucharist. As food goes it is indeed fast. But as meaning goes, you would wait long for any hermeneutical, let alone any sacramental, depth.

Later on I will want to be a bit more explicit about how Herbert connected such considerations about the Eucharist with politics, but from the outset we ought to note that Herbert would never have been satisfied with the notion that there is merely a parallel between that transforming, eschatological relation of Christianity to politics and the transforming, eschatological relation of the Eucharist to food. For just as the Eucharist is *real* food, so there is a certain sense in which through the Eucharist you can find a way into true politics. But before attempting to spell out how Herbert constructed this connection I should say a bit about some general propositions, epistemological and ethical, that he felt were presupposed to it.

The first of which is that while Herbert had much to say about the political he never seemed to have much to say in his writings about *politicians* or about what politicians think is the proper business of politics, which generally amounts, as I suppose he thought, to little more than politics in its hot-dogs-and-coke manifestation. You have to see through the quotidian business of the politicians to something not less but *more* fundamentally political than they conceive of. That politicians are at the thin end of a wedge lacking in greater thickness at the other, that they believe what they do to be 'real' politics is, of course, one of the reasons why so many of them in western

democracies think of politics as their exclusive territory and that Christians, or religious people more generally, ought to stay in their place outside. And it is also why so many right wing Catholic Republicans in the United States appear to agree with them in rebuking Pope Francis for invading their territory of public policy issues, just as there are left of center Democrats who rebuke him for invading their religion-free territory of personal morality. It's all the same either way.

For there would seem to be nothing much more than, as in a mirror, a mere horizontal reversal of the same elements in that reaction to the West's secularizing marginalization of the religious which causes some Christians to propose a reverse process of the re-sacralization of the political. The common element on both sides of this polarization is that either way the political and the religious are construed as standing to one another as, so some say, do oil and water: they displace one another, they invade one another's territories.

Now the curious thing about this image of mutual exclusion, common to both the secularizers and the sacralizers, is that it is invoked on behalf of the distinctiveness of the religious and the political: they are 'other' because they exclude one another. In fact, however, all that this metaphor of oil and water succeeds in doing is the opposite of that for which it is intended. For if you want to say that religion and politics are distinct, which you might well have good reasons for saying, you had better mind your language and not cast that distinction in terms of their displacing one another, which, of course, is what oil and water do. And I think here we get to one of the major constructive features of Herbert's thought and writing, a key formal element making its presence felt in characteristic ways across his whole theology. It's an elementary bit of logic, but, as Peter Geach used to say, logic matters, and it has substantive consequences in ways often forgotten by, or else simply unknown to, politicians and theologians alike.

## **Religion, politics and mutual exclusion**

Let's keep it simple. Two things can exclude one another only if they compete over the occupation of some common territory from which they *can* exclude one another—'red' and 'green' exclude one another in the way that colors do; whereas 'red' and 'six feet tall' do not and cannot exclude one another, because there is no common category from which one is excluded by the other's presence in it. Hence, given this conception of their difference as being one of mutual exclusion, if, as on the sacralization project, you wish to regain the territory of the religious—as some fundamentalist Christians in the United States still wish to do—it can only be at the cost of the autonomy of the political, which being so, the politicians won't have it. And if you

wish to regain from the religious the territory of the political—as one might hope to do in Saudi Arabia—this can only be at the cost of the marginalization of the religious, which Saudi-Arabians with equal ferocity resist. Well, then, it was ever Herbert’s inclination, at any rate negatively speaking, to visit a plague upon the houses of the secularizers and the sacralisers alike: religion and politics are *much more* different than are oil and water, and for that reason they can be *much more* intimately related than either can envisage. And it is worth noting why this simple point in logic mattered so much to Herbert. The reason was indeed simple, but all the same foundational for the coherence of any possible Christian theology. You cannot, to take a central case, get the doctrine of the Incarnation right without it.

