



HERBERT MCCABE'S SOTERIOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Herbert McCabe interprets Redemption as a supernatural transformation, not an improvement of human nature: both humanity and individual persons are called to share the mysterious and unpredictable divine nature. As for what concerns the atonement and reconciliation of the sinner with God, McCabe prefers two models, Moral Influence and Christus Victor, which better explain why political revolutions are not just 'secular' events: in fact, Christians 'belong with them', even though they do not 'belong to them'.

Keywords: Herbert McCabe; Soteriology; Redemption; Atonement; Justification; Revolution;

INTRODUCTION CONCEPTS

What is 'soteriology'? In the long-lasting successful handbook of Systematic Theology by Joseph Pohle we read: "Christology deals with the person of our Divine Redeemer. Soteriology (περί τῆς σωτηρίας λόγος) considers the purpose for which he came into this world"¹: that of redemption. What is 'redemption' then? If we focus on the concept of the 'atonement' of Jesus, as reformed Christians generally do, we could say that redemption is a metaphor (a "second purchase") for what is achieved through that atonement, and, therefore, that there is a metaphorical sense in which the expiatory death of Jesus pays the price of a ransom, releasing Christians from bondage to sin and death.²

In any case, metaphors apart, we should try to understand what redemption is; in fact, if no attempt to understand its meaning were undertaken, the rational basis of faith would be undermined and the result would be fideism. In other words, since the whole human person is redeemed by Christ, this must be shown in the intellectual order as well.³ Therefore, we should grasp what the function, way, scope and attitude of redemption are.

As for Herbert McCabe (1926-2001), who, although English, was Roman Catholic and not particularly interested in the idea of 'atonement', the function of redemption is to make us 'holy', that is, saints. The way or mode of this process is, however, "painful".⁴ The scope of the matter is vast because such realities as famine, pestilence, natural catastrophes,

1 'Introduction' to *Soteriology: A Dogmatic Treatise on the Redemption* (1913) (London: Aeterna Press, 2015).

2 Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, Crossway Books, 2006, 177; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 1994, 580. (Quotation taken from Wikipedia.)

3 International Theological Commission, 'Part I: the Human Condition and the reality of Redemption', *Selected Questions on the Theology of God the Redeemer* (Vatican online), 1995, 12th point.

4 Herbert McCabe, *God Matters*, (1987) (London: Continuum, 2005), 99.



illness, physical and mental suffering, and death itself reveal that evil – as the Christian tradition has of course always recognized – is by no means exhausted by what is termed “malum culpae” (moral evil), but covers also “malum poenae” (suffering), whether this is evil in itself or arises from the limitations of nature.⁵ The human attitude towards redemption should be humble gratitude; in fact, the Christian God generates outragescandalizes our sensibilities in that he loves sinners more than the righteous, so that we also are required to love sinners; we are made to realise that the gospel is not about being safe but about being saved.⁶

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics, redemption has two purposes or, to be more precise, two ‘levels’, liberation from sin and liberation from creaturehood, i.e. divinisation.⁷ We do not need God primarily because we are sinners, but because we need to be elevated to his nature and share his self-knowledge, since only God can know God. In addition to being creatures without knowledge of God, we reject this knowledge even when we are offered it: it so happens that we are either deified or else refuse deification, there is not just a ‘lack of deification’.⁸ The good news for us is not only that we have been saved from sin, but also that we are taken beyond creaturehood into the life of God himself: “this, indeed, is what our doctrine of Trinity tells us”.⁹

Ultimately, Jesus’s death on the cross unites the two levels. On the cross both sin and death are defeated. The cross is the manifestation of both the sin of the world and the redeeming God. Somewhat obscurely, McCabe says: “it is just when we realise our death that we find life. It is only when it appears as sin that it can be forgiven”.¹⁰

Let us examine each one of these two levels.

1. ATONEMENT AND FORGIVENESS OF SINS

The first and traditionally more obvious level of redemption is a sort of cure from that distortion of human nature called ‘sin’. This cure is two-fold: one aspect of it is the expiatory reconciliation accomplished by Jesus (atonement), the other aspect is that we humans are ‘redeemed’ and so freed from our sins. In other words: atonement is about resetting a broken relationship between us and God; redemption is about healing or freeing us from the consequences of this rupture.

As for the atonement, McCabe lists some theological theories about it: Jesus paid a debt due to God by man; or, also, a ransom due to Satan who had captured man. In both versions Jesus was nailed to the cross to pay something owed by man, and this was why Jesus allowed himself to be crucified. Others say he was a high priest who sacrificed himself on the cross: he went to Calvary to offer this sacrifice to the Father; we could say he took the burden of our sins on himself. Also: he paid the penalty for our sins instead of us in the name of all humankind (vicarious, representative).

McCabe points out that each theory says something true; they are not empty phrases, but have one thing in common: they all answer the question, “Why did Jesus decide to be

5 International Theological Commission, 13th point.

6 Herbert McCabe, *God, Christ and Us*, (London: Continuum, 2005), 29.

7 Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, (London: Continuum, 2002), 181. A thorough report of the two traditions (Eastern: deification; Western: salvation from sin) is provided by Trevor Hart, ‘Redemption and Fall,’ in Colin Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977; reprint, 2001), pp. 189-206.

8 *God Matters*, 20.

9 *God Still Matters*, 233.

