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Herbert McCabe on God and Humanity

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Abstract

Over the eight hundred years of the English Dominican province, few of its members have matched the rigour and depth of thought of Herbert McCabe. This paper presents a brief overview of McCabe's thought, focusing first on his understanding of God and then on his conception of human beings. Like Thomas before him, McCabe thought it vital to think clearly and correctly about both God and humanity, an effort which in the case of God involves recognising the many ways in which we cannot think of God.

Keywords

Herbert McCabe, apophaticism, theological anthropology, christology, doctrine of God

Over the eight hundred years of the English Dominican province, few of its members have matched the rigour and depth of thought of Herbert McCabe (1926-2001). Both a theologian and a philosopher, McCabe was grounded in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, which he brought into dialogue with insights from contemporary analytic philosophy, especially Wittgenstein. This intellectual orientation – sometimes considered to be part of a wider movement known as 'grammatical thomism'[1] – combined with a social consciousness to make for a unique voice in Christian thought.[2] McCabe's influence was considerable, with a diverse range of figures including Alasdair MacIntyre, Denys Turner, and Terry Eagleton acknowledging intellectual debts to him.

This paper presents a brief overview of McCabe's thought, focusing first on his understanding of God and then on his conception of human beings. Like Thomas before him, McCabe thought it vital to think clearly and correctly about both God and humanity, an effort which in the case of God involves recognising the many ways in which we

[1] Others included within the remit of grammatical thomism are David Burrell and Fergus Kerr. For scepticism about the label, see Kerr 2016. For an application, see Mulhall (2015).

[2] On McCabe's social and political thought, see Hewitt 2018.

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cannot think of God. Theological muddle, often with practical and pastoral consequences, follows from failing to do this groundwork. After presenting McCabe's ideas on these topics, the paper moves to consider his understanding of the coming together of God and humanity in the Incarnation of the divine Word.

God the Creator

In the *Summa Theologiae*, immediately after having (as he sees it) demonstrated the existence of God, Aquinas significantly qualifies his achievement,

> When the existence of a thing has been ascertained there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know its essence. Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering what God is, but rather how He is not.[3]

Following Aquinas, central to McCabe's doctrine of God is that we do not, and cannot, know what God is. Moreover, as with Aquinas, this apophaticism co-exists with a commitment to the demonstrability of God's existence. The universe, on this view, poses a question about its existence. Because the question is a real one, God exists, since God is whatever answers the question. But we cannot know what that is.

McCabe supplies a striking answer to the question what it is to say that God exists,

> In my view to assert that God exists is to claim the right and need to carry on an activity, to be engaged in research, and I think this throws light on what we are doing if we try to prove the existence of God. To prove the existence of God is to prove that some questions still need asking, that the world poses these questions for us.[4]

This could be misunderstood. McCabe does not intend to reduce talk of God to talk of a human activity of enquiry, as though saying 'God exists' were simply a pious way of talking about our own curiosity. Rather the point is a version of an ancient one: that attention to creatures, and in particular to the fact that they exist (rather than nothing), is a route to God. Augustine articulates the same position memorably,

> 'And what is he?' I asked the earth; and it answered, 'I am not he'. And everything on earth made the same confession. I asked the sea and the deeps, and the creeping things that lived, and they replied, 'We are not your God. Seek higher than we'. I asked the breezy air; and the universal atmosphere with its inhabitants answered, 'I am not God'. I asked the

[3] STh I, q3, pr.
[4] McCabe 1987, p. 2.

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> heavens, the sun, moon, and stars: 'Neither,' they said, 'are we the God whom you seek'.
>
> And I answered all these things which crowd about the door of my flesh, 'You have told me concerning my God that you are not he. Tell me something positive about him!' And with a loud voice they exclaimed: 'he made us'.[5]

The McCabian theist thinks that there is a meaningful question why things exist rather than nothing. 'God' is the name of whatever answers that question (and McCabe, as we will see, thinks that we cannot know *what* that is). God is the source of what Aquinas terms the *esse* of created beings, their existence over and against nothing. And it is that there is such a source that we are asserting when we say 'God exists'. Although God is independent of us and our enquiring activity, that we can enquire after God certainly means that theists have a more interesting and active intellectual life than those who refuse to ask the God-question. They are like inquisitive children, as yet not susceptible to the weight of social convention, and prepared to go on asking 'why?'