For if you want to say, as the ancient Council of Chalcedon bids us say, that one and the same person, Jesus Christ, was “wholly human and wholly divine,” then it is essential that you have ways of saying and showing that the utter transcendence of the uncreated Godhead cannot entail the exclusion of the full humanity of Christ, nor the other way round either. On the contrary, Chalcedon’s Christology is the language of intimacy, not of exclusion. For which reason if it is not to be self-contradictory to speak of the incarnation as Chalcedon does then the one relation in which the divine and the human cannot stand is that between oil and water. For that is straightforward Nestorianism, when it isn’t its contrary opposite, Sabellianism: for either Jesus’ humanity will be affirmed only in denial of the divinity or the divinity is affirmed at the cost of the human.

Next, there is a second group of preliminaries with which we need to engage if we are to get Herbert’s eucharistic parallel right, and first of all a couple of philosophical remarks. For Herbert, as I said, the Eucharist deepens the meaning of food. It reveals something unexpected there in the human meanings we achieve by eating and drinking together which, without the Eucharist, we could know nothing of. And so what he had in mind to say about the relation of the Eucharist to food is this: you do not fully understand the *human* meaning of food until you understand its Eucharistic depth. Lurking within the quotidian business of eating meals together is a mysterious dimension, waiting to be disclosed. And then, chasing the parallel through, Herbert would add that you do not fully understand the human meaning of the political until you understand its theological depth.

Now in affirming that the Eucharist deepens the human meaning of eating and drinking Herbert had something in mind to deny, namely that the Eucharist simply adds, as it were superveniently, a further theological meaning to the human meaning of food, such that you might, if you have faith, prefer to see food that way—rather as one might happen to see (as synesthetically I do) Thursday as a yellow day of the week and Tuesday as blue. That, roughly, is the

Lutheran account of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, it was what Luther called “companionation” the simultaneous co-existence of bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ as parallel realities. The Eucharist is the presence of Christ not as an add-on meaning of eating and drinking together: it *is* the meaning of eating and drinking together. It’s just that you need faith to see through to the depths of that human meaning, depths that we know of as the “incarnation,” which shows us that the truly human is always beyond the grasp of the merely human; or, as we say, the bread and wine are shown truly to be the body and blood of Christ.

### **Whose reality?**

As I say, there is an issue of philosophical importance lying behind these truth-claims of faith, an issue at once about meaning and about what there is, an issue of ontology as we say. The Eucharist tells us something about real food, about what food is really like—as distinct from its fantastical fast forms. Now for too long our everyday perceptions of what is ‘real’ have been weighed down under the pressure of empiricist philosophies, which, to put it in a rather casual metaphor, would have us construe the real as what we bump into, the hard knocks, as it were, of the immediate experience, such that, by contrast, meanings are mediated, secondary, and soft derivations from those hard knocks, standing at a greater or lesser distance from the real. The real, on this account, is the immediate. But this empiricist prioritization of experience’s directness over the supposedly indirect and mediated character of meaning, gets everything the wrong way round for the purposes of understanding Herbert’s theology.

One way into what is at issue here is through the notion of ‘abstraction,’ the old-fashioned word of early-modern School philosophy, used to describe the mental process by which meaning is grasped. The trouble with this word is that in today’s philosophical vocabularies it seems to suggest, and has done since at least John Locke in the seventeenth century, a process of thinning concepts out to that degree of common meaning which all and only their individual instances possess: which can be little enough. “Featherless biped” after all, is a description that will do for anything that is a human being and for nothing that isn’t, but the phrase hardly invites you into the rich experience of members of our species. Concepts, or ‘ideas’ as Locke calls them, are, in his sense of the word ‘abstractions,’ essentially simplifications, minimal paraphrases of complex objects of experience.

Thomas Aquinas’s account of ‘abstraction’ reverses all this. If you bump into three hard objects in a darkened room, you are, in Locke’s sense of the word, in possession of purely abstract impressions of them, that is to say, you have grasped of all three objects that they

possess in common the property of solidity, discounting any other properties which, in the dark, are invisible. If, however, you then turn on a light you see them all in the medium of much greater complexity and variety, you experience them no longer minimally as but tangible objects, but in their complexity as furniture. You grasp their wealth of differentiation in respect of position and color and shape and size and elegance—or for that matter ugliness if ugly they are—their usefulness, their layout; you begin to understand the social places and purposes of the room thus furnished. It's a sitting room. And as you learn more and more about what you see, you more and more successfully grasp the meaning of the sensory inputs, precisely in your grasp of their complex variety, their diversity and differentiation. And so it is that you know what kind of room you are in, you know where you are, and the experience is now *intelligible*, as Thomas would say. And so he says that the mind's forming concepts out of particular experiences is like turning on a light: it reveals the color of those experiences, it thickens them up, reveals their depths and densities. It does not, as Locke thought, thin experience out. Lockean 'abstractions' are passive, pale and effete, or, as Hume was later to say of what he calls 'ideas,' they are faded sense impressions. Thomas' abstractions are, on the contrary, polychrome and dense powers of judgment about the world.