10 *Ibidem*, 173.



crucified?” But McCabe says that the ordinary Christians who have kept the cross as a sign of their faith have never had this problem at all: they are not puzzled by the cross, they take it for granted that man was naturally crucified. “Aren’t we all?” is their rhetorical reaction. They feel that crucifixion expresses what life is about but which is not easy to acknowledge. In fact, we are afraid of suffering and death: although there are also other concerns in life, the deeply significant aspects of it are always related to suffering. Ordinary people take the crucifixion for granted: it is a symbol of hope because it became a symbol of God. The divine reaches these deep parts of life that we are afraid to look at.¹¹

Elsewhere McCabe deals with the same topic, but providing a slightly different argument: Why is Jesus’s death important to us? There was the theory of atonement: a payment for our sins, for the infinite offence made to God. But we cannot agree: in fact, a person in prison is not really ‘paying his debt’ to society, and the same happens to Jesus. If God does not forgive us till Jesus is tortured on the cross, this God is even more cruel than us, and also infantile.¹²

Therefore, Jesus’s ‘mission’ is just about being in history, being human, nothing but being the son of man. His life was tragic only because this is what being human implies: most of the time we are not human enough, because if we were we would be crucified. His crucifixion was just the manifestation of the wicked and unjust world we created: we do not need theories to explain why the Father wanted Jesus to die.¹³

We know that McCabe’s mentor, Victor White, thought that love is the core concept for explaining redemption, and is, among other things, also a bridge between the Aristotelian treatment of “friendship” and the New Testament’s concept of “caritas”.¹⁴ McCabe’s (and Eagleton’s) favourite maxim links love and death as the unavoidable consequence of the “sin of the world”.

This is what he says about atonement. As we have seen, the other side of redemption as a “cure” is forgiveness of sin. Sin, McCabe says, has three meanings: 1) the sin of the world also known as original sin, where the word ‘original’ does not point to the old sin of our remote forebears: it is *our* origin, because each one of us was born in an already distorted world; 2) by means of our baptism we are liberated from original sin, even though not completely: it is true that we are not enslaved any more by it as a “master” of ours, but we suffer from it as an “enemy” that we must overcome by grace; for this reason, we must “struggle for a more just society”. If we do not, this is the second meaning of sin, ‘mortal sin’, when we betray our baptism and join the enemy, the establishment; this way, we betray the world of future life: it is the collective failure of being fully human; 3) the ‘venial sin’, when we fail to grow in love.¹⁵

Since we are not pure spirits but are embodied social animals, there is a wide and complex psychology of sin. On the one hand, sin is a deep isolation of people from one another.¹⁶ On the other, because of this isolation we fall into fear. The root of sin is the fear that we are nothing; so we have the compulsion to flatter ourselves, to believe in ourselves:

11 Ibidem, 94-95.

12 *God Matters*, 91-92.

13 *God Matters*, 23.

14 See Aidan Nichols, *Dominican Gallery*, Gracewing, Leominster, 1997, 85-86.

15 Herbert McCabe, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, (1985), (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2000), 14-15; *God, Christ and Us*, 67. Afterwards he continues: the original sin does not refer to the origin of mankind in Adam but to my origin, “my coming into being”, what I have since my birth independently from my individual actions. Because there is the sin of the world, the world is infected (170).

16 *God Matters*, 80.



all sins are failures in being realistic. Even the childish sins of the flesh have their roots in anxiety about whether we really matter, so that we could say that every sin is to build an 'illusory self that we can admire, instead of the real self that we can only love'.¹⁷ In fact, the only way to escape the compulsion of flattering and deceiving is the faith that we are loved by God, even if we are sinners.¹⁸

Therefore, analysing our psychology, we could say that every sin has two aspects: 1) a neglect of God's love and choosing another thing, as in mortal sin, or not showing our gratitude in our daily life, as in venial sin; 2) it is an attachment and even an addiction to lesser goods. The forgiveness of sins deals with the first aspect: the miracle of contrition and conversion and the enhancement of love.¹⁹ The aftermath of forgiveness deals with the second aspect: we can remain attached even when the sin is forgiven, as a wound remains after the blow.²⁰

However, who is the "redeemer", the forgiver and the healer? Ignatius of Antioch uses the soteriological title Christos "iatros", i.e. healing doctor; Justin and the apologists emphasize the Christos 'didaskalos', or 'teacher'; Irenaeus stresses the notion of "recapitulation", which implies the restoration of God's image in man: "the second Adam, by means of the incarnation, recapitulates every individual who has lived until then, and addresses all people and languages".²¹

But all these qualities are fully human, McCabe would say. Even being sinless is a human quality: when we say that Jesus did not have sin, this is because to have sin is to be less than fully human.²²

McCabe makes much of this point: we are not saved by the intervention of a god "but by the great sanctity of one of ourselves", so that when we encounter Jesus there is a chord which resonates; he shows us the humanity that is hidden in us, he is the human being that we do not dare to be. He is the son of God, but it is by his human sanctity, his obedience to the Father, that he saves us. As Aquinas says, it is not because of his divinity that Jesus saves us, but because he was a saint, full of grace, obedient to the Father; because of this he secured our redemption and accomplished his mission. What mission? To be human: the Father sent him not to suffer and die, but to be human, to be loving.²³

What, then, about his divinity? Given the emphasis McCabe puts on Paul's image of the 'body', he would have embraced this passage by the Vatican Theological Commission:

Who is the Redeemer? This question can only be answered from within the Church and through the Church. To know the Redeemer is to belong to the Church. Augustine emphasized this in his teaching on the whole Christ, Christus totus, Head and Members together. As Gregory the Great put it, "Our Redeemer is seen to be one person with the holy Church that he has made his own." 115 The life of the Church as the Body of Christ is not to be amputated from the life of the Head.²⁴

17 *God, Christ and Us*, 17-18.

18 *Ibidem*, 60.

19 *Ibidem*, 225.

20 *The Teaching etc.*, 77.

21 International Theological Commission, 'Select Questions etc.', Part III – Historical perspectives, nn.3, 4, 6.

22 *The Teaching etc.*, 7.