McCabe illustrates this by noting the different ways we can ask, of a dog, 'how come Fido?'[6] The question could communicate an enquiry after Fido's parentage, or after the evolutionary biology of dogs, or the biochemistry of living organisms, or even after the astrophysics that provides the conditions for there to be living organisms. In each case, something about the existence of Fido is being asked about, and contrasted with an alternative – how come Fido is this particular dog (rather than some other)?[7], how come there are dogs at all (rather than simply all the other biological organisms)?,and so on. All of these forms of question are recognised as legitimate by theists, atheists, and agnostics alike. The theist, however, is prepared to ask an additional, and more radical question,

> Now our ultimate radical question is not how come Fido exists as this dog instead of that, or how come Fido exists as a dog rather than a giraffe, or exists as living instead of inanimiate, but how come Fido *instead of nothing*, and just as to ask how come he exists as a dog is to put him in the context of dogs, so to ask how come he exists instead of nothing is to put him in the context of *everything*, the universe or world. And this is the question I call the God-question, because whatever the answer is, whatever the thing or state-of-affairs, whatever the existing reality that answers it we call 'God'.[8]

To say that Fido is given being by God is to say that Fido is *created*. And, for McCabe, everything other than God is created, since the

[5] *Confessions* X.vi.
[6] McCabe 1987, p. 3.
[7] McCabe 1987, pp. 3-5.
[8] McCabe 1987, p. 5.

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question of its existence over and against nothing can be raised intelligibly.[9] To deny creation is to deny the intelligibility of the question, 'why is there something rather than nothing?' Plenty of philosophers have made, and continue to make, this denial: the most famous example is Bertrand Russell in debate with the Jesuit Frederick Coppleston.[10] It is on this terrain of intelligibility that the debate between the theist and the atheist ought to be played out.

Creation is a much misunderstood notion. Is is not concerned especially with the temporal beginning of the universe; McCabe notes approvingly Thomas' view that, as far as natural reason can know, the universe might have had no beginning, but can still be recognised as created.[11] Creation, instead, is the act by which God makes everything other than God to be, over and against nothing, for every moment of its existence. Creation is to be distinguished sharply from *making*; things are made out of pre-existing materials – a potter makes a pot out of clay. Making is something entities within the world do to other entities within the world. Manipulating some amongst those entities, the maker makes a difference, brings about a change in things, through making one entity (or some stuff) into another entity. Whereas, as McCabe is fond of insisting, 'God makes no difference to the universe'.[12] God is not an entity in the world, acting from within the world to manipulate and change other entities. Rather, God makes all that is in the world to be at every moment of its existence. God does not make a difference, so much as make there to be a universe within which differences can be made. God is not an actor, God built the stage – only that metaphor too has its limits, because stages are built out of something.

Because anything that could possibly exist, other than God, would have to be created by God, there is no particular feature of the universe that, to the exclusion of others, points to the universe being created by God. A universe lacking any given feature would be no less created, and there could be no uncreated feature of a universe. For this reason, McCabe rejects a form of argument for the existence of God common in modern philosophy which argues from particular features of the world to the existence of a designer.[13] Causes within the world, which make a difference to the world, leave distinctive features from which the cause's existence can be inferred. Hence from a watch, we may infer the existence, if not these days of a watchmaker, at least of

[9] Compare here van Inwagen 2009.
[10] Copleston & Russell 1948.
[11] Aquinas *De Aeternitate Mundi*.
[12] McCabe 1987, p. 6.
[13] McCabe 1987, p. 6. There are important discussions in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

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a designer. God, however, makes no difference to the world. The only trace of God is the sheer existence of things, howsoever they may be:[14]

> Creation, then, does not make any difference to things. If you like, it makes all the difference, but you cannot expect to find a 'created look' about things. The effect of creation is just that things are there, being themselves, instead of nothing.[15]

Those who think otherwise, thinks McCabe, have tacitly smuggled some illicit content into their conception of God; when looking for the divine signature in reality they are doing so in the light of the implicit question 'what would *I* do if *I* were God?' Quite apart from its being susceptible to criticism in the light of the great critiques of religion as projection, formulated by Feuerbach and Freud, if we give in to the temptation to think about God and creation in this way, we domesticate God, making God altogether too comprehensible, as though he were an agent with designs and intentions much like our own. The scriptural warning 'my thoughts are not your thoughts'[16] ought to sound in our ears. McCabe is attentive to that warning and insists that we cannot know what God is, rejecting accordingly any theological project which claims otherwise.