And when Wittgenstein sought an account of how meaning is grasped, having little taste for the Lockean language of abstraction, he thought of it as more like learning how to use a vocabulary, a lexicon, or, as he called it, a language game: you get some way towards knowing what 'human' means when you have mastered the use of a hugely complex and varied discourse, not by a sort of intellectual staring at a single concept of the human, for such mastery is shown by way of a capacity to generate ever more varied, complex and refined judgments. Of course, Wittgenstein was right to abandon the old schoolman's word abstraction in view of its possessing that common Lockean meaning, for it has passed over into ordinary usage to such an extent that it is unusable today; and for sure in today's usage it offers nothing in respect of Thomas's account of judgment-formation. In any case, on the account of meaning that you find all over Herbert's work, we get at the meaning of a complex nature as Thomas and Wittgenstein thought of it, when we grasp not some abstract idea but, on the contrary, when we grasp the complex differentiations of the concrete, the living reality of a segment of the world, how that reality signifies, and so it is that thereby you come to understand what languages you need to learn in order to experience the world with any degree of adequacy to its complexity. And if concepts were for Thomas in this way polychrome, for Wittgenstein they are polyglot, they speak in many tongues all at once. For Thomas and Wittgenstein by way of what the schoolmen

once meant by abstraction you get nearer to, not further away from, the reality of a thing than any sense experience can get. By abstraction you get to a thing's *depths*.

When therefore Herbert said that the Eucharist reveals a depth within the human transactions of eating and drinking he meant what Thomas meant when he said that understanding the concept of something is like throwing a light on it, revealing it in its full, concrete, variety and differentiation: the Eucharist shows us something in the meaning of eating that otherwise we could not see. It does not superveniently add on an optional extra. And, to speak in very general terms, Herbert's disdain for our quotidian conception of politics amounts to this equivalently, that in truth it is the politicians' and the political commentators' conception of the political that is a Lockean abstraction, for in our day-to-day political practices the politicians are like nothing so much as persons bumping into hard, massy, objects in the dark: as they crack their shins they protest that that is all there is to be experienced in the real world of politics. Naturally they will suppose that the theologians have nothing to say if they know nothing of their bruises. Well, then, as I should say by contrast, in how he envisaged its standing to the political the Eucharist was, for Herbert, like turning on a light: other realities, other depths, of the political are shown forth, because there is more there than is known in the politicians' abstract experiences, and the Eucharist reveals that more. In turning away from the politicians Herbert was far from turning away from politics. He was telling you what real politics is. The meaning of the political is to be found in the meaning of the Eucharist.

### **Propaganda, ideology, and sin**

Next, a contrasting word, about sin, about sin as politics—not, you will be glad to hear, about the sins of politicians, interestingly scarlet as often they are; nor particularly about your sins and mine or anyone else's, most of which are uninteresting and plain; but sin as it is understood in the expression “the sin of the world” to which Herbert frequently adverted as one of several key themes that he had found in the gospel of John. It is, he noted, as having taken away the sin of the world that John the Baptist first introduces Jesus to his own followers [John, 1: 29], and whatever he meant by Jesus' having “taken [it] away,” by “the sin of the world” Herbert took John not to be referring to *anyone's* individual sins, howsoever interestingly scarlet. He referred rather to a rather tediously common sinful predicament, to the mess that we are all collectively *in* willy-nilly, rather than to the mess that we personally make of things, and therefore to a general condition of sinfulness that in one way or another mediates all our actions, whether personally sinful or innocent. The world, we



Christians say, is a fallen world. In fact, Herbert seems right here: the author of John's frequent references to "the world"—as when Jesus says in his last discourse that "the world will not know you"—simply means the pervasively fallen condition of things. There is a *world* of sin, sin has made a universe for itself. And one of the consequences of the world's sinfulness is that the world does not know things, does not see things that are there to be seen: it does not know the truth, its *own* truth. The fallen world is bumping around in the dark and is much bruised in consequence. And politics of the hot dogs and coke variety, like everything else, is firmly set within that world.