23 *God Matters*, 99, 93; *God, Christ and Us*, 66; *God Still Matters*, 92-93.

24 International Theological Commission, 'Select Questions etc.', Part IV – Systematic Perspectives, A – The Identity of the Redeemer: Who Is the Redeemer? n. 4.



In fact, McCabe, in discussing Jesus's bodily presence, recommends: do not look for his body in the tomb, nor in the heaven, but, instead, look among yourselves, look at the food you eat together: his bodily presence is when you eat together.²⁵

This 'bodily' presence, insofar as it is bodily, must be historical. On the one hand, what is historical can be despised and underrated as 'particular' and so irrelevant. In McCabe's words:

'Nobody comes to the Father but by me' (John 14: 6b). Can we really take that literally? Can we even take it seriously? 'Nobody' (he is talking about the whole human race) 'comes to the Father' (he means God) 'but by me' (he means himself). There are, I think, around four or five thousand million people alive today and countless millions have lived in the past; and most of them – apart from a few eccentrics – have thought about God one way or another, communally or individually. I mean they have thought about the mystery that things are, the mysterious purpose of human life, or however they have put it; and they have sought to come to God. There have been great religions devoted to meditating on these things, whole civilisations sustained by some kind of worship of God, there has been endless striving to come to the Father. And now, amongst all these teeming millions, it is being asserted that, after all, nobody comes to God except throughout this individual carpenter in Palestine. The egoism is breathtaking. Surely there must be some mistake.²⁶

On the other hand, this historical setting brings us towards the divine: in the "fullness of time" under Tiberius, for [?] centuries after Socrates's life and for centuries after the establishment of Judaism, and according to thousands of other conditions, Jesus was born, lived, died and was resurrected. How was he resurrected? As the Vatican Commission says,

The life of the Church as the Body of Christ is not to be amputated from the life of the Head. John Eudes provides an initial approach to a description of the Redeemer's uniqueness: "We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and his mysteries and often to beg him to perfect and realize them in us and in his whole Church /.../ For it is the plan of the Son of God to make us /... / partake in his mysteries and to extend them to and continue them in us and in his whole Church /... / Christ's uniqueness is to be understood within this 'Christological constellation'."²⁷

2. TRANSFORMATION: A JOURNEY WITHOUT A PURPOSE

The second and traditionally less obvious level of redemption is the transformation of human nature into the divine. What could this mean? If we said, with McCabe, that when we try to set up a community by "purely *natural* means, whether be it the family or the political community, we fail to reach real unity"²⁸, this would be a failed attempt for improving us qua humans (social animals) without God's grace. If we received and accepted God's grace for unity, however, this attempt would be successful but would still be only an improvement of human nature.

This point is worth pondering: the 'new creation' (our deification coming from redemption), while being a transformation into the divine nature, is not an improvement of created human nature, as would happen to a man, for example, who became more handsome, intelligent, generous, brave or long-lived.²⁹ The useful applicability of this point is in

²⁵ *God, Christ and Us*, 84.

²⁶ McCabe, 'Coming to the Father', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 68, No. 807 (July / August 1987), 320.

²⁷ A – The Identity of the Redeemer: Who Is the Redeemer?, nn. 4, 7.

²⁸ Herbert McCabe, *The New Creation*, (1964) (London: Continuum, 2010), xi.

²⁹ McCabe, *The New Creation*, 3.



debunking all the claims of the ‘born again’ fundamentalists about their moral and even psychological superiority to all the not-yet-born-again others.

This is bound to happen for intrinsic reasons. For example, a fundamental Christian value like the equal dignity of all human beings is not achieved by them through progressive improvements of their nature, it is not a sort of evolution Lamarckian (that is hierarchical, as opposed to the Darwinian one which is not), but, rather, it requires the end of any hierarchical structure. McCabe thinks that in us, linguistic animals, reason permits that natural hierarchies could be ‘slowly subverted by love’.³⁰ However, we see that hierarchies and inequalities still spoil and dishearten the people of our time. For instance, in Western societies many think that it is wise and ethical to take a step towards embracing ‘poverty’ (decreasing food and weight, avoiding waste, career struggles, exploitation and pollution) and that this is also a form of ‘therapy’ for ourselves, our ‘means of flourishing’ and a progressive ‘improvement’ of our human assets. And so new, subtler and more hidden, but not less wicked, hierarchies are built and established. And the people who do not ‘flourish’ are ruthlessly, albeit secretly, excluded and left behind.

Jesus himself was misunderstood and opposed by the Jews – something to be expected – but he did not carry on confronting them in the ‘natural’ terms of physical force or moral persuasion: he eventually realised that “death is unavoidable”.³¹ Jesus no longer wanted to seek worldly success and began to accept being guided towards a goal which, in itself, is not really a human purpose and does not respond to a human need, in other words death. To use the words of the Vatican Theological Commission, the purpose of redemption is not a known answer to human needs:

redemption is primarily about the glorious goodness of God, rather than about our need, for all that redemption takes care of that need—that it is a liberating reality for us. If redemption, on the contrary, were to be judged or measured by the existential need of human beings, how could we avoid the suspicion of having simply created a Redeemer-God in the image of our own need?³²

In the same way McCabe remains apophatic and does not say what the supernatural (not only human) purpose of redemption should be. He worries that the “God of biblical theology” (who takes part in the history of his people sharing their experiences, joys and sufferings) is, unlike the real God of the Bible, too similar to gods. Worst of all is if this confusion is found among liberation theologians, because the God who is liberator has such a quality because of the very reason that he is not a god, that is, a part of history (and – we must remember – it is the gods who account for alienation and oppression).³³

Jesus lived his humanity in a world less than human and so two things necessarily ensue: 1) he had a mission to transform the world, 2) he will be prevented from carrying it out.³⁴ So the purpose of redemption is unclear. Since the beginning (“messianic secret”) it has been Jesus’s wish to prevent people from interpreting messianism in a political way. But it is especially after the confession of Peter at Caesarea that Jesus begins to manifest his destiny on the cross. And this also applies to his disciples: “the Disciple is not characterized only by accepting the message of the kingdom of God that comes through the conversion of the heart,

30 *God Still Matters*, 4-5.

