New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Omnia Opera*

Fr Herbert McCabe died in hospital in Oxford on 28 June 2001, aged 74. *God and Evil in the Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (Continuum 2010) is the tenth and last of his works. Paradoxically, it reproduces the first that he composed, the dissertation submitted in 1957 in part completion of his formal studies in the Dominican Order. He saw four books into print: *The New Creation* (1964), talks to university students about the sacraments; *Law, Love and Language* (1968), lectures on the basis of ethics; *The Teaching of the Catholic Church* (1985), a version of the catechism, commissioned by the then Archbishop of Birmingham; and *God Matters* (1987), a miscellany of lectures and sermons. Now, under the careful editorship of Brian Davies, his literary executor, we have *God Still Matters* (2002); *God, Christ and Us* (2003); *The Good Life* (2005); *Faith within Reason* (2007); and *On Aquinas* (2008). Thus the *omnia opera* are complete.

Herbert went to Manchester University in 1944 to study chemistry but changed course and graduated in philosophy. The philosophy department was under the leadership of a remarkable woman, Dorothy Emmett. She arrived in 1938 as lecturer in the philosophy of religion. In 1946 she took over the principal philosophy chair. Since her Oxford undergraduate days, influenced by A.D. Lindsay, she combined philosophy with 'progressive' social and political concerns. Her first book, *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking* (1945), responded to logical positivism by maintaining that metaphysics uses concepts analogically to develop an arguable way of interpreting the world. How Herbert judged the book, or whether he ever read, or was even aware of the existence of, any of the half dozen or so books that Emmett subsequently published, remains unknown. It was Emmett's 'fate', according to Alasdair MacIntyre, also doing philosophy at Manchester, 'to provoke her most gifted pupils into sharp, but constructive disagreement of a dialectically skilful kind' (see his foreword to *God Still Matters*) — which sounds as if she left her mark on Herbert! Emmett retired to Cambridge in 1966, where she returned to philosophical theology as one of the Epiphany Philosophers. She died in 2000 aged 95.

Herbert never studied theology at any institution outside the Dominican Order. In 1989 he was awarded the degree of Master of Sacred Theology: the highest academic honour that the Order confers. He belonged to a generation of Catholic theologians who

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never — incredible as this will seem a few years from now — pursued doctoral studies at any secular or Catholic university. Widely respected in his life time as a theologian and especially as an exponent of the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas, he would no doubt be surprised and amused at the way in which his books have increasingly 'entered the literature' (as they say) since his death. It is not too much to claim, as the back cover of *God Still Matters* asserts, that Herbert is now recognized as 'one of the most intelligent Roman Catholic thinkers of the twentieth century' — laughable as he would have regarded such hyperbole. Certainly, however, his books are being read: they are cited in footnotes in the professional journals, they are quoted in examination scripts at the best universities.

Whatever the influences on Herbert, friends and colleagues are happy to acknowledge their debt to him. Stanley Hauerwas (a name to conjure with!) describes *Law, Love and Language* as 'one of the most important books to have been written in ethics and theology in the last century' (see his essay in this journal, May 2005). *Faith within Reason* is prefaced by Denys Turner, *On Aquinas* by Anthony Kenny, and (as noted above) Alasdair MacIntyre wrote the foreword to *God Still Matters.* Terry Eagleton, finally, contributes the foreword to *God and Evil*.

While the question of God was always at the centre of Herbert's theological reflections, it would no doubt be easier to engage with the essays on God and evil in *God Matters* and *Faith within Reason*, as indeed Brian Davies suggests, rather than with the argument in *God and Evil*: it is, after all, 'a fairly formal work', an 'academic dissertation', displaying nothing of that 'highly engaging and personal style of writing' — even to the point of being 'chatty' — which characterizes Herbert's other books. Nevertheless it is good to have this early work, no doubt more taxing for non-professionals, yet welcome as the overture to a remarkably coherent body of theological reflection.

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