It may be guessed from these last remarks, and if so, then correctly, that Herbert's principal interest in attempting to explicate this notion of the world's sin is with epistemology, with the way in which our human condition of fallenness shows up in failures of human perception, of seeing and of knowledge, with how our fallenness is a general condition on social cognition: the world *falsifies*, that is what it does. The world in this Johannine sense is the reason why we do not know the truth. And here it is unsurprising if Herbert, particularly in his writing in the sixties and seventies, called upon Marx for an explanation. For as to its effects on how we humans perceive our social world, the sin of the world is productive of what, from Marx, he learned to call 'ideology.'

## Ideology and propaganda

By 'ideology' you do not mean lies and propaganda, that is to say, the corrupt activity engaged in by interest groups, whether in possession of or seeking to acquire political or economic power, lies and propaganda designed to skew a people's perceptions of political reality by rhetorical or coercive means. By 'ideology' you do not mean what Fox News in the United States or in the United Kingdom the *Daily Mail* contribute to the news, deliberate falsifications, failures of truthfulness, that you can check out simply by consulting the facts. By 'ideology' Marx meant, as Terry Eagleton once put it (I do not recall where) a "society's natural and spontaneous mode of thought." Ideology is a more complex socially cognitive formation than propaganda. Propaganda has an author. The propagandist seeks to impose refutable untruths or distortions by the use of force, or charm or seduction or hook, crook, bribery or simple cover-up, but in any case tactically, because someone, or some agency, is somewhere actively lying. Ideology, by contrast, arises endogenously out of the very meaning of the social relations we transact, it is the social world as we consistently and as a matter of course misperceive it because the social relations themselves are constructed out of those misperceptions. Ideology is a society's common sense, its lived

“matter of course,” even if, as G.K. Chesterton observed (I think in *Orthodoxy*) much common sense is, as a matter of course, uncommon nonsense.

Now just as in this way ideologies are natural, spontaneous and internal to the social practices they arise from, so are the structures of misperception of a fallen world. I think Herbert thought of sin mainly in these terms, as socially structured misperception, as human beings systematically mis-relating to their own truth, the truth of themselves. A fallen world does not know its own truth, above all it must misrecognize its own condition as fallen.

### **The sin of the world**

It follows that there is an important difference between the cognitive dissonances of an ideology and those of that general condition that John refers to as the world’s sin—an ideology will be one historically specific form in which the sin of the world appears. In theory we can construct particular causal explanations of an ideology, we can after all, analyze out that diffuse and pervasive system of embedded economic practices, perceptions and value-judgments that we call the market, “spontaneous and natural” modes of thought though they be. We can diagnose them, and we could hope critically to engage with them from within some non-ideological ground, and Herbert thought Marx must be right about that at least, even if he was wrong about everything else. And for this reason he thought that all social critique ought to begin from Marx, even if, as we will see, he also thought that the demands of the truth required more than Marx could offer, a truth that in fact Marx set about systematically denying.

For what John in his gospel calls the “sin of the world” is a condition that is too universal to be laid at the door of any particular cause, for everything whatever is subject to its conditioning, including Marxism. I suppose that this is what Calvin meant when he spoke of our fallen condition as one of “total depravity,” for everything whatever is depraved by it: even the very instruments of social and political criticism are themselves blunted and infected thereby. We cannot get behind the falsifications to some unfalsifiable and ideology-free standing ground. Unsurprisingly, then, there is no proper causal account in adequately theoretical terms of human fallenness, but only images and foundational narratives. For which reason, even the best known of these narratives of sin’s origins, those of *Genesis*, do no more than disguise, without resolving, the contradiction they embody: how can Adam and Eve succumb to the temptation to seek the “knowledge of good and evil” if they are not already in possession of that knowledge as a condition of their being thus tempted? The lesson of *Genesis* is clear: there can be no

etiology of the sin of the world, since any explanation of its origin must presuppose that fallenness as its causal condition.