31 *God Matters*, 90.

32 International Theological Commission, ‘Selected Questions etc’, part I, n. 2.

33 *God Matters*, 42.

34 *God, Christ and Us*, 39.



but by having adhered in a special way to Christ and his life”, that is to say, by adopting the radical decision of sharing with him his mission and his destiny on the cross.

In his writings about anthropology McCabe maintains that death is ‘natural’ to other animals but not to us, we know that our life as human beings is always a failure, not just because we are sinners, but because ‘our death is unnatural’. Sin is to deny creaturehood and therefore our death, whereas the gift of redemption is to receive divinity. It is only accepting our peculiar creaturehood (and our peculiar death) that we are taken into divinity.³⁵ We may express this with other (but not clearer) words:

We help to create heaven by failing to make it. The suggestion is paradoxical. But that is what the crucifixion meant. Jesus failed and that is how the kingdom was established.³⁶

Our life is a journey. Sin or idolatry is setting up for the current state of affairs, in resisting the call of faith, the call of revolutionary change.³⁷ From an ethical point of view

Life in Christ /.../ is a seeking into the meaning of human behaviour which involves a constant reaching out beyond the values of the world. Sin consists in ceasing to reach out, refusing to respond to the Father’s summons, and settling for this present world. /.../ Of course trying to live in the present world a life in accordance with the future is a dangerous business, as Jesus found out. The Christian may expect to be crucified with him.³⁸

But the ethical point of view is only a provisional one. Redemption is more mysterious than an ethical struggle:

Christians are not people who think that because they have faith they have an advantage; that they are better informed about God than other people or have reached a position closer to God than other people; that they have discovered the secret of coming to the Father. Christians do not claim to have any secret and private knowledge about God or to have discovered any new secret way to the Father.³⁹

We are not allowed to rely on a plan revealed to us:

It is to say that the picture of the prearranged plan worked out by God up there, to which we must conform, is only a provisional picture, an inadequate one. There is no heaven waiting for us; it is we who will create heaven, but only because of the divine life we already have within us.⁴⁰

3. A TRANSVALUATION OF ALL VALUES

One of the effects of redemption is the so-called ‘justification’, (*iustum efficiere*): human beings receive back the ‘original justice’ that was lost because of the Fall. How? The doctrinal battle between Catholics and Reformers five centuries ago about the means of justification (good works, faith, grace) are now over: in 1999, at Augsburg, Catholics and Lutherans signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.

However, throughout the last five centuries, for all of the signatories, the very concepts of justification, grace, works and the like, have changed in meaning to such an extent that I find it appropriate to title this section with the Nietzschean phrase ‘transvaluation of all values’. Among both Catholics and Protestants, there is a very visible

35 *God Still Matters*, 234.

36 *Ibidem*, 181.

37 *God Matters*, 123.

38 *Law, Love and Language* (London: Continuum, 2004), 153.

39 ‘Coming to the Father’, 320.

40 *God Still Matters*, 181.



change: in the 16th century all Christians were examining the themes of grace and works in order to grasp something about the afterlife destiny of human beings: heaven or hell? Today almost nobody speaks (or thinks, for that matter) about hell. One of the major victories of the too much despised and criticised liberal theology is indeed the widespread ecumenical agreement about universalism, if not explicitly, at least by means of omission. Even today grace and works (as fruits of the former) are meant to lead us to what both the ancient philosophers and the common sense of the everyday man call 'happiness', and, also to what Christians call 'holiness' or 'sanctity'. But how is this so? Not any longer as a divide between inferior and superior, damned and saved as two definite categories of fellow human beings. No. Today the Christian message has dispensed with hierarchies and imaginings about the 'afterlife sojourn' and *sola fide/sola gratia* works first of all by maintaining faith within an increasingly atheistic world.

McCabe fully embraces this line: we are made children of God by the Holy Spirit. This is the good news. When we depart from grace, we have a false God, and his righteous wrath is only the projection of our guilt. In reality, God does not react to the world, to good or bad people, he loves us even if we are not good. He does not forgive us because we repent, but the other way around: we repent because he has already forgiven us. He does not demand anything from us.⁴¹

'Jesus comes to us in a complete failure, in one who suffers and is defeated, as a condemned and despised and executed criminal',⁴² therefore he is really a non-demanding model. Perhaps our parents and many other agencies of society were/are indeed demanding and ask us to perform successful deeds. But God the Father in Jesus shows us that failure is ubiquitous and for everyone and that there may be hope in the midst of failure.

Sola gratia, indeed. But while for John Calvin the acceptance of Grace was as demanding as Ignatius de Loyola's exercises, for McCabe and many of us Grace means mainly God's love and initiative. McCabe's theology of Grace follows the mainstream 'transvaluation' of the late 20th century, which dispenses with hell and focuses on God's acceptance much more than on his rejection.