Apophaticism – The Unknown God

McCabe's approach to God, and to reading Aquinas on the doctrine of God, was profoundly influenced by his Dominican teacher, Victor White. A passage from White's *God the Unknown* expresses a theme that is pivotal for McCabe,

> St Thomas's position differs from that of modern agnostics because while modern agnosticism says simply, 'We do not know, and the universe is a mysterious riddle', a Thomist says, 'We do not know what the answer is, but we do know that there is a mystery behind it all which we do not know, and if there were not, there would not even be a riddle. This Unknown we call God. If there were no God, there would be no universe to be mysterious, and nobody to be mystified'.[17]

Following White, and Aquinas before him, McCabe is an *apophatic* theologian, denying that we can (in this life, at least) know the nature of God, and insisting on the radical inadequacy of our language before

[14] C.f. Wittgenstein, 'Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is' (TLP 6.44).
[15] McCabe 2002, p. 11.
[16] Isaiah 55:8.
[17] White 1956, pp. 230-1.

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the divine reality.[18] In Aquinas, apophatic themes occur at an early point in the *Summa Theologiae*. Having, as he sees it, demonstrated the existence of God,[19] Thomas goes on to say,

> When the existence of a thing has been ascertained there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know its essence. Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what he is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how he is not.[20]

Much of what McCabe has to say about God consists in reiterating these words of Aquinas. We cannot, McCabe tells us repeatedly, know what God is. This apophatic theology is likely to meet with bemusement from people formed in contemporary philosophy. 'What do you mean we do not know what God is?' these characters will ask, 'You – McCabe, and others in the tradition of Aquinas, claim to know all sorts of things about God: God is supremely powerful and loving; God is the creator; God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit; God forgives us, and so on'. And this is correct, McCabe does sign up to a lot of positive claims about God, which are candidates for knowledge[21] either because we can arrive at them by reasoning or (more often) because they have been revealed to us by God. But there is an important sense, he holds, in which none of these claims tell us *what God is*. This is because McCabe, following Aquinas and Aristotle, thinks that there is a particular way of knowing what something is which consists in possessing a definition of the kind of thing that particular thing is. So, for instance, you can know what I am because you can come to know that I am a human being, defined (at least for Aristotle and Aquinas) as a rational animal. And on the basis of this definition you can know a good deal about what it is appropriate to say about me or enquire after concerning me. You can intelligibly ask about my heart rate; you cannot intelligibly enquire after my prime divisors (I am, after all, an animal, not a number!)

Knowing what kind of thing something is usually forms the basis of our understanding of how to talk about and reason concerning that

[18] 'He is always dressed verbally in second-hand clothes that don't fit him very well. We always have to be on our guard against taking those clothes as revealing who and what he is', 2002, p.3.

[19] Against the claims of some theologians, particularly those associated with the *Radical Orthodoxy* school, it's important to be clear that Aquinas did think that rational demonstrations of God's existence were possible, and that he had provided such demonstrations in STh Ia, q3, a2. O'Grady 2014 is a good guide, engaging with present day theology. Note also that Aquinas was working on his commentary on Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* at the same time as part one of the *Summa*, so we know how he understands demonstration.

[20] STh Ia, q3, pr.

[21] In the modern sense of 'knowledge' at least. The thomist tradition has tended to distinguish between faith and, what Thomas terms, *scientia*. For recent advocacy of the older view see Antagnozza 2019.

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thing, what – following Wittgenstein – we might call the grammar of the thing.[22] Since in the case of God we cannot know what she is, our capacity to speak and reason about God is accordingly restricted. But why can we not know what God is? Here again McCabe stays close to Thomas. It is vital that we deny anything creaturely of God. If God is the reason why there is something rather than nothing, that which creates everything in the world over and against nothing, then God had better not be one of the world's inhabitants, on pain of a vicious regress. So, argues McCabe, we have to deny anything of God that would mark her out as one of the world's inhabitants,

> If God is whatever answers our question, how come everything? then evidently he is not to be included amongst everything. He is not a thing, an existent among others. It is not possible that God and the universe should add up to make two….
>
> I have said that whatever God is, he is not a member of everything, not an inhabitant of the universe, not a thing or a kind of thing. And I should add, I suppose, that it cannot be possible to ask of him, how come God instead of nothing? It must not be possible for him to be nothing.[23]

In the background here is Thomas' approach to divine simplicity. Having argued, in the second question of the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*, that God exists, Thomas maintains that, since we cannot know what God is, the correct approach is to go on to say systematically what God is not.[24] The doctrine of divine simplicity, which holds that there is no composition in God, no coming together of separate parts of components, is his way of doing this. It is characteristic of creatures that they are composite in various ways: I have material parts (as do all bodies); I have properties that are distinct from myself (the brownness of my hair is not the same thing as me; indeed I could exist without that property - I could go bald); I am a coming together of what is actual and what is merely potential (I am actually tired, but only potentially drunk); and (importantly for Thomas, although jarring to ears attuned to contemporary philosophy) there is a distinction between *what* I am and *that* I am (I am a human being, but it is no part of what it is to be human *that* I exist – so the what and the that need to come together for me to exist, in Aquinas' terms I need both essence and esse: I need to be created). None of these modes of composition apply to God. God is not a body, contains no potentiality, does not possess properties distinct from himself, and is such that it is inherent in what she is that she exists. In all of these respects, God is radically unlike ourselves and unlike the objects of our everyday experience and scientific theorising, and so may only tentatively (at best) be spoken of using languages crafted for

[22] 'Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)' (PI 373).
[23] 1987, p. 6.
[24] SthTIa, q3.

