New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12735

Introduction

Brian Davies OP

I

This March 2022 issue of *New Blackfriars* is a special one devoted to the proceedings of two recent conferences. To begin with, we have six articles deriving from the 2021 meeting of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain. The title of that conference was 'Eco-Theology: A New Heaven and a New Earth'. Then there are four papers coming out of a one day conference held at Blackfriars, Oxford, to commemorate Herbert McCabe OP (1926-2001). The title of that conference was 'The Philosophy of Herbert McCabe'. It took place on November 13th 2021.

New Blackfriars has published the proceedings of CTA conferences for a number of years. The present collection of essays was edited by Dr Geoffrey Turner, who has kindly written the following by way of introducing it.

II

'With the publication of *Laudato si'* and the meeting of COP26 in Glasgow it was almost inevitable that the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain should hold its annual conference of 2021 on theology and the created environment. This was a conference organised jointly with the Irish Theological Association. It was intended originally to be held in 2020 in Maynooth, Ireland, but had to be postponed because of Covid-19. This postponement led to cancellations and late changes of speakers and finally had to be held as a set of virtual seminars on Zoom. The original short presentations have since been extended and written up in the light of the Zoomed discussions so that the speakers could have the space to do their arguments justice. All this has led, we hope, to a significant, if small, contribution to a growing and certainly important discussion.

'Our "little blue dot" is under threat as never before, but whatever human sin and stupidity and carelessness might do to our planet, Christian theology will always reject the idea that the whole of

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12735 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reality will disappear; there will always be the Creator and probably some form of creation.

'And Christian eschatology will never accept that this world will go on forever as it is. Human reality will come to an end, but what we hope for is transformation, not oblivion. The hope for divine transformation (a hope rooted in the resurrection of Jesus) may lead to the temptation of Quietism – that the environment is out of our hands and there is nothing we can or should do to interfere with it. Such an attitude is more akin to hopelessness. Christian ethics demands that we mirror our Creator and that with care and solicitude and determination we work towards a transformation that only God can complete. Indeed we would like something worthwhile to still be around for God to work on, to say nothing of redeeming the suffering that is already taking place among our brothers and sisters because of the way we are damaging our planet.

'The first contribution comes from Celia Deane-Drummond, who begins by introducing us in a general way to eco-theology. Because of the discussion at the conference, she is aware that some ground has to be cleared to show why theologians should engage with science and become, in some preliminary way, scientifically literate. Once over that hurdle, her main concern is with biodiversity and its relation to climate change and poverty, and ultimately to issues of social justice. Her aim is to work towards an ethics of biodiversity that draws on Pope Francis's *Laudato si'* and Thomas Aquinas's understanding of practical wisdom.

'In order to do "eco-theology at the foot of the cross", Peter Tyler takes up the challenge of *Laudato si'* by exploring how "nature" is understood in the modern world. The main influence that is explored in our secular world is that of Nietzsche, always a difficult opponent for Christian theologians. But theologians have been able to draw on older traditions to open a Christological perspective on nature, and Tyler finds such an approach in Gerard Manley Hopkins, an exact contemporary of Nietzsche. He concludes with an exposition of *The Wreck of the Deutschland*.

'Salvador Ryan is concerned with how Catholics in particular relate to the material world they find themselves in, indeed of which they are a part. Christian thinking has long been bedevilled by a Platonism that has separated the physical and spiritual and placed Christian believers firmly in the spiritual realm together with the Trinitarian God. This has affected talk about body and soul, flesh and spirit, and, of course, creation. Professor Ryan notes the semi-Docetism of much piety around Jesus and in too much of what passes for orthodox Christology. All this has had a baneful effect on Catholic attitudes towards materiality and the physical, created world. Ryan asks, are we a part of the material world or apart from it?

'Cathriona Russell looks at how a Christian ethics of the environment might develop in the light of the challenge laid down in *Laudato*

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si'. She is interested in "integral ecology" and wants to see how creation theology is affected when looked at in the perspective of autonomy, human freedom and human agency. This involves determining how technology should to be used creatively on the created world rather than having technology dominate humanity and the world in general. In particular Professor Russell reviews the legislation for drones and considers the danger they can pose for bird habitats. She also promotes the use of bicycles!