Contemporary sensibility sees grace mostly as a gift meant for our wellbeing, rather than a challenge and a responsibility. It is true that some gifts are not easy to be discerned. Are riches, security and health gifts of God? However, life is God's gift in itself and we are to enjoy it and to be grateful for it.⁴³ This life is transformed by the Holy Spirit, which is received while not merited by us.⁴⁴

the good news is that the Father comes to us. In one way, a negative way, Christians do perhaps understand God better; because they won't have any substitutes, any idols, any gods. They have the sort of clearer, uncluttered, understanding that atheists have.⁴⁵

In fact, most of all, we do not understand. Our theological language is both as imperfect and ambiguous as our sacramental celebrations and our political actions are, because we live in the 'pre-revolutionary' era when 'the gospel seeks to be at home in a transitional world'.⁴⁶ But we are all the same allowed to live a good life through our friendship with God and with other people. This good life is really friendship and happiness

41 *The Teaching*, 10; *God Still Matters*, 9; *God, Christ and Us*, 61, 27.

42 'Coming to the Father', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 68, No. 807 (1987), 321.

43 *God, Christ and Us*, 65.

44 *The Teaching*, 11.

45 'Coming of the Father', 322.

46 *God Matters*, 175.



when to our natural virtues God adds the supernatural or theological virtues, and we can perform acts of happiness, those very ones performed by the poor, the meek, the persecuted and the like, that is, the beatitudes.⁴⁷ And how happiness can identify with the beatitudes is something we do not understand.

4. TRANSFORMATION: A JOURNEY WITHOUT A REST

Since God's Grace provides happiness through the beatitudes, this means that our life paths do not follow our plans. At the beginning of my life I trod the path of mundane materialism and natural human virtues. It is true that God at the end will show me – says McCabe – that the thing I want most is God himself; but there is no shortcut to achieve this end: we all start as children and need time to grow up; there is no good in pretending that we have already arrived. Never treat a child as an adult, otherwise he/she will not grow up into a real adult. If you treat yourself as a saint you will never become one, nor will you want to become one.⁴⁸ Therefore, the path of seeking the natural (Aristotelian) virtues is something that we should not skip.

However, afterwards, we realise that we are called upon to carry out a restless continuous quest, and we have to leave behind our personality that we used to interpret as complete; now it has to be reshaped in a way we are not able to see.⁴⁹ Christians cannot give advice to get a better understanding of God: 'there is no straight and settled road towards God/.../God in man may be anywhere at any time. He is like a thief at night time'. You never know when the revelation is offered to you. The gospel does not explain God to you; at best, it makes you ready, open and vulnerable 'to the sudden flashing out of divinity at the most unlikely moment'.⁵⁰

This preparation, in which we detach ourselves from our past personality, in which we become ready and open to the unpredictable, is indeed a transformation of our natural potentialities, personal desires and habits we acquired from society. However, McCabe underlines that the agency of this transformation is not ours: there are ways to become more human (commandments, virtues), but no means to become divine: this in fact is God's business.⁵¹

One major proof of this transformation is our attitude towards love. If to love (and not just to be loved) is our natural need, when we do love, we are challenged in depth and feel fearful because we see that we have to abandon ourselves. But if love wins over fear, when we love, we indeed overcome that fear of losing ourselves and discover that to love God is similar to loving ourselves. What is fear? A disbelief in myself, because I think that I do not matter, I do not really exist, it is the fear of playing a false role, wearing a disguise. But, although this is a common experience in loving other people, this does not apply to my love for God, because I know that he loves me unconditionally. All this is transformation.⁵²

47 *The Teaching*, 11, 49. For the relationships between virtues, gifts and beatitudes according to Aquinas, see: Ryan Erlenbush, 'The beatitude of poverty, the gift of fear, the virtue of hope' on *The New Theological Movement*, 31/08/2013 [<http://newtheologicalmovement.blogspot.com/2013/08/the-beatitude-of-poverty-gift-of-fear.html>]: the beatitudes are not habits nor stable realities of the soul, unlike virtues and gifts, but are acts, like happiness itself is an act.

48 *God, Christ and Us*, 9.

49 *God Matters*, 94.

50 *God, Christ and Us*, 144.

51 *God Still Matters*, 104, 103.

52 *God, Christ and Us*, 71; *God Matters*, 174, 93, 95; *God, Christ and Us*, 70.



As we have already seen while speaking of Redemption, that is, from the point of view of the Redeemer God, in the same way now, from our point of view, we understand ‘grace’ to mean that we are given divinity (apart from being forgiven and cleansed from our sins).⁵³ We might possibly have been able to conceive the idea of a Creator God by just contemplating the world, but without a divine revelation we would never have been able to know that God loves us, not just to make us flourish and be happy, but also to share his friendship and divine life.⁵⁴

In fact, this divine friendship is not a clear and conventional ‘flourishing’ of any sort. The mission of the God Man Jesus was to be fully human, but this goal implies defeat: because of the natural ‘unjust’ death we have already mentioned and because of the wicked structures of human community. Jesus failed, and the Easter Vigil can be interpreted as the celebration of the meaning of Jesus’s life, passion and death, rather than a new step in the series.⁵⁵ Death is inevitable for us human beings, but thanks to life in grace we live it as a gift and as divinisation.

5. LIFE IN GRACE: THE DIVINE VIRTUES

Pieter Vos maintains that

It is commonly held that Reformed ethics is basically accomplished as an ethics of divine commandments, creational orders and—to a lesser extent—(human) rights, whereas theological virtue ethics is in particular developed in the Roman Catholic tradition.⁵⁶

McCabe as a Catholic indeed presented the roles of theological (divine) virtues on many different occasions. However his ‘originality’ was more a sort of ‘unconventionality’, since, as a disciple of Aquinas, he was commenting on Thomistic statements that were (and still are) quite paradoxical within many Christian circles. For example, loving ourselves is closer to perfect charity than to love our neighbours.