I think it was his insistence upon this completely general character of sin, of its being the general condition of a fallen world, that differentiated Herbert's response to the political from that of his third major source of inspiration, after Thomas and Wittgenstein, in Marx. The political critique of a fallen *world* is bound to be distinct from the political critique of a historically particular political formation, even though in either case these formations share the general character of being structured upon systems of misperception of their own reality. Contrary to some misreadings of Herbert's position, he never identified the "world" of John's Gospel with capitalism. However could he, since he was convinced of the relevance of history, and the emergence of mercantilist economies in twelfth century Italy is hardly what the author of Genesis had in mind? And he certainly maintained that even though there can be no moral equivalence between capitalism and the socialist critique of it, nonetheless socialism was subject to the same conditions of fallenness as are exhibited by the capitalism it critiques. The world *cannot* know itself on its own terms, its socially organized structure of internally generated misperception is pervasive, universal. That is to say, because of the way the world is, its sin not only causes misperception of the fallen world in general; it recursively generates the misperception of the sin that causes it to be fallen. As it were, sin cannot truthfully tell its own story, it has no power of its own to know its own truth. And what Herbert was ever after was an answer to the question: What narrative tells the true story of sin? Which one of us is in a position to tell that story of sin who is not also complicit in the sin the story tells of? How can we know the truth of ourselves in practice? Well, obviously the answer to all those questions has to be the same: Jesus, *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo*. We are back with the person of Christ again, a wholly human human-being, a being whose reality as human is too much for a fallen humankind to bear.

So it is just here that we get to the heart of Herbert's theology. There was only one issue for him, and that had to do with how to love in a world whose characteristic and sustaining practices showed it to be the political routinization of sin and so of the rejection of love. And Herbert's answer, from the time of that lecture in Dublin in 1965 to the day he died in 2001, was always to my knowledge the same: it takes a man's being killed finally to expose and resolve the conflict between love and the world, not because there was no alternative available to God, for, as Thomas says, the slightest twitch of the divine finger would have done it, a nod and a wink; but just because the true nature of God would be revealed only by a solution so radical that it is at once wholly surprising and wholly right, at once supererogatory and "just so." For, as Thomas says, "God's generosity is unique and wholly over the top (*ipse solus est*

*maxime liberalis* is the Latin): for God does nothing simply for his own benefit, everything as an expression of sheer goodness.”<sup>1</sup>

### “Christian politics” and the martyr’s death

Everything for Herbert followed from that. It is from there that Herbert began to talk about “revolution,” that acknowledgement of the surplus *demand* that always exceeds the capacity of the given *fact*. Revolution is nothing but the supererogatory as political practice. Always you heard Herbert say, the revolution that a Christian politics calls for is nothing so limited as a revolution in society: it is nothing so limited as that, because no revolution in society could be final which is not also a revolution in the body itself, achieved in its death and resurrection. As Paul said, the final enemy, the ultimate limitation imposed upon all human agency, and so on the political, is imposed not by sin, but by sin’s consequence, which is death. Hence the only revolutionary hope that is not groundlessly utopian lies in the revolutionary transformation of what Paul calls the “body of death” itself; it lies in the resurrection.

Necessarily, then, the Christian orientation to the political is from the edge, the edge represented by the acceptance of death as the price of love. Herbert would say that the world is so desperately in need of its false consciousness that it will kill rather than have it exposed in its true colors as the refusal of unconditioned love that it is. That is why Christians cannot construct their politics from the centre-ground. This is not because its claims are marginal. Christianity views the political from the margin because the centre-ground of politics is dominated by a practical untruth, an ideological misrecognition of its own nature and conditionality—because, to repeat, the world’s sin is such that it cannot know its own truth, not even politically. Otherwise put, the politics of a sinful world inverts everything. It has centred the marginal and has marginalized its own centre. And the Church, therefore, stands centred upon what the sin of the world has pushed out to the margin. The Church is a sort of disloyal opposition. It’s not that it takes the other side on a shared agenda. It’s more like the reply the man in Oxford gave when asked how to get from Oxford to Birmingham: “if I were you I wouldn’t start from here.”