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these mundane entities. Apophaticism flows from affirmation of divine simplicity.

But if it is clear enough why the radical 'otherness' of God, expressed by the doctrine of divine simplicity, imposes a certain hesitancy on theological language, why should we think that it rules out, in particular, our being able to say what God is?[25] Recall that this would involve being able to offer a definition of God, singling him out as one of a particular kind of thing, just as you can single me out as a human being, a rational animal, or a water molecule as a certain kind of compound of hydgrogen and oxygen. Notice that in both these cases, I am appealing to properties of the things in question – being rational, being an animal, containing oxygen, containing hydrogen – that are distinct from the things themselves and could be shared with other things (I am not the only animal, for instance). According to the doctrine of divine simplicity God has no such properties – all that God has, God is. So, in particular, no properties can be singled out as belonging to God which distinguish her as being a thing of a kind. God is no kind of thing.

McCabe on Human Beings

For McCabe, then, it is foundational for theology to get clear about the nature of God (or, rather, about why God's nature must be such that we cannot grasp it). It is similarly important to get clear about the nature of human beings. A perpetual temptation for religious thought is to imagine that we are fundamentally not material beings, that we are somehow like angels, perhaps temporarily equipped with a body but destined ultimately to be free from this encumbrance. We are, it might be suggested, to be identified with our souls. Kerr writes of, 'the Origenist theology which secretes a philosophy of psychology that tends to represent human beings as angels fallen into flesh'.[26] Against such theology McCabe agrees with Thomas, 'my soul is not me'.[27] We are human animals, inhabitants of the material world. To get clear about how McCabe understands what it is to be a human animal we should examine first animality, which we have in common with other animals, before going on to consider what is distinctively human.

As I write this, our lurcher, Lola, is lying on the sofa near where I am typing. Her ear is pricked up, listening no doubt for the postman who calls at around this time in the morning, and at whom she will, in spite of all attempts to train her to do otherwise, bark. Thinking about Lola provides a way in to thinking about animality. Lola is, first of all,

[25] For a more thorough treatment of divine simplicity and apophaticism see Davies 1992, Ch. 3. Also see Hewitt 2020, Ch. 6.

[26] Kerr 1997, p. 168.

[27] 1 Ad. Cor. 15

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alive, she is functioning as an organism (I can see her chest moving up and down as I write). Living beings, which include plants as well as animals, have a certain kind of unity to them, which distinguishes them from merely artificial assemblages such as machines. Here McCabe takes his lead from Aristotle as well as Aquinas:

> Life is some kind of autonomy, some kind of independence or freedom, some kind of self-originating. Fred is alive when, if one part of Fred moves another part of Fred, Fred is moving Fred. This occurs just when each part of Fred is Fred. This is the case when the parts of Fred are organs… An organ is a part of a structure which is most fundamentally defined as a part of the whole structure.[28]

Through its organs, the whole living being acts. Lola is listening with her ear (it would be strange to say that the ear listens: rather, the whole dog listens with her ear). She will, alas, bark with her mouth.

This much, the particular kind of unity distinctive of living organisms, is true not only of Lola, but also of the spider plant on my desk, through the movement of the leaves the whole plant displays phototropism. But Lola is not simply alive, she is an animal. And that, according to McCabe, involves the world being meaningful for her.

> The sense organs of an animal are the means by which the world is meaningful to it. The forms and structures of the world around it are taken up into the complex organic structures of the animal body and thereby become meanings for that animal.[29]

Parts of the world assume a significance for Lola. The sausages defrosting in the kitchen are smelled and identified as tasty. The postman is heard and encountered as a threat. This understanding of animality in terms of meaning is McCabe giving a Wittgensteinian colouring to Aristotle's account of animals as *sensitive*. To be alive in McCabe's sense is, moreover, to be – in more traditional language – in possession of a soul. The difference from the Cartesian view is evident: far from being conceptually separable from embodiment, having a soul is precisely a matter of how a material body is organised as a unity. Having an animal soul is, in addition, a matter of a body being susceptible to meaning.