First of all, intellectual and moral virtues including self-control cannot last for long without “divinely inspired self-denial”; in themselves human virtues soon degenerate into “subtler forms of selfishness and pride”.⁵⁷ McCabe argues that, for everybody and more clearly for Christians, it is the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity) that “bear on our friendship with God”.⁵⁸ In fact, the cardinal virtues serve human society, but society serves the kingdom of God and thus the cardinal virtues must be “enlivened” by the theological virtues because only a supernatural gift can permit human beings to enter a friendship with God.⁵⁹ When we say that we ‘share’ God’s life by ‘sanctifying grace’ we mean that we are given the three theological virtues, of which faith and hope make us children of his, and charity sets up the relation of friendship with him.⁶⁰

Although there is not any proven evidence of his readings on this matter, we see that McCabe shares some tenets of the most updated theological anthropology. Theological anthropology in those decades was further developed by some Jesuit theologians: first of all

53 *God Matters*, 22. Grace is the effect of redemption: what we receive. We receive the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit

54 *God, Christ and Us*, 63.

55 *God Matters*, 99, 106.

56 Pieter Vos, ‘Calvinists among the Virtues: Reformed Theological Contributions to Contemporary Virtue Ethics’, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 2015, Vol. 28(2), 201.

57 *The New Creation*, 78.

58 *Teaching etc.*, 50.

59 *Ibidem*.

60 *Ibidem*, 61.



Henri De Lubac in his *Le Mystere du surnaturel* (1965),⁶¹ then Juan Alfaro Jimenez in his *Cristología y antropología* (1973),⁶² and then Luis Ladaria in his *Antropología teológica* (1983):⁶³ the main point of this is to trace the supernatural action of grace since the very beginning of the natural action of creation, thus representing human nature as always called to divinisation since its very beginning.

Since Saint Paul's letters, the order of theological virtues starts with faith, continues with hope and ends with charity. Faith – like the other two – is a gift from God which 'saves' us.⁶⁴ This means that perhaps some are given this gift while some others are not; or, better said, all are offered but some accept and some refuse it, even though we do not actually know who they are: for example, not all so-called atheists have rejected the gift of faith. They may simply have rejected some particular image or understanding of the mystery of God; only God knows.⁶⁵

* * *

Faith is a redeeming gift because it is something positive for us humans. It is a sort of optimism, as it were. In fact, the traditional Augustinian doctrine ("intellige ut credas, crede ut intelligas"⁶⁶) points to a reciprocal reinforcement of two acts of ours that are, in any case, necessary, and to whose flourishing it would be regrettable if they conflicted with each other: the act of believing somebody else and the act of examining and understanding reality by ourselves.

As for 'intellige ut credas' (reason culminating in faith), McCabe says that if we examine the reasons of those who reject faith, while pondering their arguments, we could deepen it, distinguishing our faith from prejudices and purifying our beliefs, finding better ways of formulating them.⁶⁷ We see Christians that exercise their reason to state

that they know nothing of God. Christians think that anyone who claims to know God has set up some kind of idol in place of God. Christians say that they are in the dark; it is the special darkness they call faith. Christians are not proud of being in the dark; they just know that they are.⁶⁸

In fact, faith is not fideism (a blind faith not sustained by the 'praeambula fidei', i.e. reasoning): for example, even though Jesus himself says that the *Psalms* were written by David – which is false - this is not actually a matter of faith because it can be solved by a human investigation and, moreover, is not central to Jesus's teaching.⁶⁹

When McCabe was a child, they taught him that Christians show their "loyalty", their "faith" in believing what is so hard to be believed, to embrace humility; the great enemy was 'spiritual pride'. But when he grew up, he disliked this interpretation of faith and was

61 *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed, (London: G Chapman, 1967), new edition by (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998).

62 Ediciones Cristiandad, Madrid.

63 Translated into Italian as *Antropologia Teologica*, (Casale Monferrato-Roma: Piemme-PUG, 1986).

64 Ibidem, 52.

65 Ibidem.

66 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones*, 43:9

67 *Teaching etc.*, 53.

68 'Coming to the Father etc', 321.

69 *The New Creation*, 82.



inclined to favour the view expressed in *Hebrews* : in fact, in this book faith is all related to understanding.⁷⁰

As for 'crede ut intelligas' (faith culminating in reason), McCabe says that in faith we interpret both the history of humanity and our life-story as centred on the love of God as revealed in the Son of God Jesus, so that our eventual understanding of our existential path derives from an initial vitalizing trust that makes us raise our head.⁷¹ On the same line, he says that sinners think they cannot be loved if they reveal their sins: however faith is precisely the conviction - which comes from Jesus - that God loves us even when we are sinners. Therefore, faith comes first, when we still do not see, and understanding of God's love comes second.⁷² While on their life-journey Christians would prefer not to be in the dark and not to be defeated, but they go on all the same, because they do not rely on themselves, in their success and their understanding. Their faith is in the power of God.⁷³

This optimistic experience of integration and reinforcement, as we have seen, is a gift. The Giver hands it out to us through the community of the other receivers, that is, the other faithful, the church. By Baptism, which is the sacrament of faith, we renounce worldly citizenship and become citizens of the future humanity, of which the church is sacrament.⁷⁴ To a candidate for baptism we ask: what do you want from the church of God? And his answer is: faith! The church gives us our faith and also is the custodian of it.⁷⁵ Faith in what? What is central in Jesus's teaching? It is not easy to answer, however it is the whole Christian community who is entitled to say what is central, not individuals.⁷⁶

* * *

If Faith plays an optimistic role in our lives, paradoxically the second virtue, Hope, is not an evidently easy form of optimism. According to Christianity, we just have to accomplish our tasks for justice, for the poor. As for ourselves, because of this struggle for justice, Christian hope goes through suffering and the cross. However, we sacrifice our lives only if we have hope that God will bring life from this defeat.⁷⁷

The principal expression of the virtue of hope is prayer (not only personal, also the divine office and the liturgical year are included).⁷⁸ In fact, it is true that the power of God is also manifest in the growing of the barley and the baking of the bread, and not only, say, in the multiplied loaves; but in the growing and baking we could not notice it: we notice things when they are good and come as an answer to our prayer. Starting from our requests addressed, as children, to our parents, we experience love and gratitude when through prayer we see that we receive good things. However, our parents would have given us those good things in any case, at least most of them. In the same way, but even much more, in the case of God the Father, we do not change his mind but he changes ours, in order that we can recognize what he has given to us, and so we believe in him and love him.⁷⁹

⁷⁰ *God, Christ and Us*, 1.