It is for this reason that Christian faith cannot be translated out directly into any political program without being subjected to a reductive secularization. In short, the world’s truth can exist only in an unresolvable tension with the world whose truth it is, a tension unresolvable until the sin of the world and its condition of mortality

<sup>1</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 1a q44 a4 ad1.

is finally overcome. But does all this entail that there is in the meantime *no* Christian political praxis? And if indeed there is, how did Herbert envisage it?

Herbert was a socialist and, with qualifications, a Marxist and could not imagine how a Christian who read the gospels could consistently be anything else. But socialism as hot-dogs-and-coke politics could never get to the point, because you had got to the point only when you had confronted, not Donald Trump, but somehow mysteriously together with Donald Trump, death itself as the last enemy. For Herbert, revolution was simply the resurrection—the triumph of the body over death—as politics. Consequently, for Herbert, there is of course a Christian political praxis—if that is what you wish to call it, though it might be better just to call it a foregone conclusion. It consists in the price that is to be paid for our resurrection and therefore is exhibited in a spectacular way in the lives, but more than in their lives, in the foregone conclusion of their deaths, of Oscar Romero and of Martin Luther King, of Mahatma Gandhi, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of the five women martyrs of El Salvador, and of countless other martyrs who threatened the world's powers with the exposure of their own truth, the truth that they must needs not know.

Those martyrs knew that they were challenging the world, that they were pushing it to its last resort to own the truth that it has willfully marginalized, knowing that as a last resort it will kill to ensure that it is not revealed for what it is. For at all costs the world needs not to know its own truth, since its power depends on that truth's not being known. And so, as one theologically-minded worldly power very sensibly observed, "it is expedient that one man should die for the sake of the people," though somehow it always seems to turn out that there is just one more death-dealing strategy that is expedient for the people's sake. Those deaths are paradigmatic for a Christian politics, whose nature is essentially that of the prophetic, of the seer. For what the world needs do in order to suppress the knowledge of its own truth is precisely what reveals its lie: its need to kill. Correspondingly, the martyr is no innocent, but passive, accidental victim of the crush of circumstance, nor any merely promethean hero. Martyrs are those who have willingly placed themselves in the way of that collision, embracing death as love's price, because they stand exactly at that point of eschatological intersection between love and death which Herbert had identified as the Church's position of critical marginality, the most telling quotidian theological expression of which was of course for him the Eucharist.

Those deaths, then, are prophetic indeed. But there is no need to over-dramatize this conclusion, neither did Herbert ever do so. For to stand at that point of eschatological collision is the *ordinary* condition of the Christian—it was of course where Bartolomé de

las Casas stood—of which ordinary condition the martyr is but the exceptional, hyperbolic, instance. So the ordinary practice of the Christian, of the Church, is the Eucharist, the celebration of a martyr's death; therein is a kind of disambiguation, a final clearing away of the fog of all ideology. The praxis of the Christian reveals the world for what it is, revealing what on its own terms it needs to be – it needs its last resort of violence. The world feeds on death.

The death of martyrs is therefore paradigmatic for a Christian politics: martyrdom is the Church's principle of verification. It is not, therefore, that there is no quotidian form of Christian intervention in the political, though what form and shape in detail such intervention may take is a story for another theologian—it was never Herbert's primary concern. But if for another theologian, it is not another story. For martyrdom remains the eschatological paradigm for all Christian political action, the paradigm of its praxis. Those martyrs' deaths tell you something that no Christian political programme could otherwise tell you. They do not tell you what to do. They tell you no more than where to stand, where Las Casas stood. They tell you what you will see when you stand there, for it is only standing there that the truth can appear over the horizon. And they tell you that, standing there, you will discover the price of the truth that you see. For one way or another, the world will cut you down where you stand.

This, then, is the supererogatory practice of the Christian, the above and beyond that is Christianity's default. Herbert, as ever, put it most memorably in perhaps his best-known *obiter*. "If you do not love," he used to say, "you are scarcely alive. But if you do love, you will certainly be killed."

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