'Ashley Beck, the retiring President of the British CTA, who did much to organize this conference, engages with pastoral theology through a reading of the Pastoral Letter on the environment that the bishops of England and Wales, and of Scotland, published for Pentecost 2021 to be read in all parishes. He shows how the letter is grounded in traditions of Catholic Social Teaching and relates the urgency of the letter for all Catholics to our doctrine of the Holy Spirit. He then reflects on what he calls three footprints of the Spirit: rationality, unity in diversity, and urgency. While they invite further development, these footprints are to guide our engagement with the environment.

'Finally, Peter Scherle, who completed a Master's in Ireland in 1990 and who has taught future ministers for the German Evangelical Church in Hesse (Darmstadt) for the last twenty years, offers a serious piece of dogmatic theology. After a brief account of recent eco-theology, he identifies two basic types: one that is eco-centric and one theo-centric. Being in the Barthian tradition, it is understandable that Scherle focuses on the latter, where he finds it necessary to do some serious rethinking of pneumatology (which relates to Ashley Beck's paper) and ethics (which relates to Cathriona Russell). Creation *ex nihilo* becomes central, where creation is seen not as "a saga about the origin of things" but as "itself a soteriological and eschatological category". In pursuit of the ethical implications of this, Scherle seeks to regain a realistic sense of the political and of nature, and has a final note on the place of the eucharist'.

III

The idea of a one-day conference on Herbert McCabe's philosophy originated with Simon Hewitt (University of Leeds) in light of the fact that, while McCabe's writings are widely appreciated by theologians, the same is not the case when it comes to philosophers (even though McCabe had important things to say on philosophy of religion and ethics).

To be sure, there are distinguished philosophers who admire McCabe as a philosopher. An example is Anthony Kenny. In *Brief Encounters: Notes from a Philosopher's Diary* (SPCK, 2018), he says that, when he first arrived at Oxford University, he found McCabe to be 'one of the

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most interesting people to discuss philosophy with, not only by comparison with other Catholics but by comparison to anyone in the university'. Kenny goes on to say that McCabe was 'a man of extremely sharp intelligence, and there is no doubt that if he had chosen to pursue an academic career he could have become one of the most distinguished philosophers in the country'. But it is still true that McCabe is better known among theologians than philosophers. And Simon Hewitt's idea was that, at a time when there is a renewed interest in theological topics among analytic philosophers, it seemed worthwhile to promote the potential of McCabe for feeding into 'analytic theology'.

The Aquinas Institute at Blackfriars agreed with Hewitt and (with assistance from Richard Conrad OP and Oliver Keenan OP) helped to organize the 2021 McCabe event as part of the English Dominican Province's celebration of the arrival of the Dominicans in Oxford in 1221 (the September 2021 issue of *New Blackfriars* also marks this historical landmark). The keynote speakers at Blackfriars on November 13th 2021 were Stephen Mulhall, Mark Wynn, Matthew Dunch, Anastasia Scrutton, and Franco Manni. Anastasia Scrutton was unable to work up her talk (on McCabe and privation) for publication in this issue of *New Blackfriars*. So her contribution does not appear below.

Mulhall and Wynn share a common interest in what Aquinas says about the Eucharist. Mulhall ranges over all of section 4 of McCabe's *God Matters* (1987). Wynn focuses on one chapter of that book. And both of them, while trying to expound what McCabe writes, attempt to indicate how it can be defended. Mulhall lays emphasis on how it might be thought that McCabe's approach to the Eucharist is in line with Wittgenstein's idea that there are ways in which we can speak which try to mean more than we can express in the language we use — ways that are not to be dismissed even though they might jar with common understandings of that language.

Wynn focuses on McCabe's suggestion that, in the Eucharist, 'our language has become Christ's body'. He indicates how sense can be made of this suggestion while respecting the fact that McCabe defended the 'real presence' of Christ in the Eucharist just as much as Aquinas did.

Some readers of McCabe have taken his respect for Wittgenstein to have resulted in theological views that are far removed from those of Aquinas (and Catholic orthodoxy). Some have said that, while Aquinas was a 'realist', McCabe was not. This seems to be the view of Francesca Murphy in *God is Not a Story* (OUP, 2007). In 'Herbert McCabe's Realism', however, Matthew Dunch SJ gives reasons for thinking that this reading of McCabe is misguided. McCabe's writings, Dunch suggests, are shot through with the conviction that what is most real (God) is what is most important (being the mysterious source of all creatures). This thought is echoed in Franco Manni's 'Knowledge, Freedom and the Meaning of Life according to Herbert McCabe',

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which enthusiastically aims to give readers a sense of some of McCabe's key ideas.

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