⁷¹ *Teaching, etc.*, 50.

⁷² *God, Christ and Us*, 60.

⁷³ 'Coming to the Father', 321.

⁷⁴ *God, Christ and Us*, 66-67.

⁷⁵ *The New Creation*, 44.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 82.

⁷⁷ *God, Christ and Us*, 15.

⁷⁸ *Teaching, etc.*, 55, 57-58.

⁷⁹ *God, Christ and Us*, 6.



Because of hope we pray, but Hope is a gift from God and so is prayer also. My prayer is the action of God in me, it is God who prays. In prayer we don't change God's mind, "rather it is God who wants us to change our minds". In fact, prayer, as everything, starts from God. He decides that we pray and he answers our prayer giving us: 1) what we ask, or 2) more than what we ask, but 3) never less than what we ask.⁸⁰ This is the divine side of prayer.

Whereas, the human side of it is the embodiment of it within our life-story and concrete desires. Actually, this is Victor White's idea followed and preached by McCabe: the good prayer is the petitionary prayer, too often despised in favour of 'spiritual' ones. We should ask God the 'little' or 'material' things that we really desire and treat God as a father or a friend; in fact, more than them, he fulfils our good desires and does not listen when we ask for the wrong things.⁸¹ The long 'priestly' prayer of Jesus to the Father, which ends with the trial and the crucifixion, is the 'archetype' of all prayers: Jesus made a petition for his true personal desires and the Father responded to it and satisfied it through the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection.⁸²

In prayer we humans address God, but we do not know what God is. We don't know how to pray because we do not understand whom we are praying to and the best theologian knows of God the same as a small child. This is the reason why we use metaphors – such as Lord or Father – while addressing God: in fact, metaphors tell us clearly that they point to God but do not pretend to describe God.⁸³

Apart from prayer, we exercise the virtue of Hope through contrition, i.e. that pain that comes out of repentance. In fact, we allow ourselves to feel contrition only because we hope that God will forgive us and transform this sinful world. Since prayer and contrition are the actions of hope, they cannot thrive when we fall into the vices opposed to Hope: presumption and despair. Despair says it is useless to pray for God's grace and to work for the Kingdom. Presumption says: it is needless to pray for God's grace and to work for justice and peace. Both vices share an exaggerated estimate of myself and my world instead of confidence in God's love.⁸⁴

* * *

Charity is love as given by God's grace.

This love must be ordered and its hierarchy is: 1) love for God, 2) for ourselves, 3) for our neighbour 4) for our material possessions including our bodily life.⁸⁵ In fact, we are meant to love life passionately, provided that we do not set it above our love for God, ourselves (meaning our moral Self) and our neighbours.⁸⁶ Point 1) and 2) are strictly connected to each other: what is the meaning of loving God? For McCabe, the best answer is to ask what it is to love ourselves; and we can know the latter if we start asking what is *not* to

80 *God Matters*, 222; *God Still Matters*, 71; *God, Christ and Us*, 71, 6-7, 106.

81 *God Matters*, 220-4; *Teaching, etc.*, 56; *God Still Matters*, 73.

82 *God Matters*, 219.

83 *God Still Matters*, 215, 58.

84 *The Teaching, etc.*, 59-60.

85 *Ibidem*, 61.

86 *God Christ and Us*, 65.



love ourselves.⁸⁷ Whereas, point 3) and 4) easily conflict in human lives and often we give up our love for the others because we are attracted by material lesser goods.⁸⁸

Moreover, this love is a supreme value, or ultimate end: to stay in friendship is to treat it as more important than anything else, even life. It is to think that sharing the life is better than an individual life, it is better to die instead of living a long life separated from the Father.⁸⁹

Furthermore, this love must be 'pure', in other words not adulterated by extraneous motives; for example, to aim at riches is to aim at something which sooner or later corrodes friendship: we are not required not to have possessions, actually, but to aim at poverty and not to aim at riches.⁹⁰ Personal friendship is the model for human society according to Aristotle, and also according to Jesus, who put his personal friendships as a model for reciprocal love within the church.⁹¹

In the New Testament the opposite of love is not hatred but fear, which, therefore, is the root of sin. What fear? Fear of not being loved, of thinking that one does not have any importance in the eyes of others (parents, for example), so that we must act a false role in disguise in order to be loved, but fearing that under this disguise there is nothing.⁹²

Charity, like the other two theological virtues, is a gift from outside, we learn to love when we *are* loved, we cannot gain charity by introspection, because it is a sharing of life with God. Therefore, the root of love is Faith, our faith that God loves us so that we can love ourselves and be grateful for the gift of ourselves. This is the meaning of 'loving God'.⁹³

* * *

If, according to a long-lasting tradition, we can understand through reason that the world has been created and that God loves us and wants us to become his friends, this we would have never understood if God had not revealed it to us. That God is capable of love because he loves Jesus is something "revealed to us" through Israel and the Church not as a piece of information about God but "in the act of God's taking us up into his love".⁹⁴ The work of the theological virtues in us is not, therefore, against our very nature of rational animals, but is, supposedly, something 'beyond' it. We need this 'beyond' because the act of death is both our inevitable doom and something that exceeds our capabilities; exactly as Faith does, and Hope as well, because it is hope in the resurrection, something which exceeds our nature.⁹⁵ McCabe lived in an era of transition between a society used to religious practices, imbued with religious culture and overseen by religious institutions, and a society like ours where less than one tenth of British people attend church on Sundays. However, he was already aware as well as we are that it is impossible to keep Faith without living somehow in a Christian community. All the same, when he speaks of the 'transformation' operated by life in Grace through the theological virtues, the reader cannot help feeling that these values of faith, hope and love are not meant just for the few committed Christians, but are intended for all.

87 Ibidem, 70.

88 *The Teaching, etc.*, 64.

89 *God, Christ and Us*, 49.

90 Ibidem, 56.

91 Ibidem, 57.

92 Ibidem, 17, 70.

93 Ibidem, 71; *The New Creation*, 72.

94 *God, Christ and Us*, 63; *God Matters*, 18-19.

95 *The New Creation*, 131. *God Still Matters*, 63.



CONCLUDING AND CONTEXTUALISING

How to place McCabe's soteriology in the context of other soteriologies? In the first place, its strongest emphasis is on redemption as a supernatural transformation: both humanity and individual persons are called to share the mysterious and unpredictable divine nature.

In fact, his interest in Aristotelian virtue ethics serves to counter the moralism of Kant's legalism, which he did not find consistent with the spirit of his times, i.e. with the spirit prevailing from the Sixties onwards with all those various movements of sexual emancipation and non-conformist customs in general. But acquiring virtues is still on this side of the human/divine divide: the outcomes of our transformation are not predictable.

Secondly, as for the aspect concerning atonement and reconciliation of the sinner man with God, McCabe has his preferences among the various theories.

In fact, there are many of them and recent theologians have committed themselves to group the minor and classify the main ones. Ted Peters distinguishes six kinds: 1) Jesus as teacher of true knowledge; 2) Jesus as moral example and influence; 3) Jesus as the victorious champion and liberator; 4) Jesus as our satisfaction; 5) Jesus as the happy exchange; and 6) Jesus as the final scapegoat.⁹⁶ Green and Baker distinguish five types: 1) court of law (justification), 2) commerce (redemption), 3) personal relationship (reconciliation), 4) worship (sacrifice), 5) battleground (triumph over evil).⁹⁷ Colin Gunton four, coming from as many life environments: 1) the battlefield (victory against demons), 2) the temple (sacrifice), 3) the slave market (redemption) and the 4) law courts (justice).⁹⁸ Gustaf Aulén three: 1) the satisfaction or Latin theory from Anselm, Aquinas and the Reformers; 2) the moral influence theory, from Abelard, Peter Lombard and liberal Protestant theologians of the 19th century; and 3) Christus Victor, what Aulén called the "classic" view, from the Fathers of the church both Eastern and Western.⁹⁹

As we have already seen, McCabe is quite far from the Anselmian model of "vicarious satisfaction" and, on this point, he differs not only from Calvin but also from Aquinas. Instead, he is close to the theologians of his time such as Paul Fiddes, who prefers the moral influence model,¹⁰⁰ just as McCabe says that Jesus saves us by his human sanctity. He is similar also to Green and Baker who criticize the Penal Substitutionary Atonement theory because it is too anthropomorphic and is based on the ideology of success in life and, so, an easy way to explain failures.¹⁰¹ And he is close to J. Denny Weaver who opposes the violent dimensions of satisfaction atonement and proposes a revised version of Christus Victor theory; for Weaver we do not need to explain why the Father sent Jesus to his death:

In narrative Christus Victor, the cause of Jesus' death is obviously not God. /.../ Rather, in narrative Christus Victor the Son is carrying out the Father's will by making the reign of God visible in the world — and that mission is so threatening to the world that sinful human beings and the accumulation of evil they represent conspire to kill Jesus. Jesus came

96 Ted Peters, 'Six Ways of Salvation: How Does Jesus Save?', *Dialog*, Volume 45, Issue3/Fall2006, 223.

97 Joel Green and Mark Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 23.

98 Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988).

99 Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, Wipf & Stock Publishers (Sept. 2003).

100 Paul Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: the Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1989).

101 Joel Green and Mark Baker, *Recovering the Scandal etc*, 24-25.



not to die but to live, to witness to the reign of God in human history. While he may have known that carrying out that mission would provoke inevitably fatal opposition his purpose was not to get himself killed. /.../ Jesus depicted in narrative Christus Victor is no passive victim. He is an active participant in confronting evil. /.../ His saving life shows how the reign of god confronts evil, and is thus our model for confronting injustice /.../. It means actively confronting injustice, and in that confrontation, we continue with Jesus to make the rule of God visible in a world where evil still has sway.¹⁰²

In Weaver's words we recognise the same points so dear to McCabe, who linked continuously two models of redemption – moral influence and Christus Victor – to provide a Christological hub for the revolutionary struggles for justice which seemed to him so important in the politics of his times.

In fact, McCabe, as a person strongly committed to the public affairs of his times, from the Sixties onward admired many aspects of the political revolutions taking place in Vietnam, Ireland, and Cuba and other Latin American countries. More generally, for him, it is important and good to unmask the lie of the powerful and rich that their interests coincide with the interests of the community¹⁰³. These revolutions, like those of the 19th century in France, Ireland and Italy, are not just 'secular' events: in fact, the Christians 'belong with them', even though they do not 'belong to them' because the Christian revolution goes more deeply to the 'ultimate alienation of humans', sin, and the 'ultimate transformation which is death and resurrection' after Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁴

102 J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

103 *God Matters*, 184.

104 Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love and Language*, (1968) (London: Continuum, 2004), 166.



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