In what does the difference between humans and other animals consist? In a word, language. To adapt an example of Wittgenstein: Lola can be happy that I have come home after a walk, she cannot be happy that I will return home next week. By contrast, suppose that Lola is spending a few days at a friend's house – I can be happy at the prospect of her returning home in a few days.[30] The difference is that I possess

[28] McCabe 2005, p. 59.
[29] McCabe 2005, p. 65.
[30] PI 650.

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language, and so can possess concepts such as 'in a few days time' and 'next Wednesday'. Through language more of the world becomes meaningful for us.

This capacity for linguistic meaning is, according to McCabe, constitutive of human freedom: 'it is [the] creative capacity to make new ways of interpreting the world that consitutes our freedom'.[31] The open-ended possibilities for interpreting the world that come with linguistic ability enable us to form judgements about what is good and desirable, judgements that might differ from those of others. Language also, and crucially, enables us to form intentions:

> What is special about the human animals is that we not only, like the dog, have things we like to do and things we are reluctant to do, we also formulate aims and intentions for ourselves. This formulation or setting of aims can only be expressed by saying 'We did what amounted to saying to ourselves: "This is what I am trying to achieve and this is how I am going to achieve it"'. This is different from simply having an aim in that you might not have formulated it or set it for yourself. It is just this 'is-but-might-not-have-been' that language exists to express.[32]

McCabe's understanding of human beings as essentially linguistic is his way of presenting, in a Wittgensteinian mode, Aristotle and Aquinas' understanding of human beings as *rational* animals. It is striking that the resulting view is one on which rationality, far from being a private and purely cerebral affair, is thoroughly social. Language is a social practice, one to which we need to be introduced by others. The language by means of which I am able to function as a rational creature is received from others,

> In… the linguistic community, what the part receives from the whole – language and rationality, the symbols in which she can represent herself to herself – are precisely what makes posible her special human kind of individuality.[33]

Elsewhere McCabe contrasts the social reception of the means of linguistic meaning with the evolutionary inheritence of general animal capacities for meaning: 'nobody *inherits* the French language or even the Irish; instead of inheritance and evolution we have tradition and history'.[34] Linguistic animals are intrinsically social.

To be alive in the way that linguistic animals are alive is to be, in Aristotelian terms, in possession of a rational soul. Aquinas argued that the rational soul is immaterial, and McCabe reiterates this argument

[31] McCabe 2005, p. 68.
[32] McCabe 2005, p. 69.
[33] McCabe 2005, p. 27.
[34] McCabe 2005, p. 68.

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and agrees with Aquinas.[35] Through our rational capacities we transcend what is merely material. But, insists McCabe, in the face of the Cartesian tradition, this makes us more rather than less social. My thought is never in principle private, since through language it always has the capacity to go beyond me, to be shared with others. In a passage that deserves quoting at length McCabe makes the point forcefully,

> For the Cartesian consciousness is a way of being private; it belongs to an essentially hidden inner life; for the Aristotelian, thinking belongs to a world more social, in the sense of more *shared*, than any other. So long as, like other aimals, I am restricted to sensual experience, my life is private. No one can have *my* sensations; everyone can have my thoughts. If they could not they would not be thoughts. There is a special kind of conversation that we call discussion or argument which is a way of testing whether what I take to be my thoughts really are thoughts – they are not unless they can be shared by others. The use of language, then, is what frees us from imprisonment in the isolated [self]; it is a way of transcending my individuality; to use the old jargon, it is a way of being 'immaterial'.[36]

Importantly, language is the means by which we tell stories. As linguistic animals we can understand ourselves narratively, tell our autobiography, and we can understand ourselves as part of wider stories (of humankind, of Israel, of the Church). This, thinks McCabe, is important for Christians not least because, considering our story in its widest sense, 'the wisdom which made this drama so loved his human characters that he became one himself to share their lives'.[37]

The Incarnate God

In order to do theology, we must avoid getting into a muddle about either God or humanity; we must, in other words, have a handle on the grammar of God-talk and humanity-talk. In no area of theology is this more evident than in christology, where we attempt to talk about the coming together of God and humanity in Christ. Here McCabe applies his apophatic doctrine of God and, in a more subtle fashion, his understanding of humanity to safeguard the Chalcedonian conviction that Christ is truly God and truly human.

McCabe wrote about the Incarnation in a context in which the Chalcedonian doctrine was being called into question in English-speaking theology. In particular, the essays collected together in *The Myth of God Incarnate* had interrogated the traditional understanding of the

[35] McCabe 1969,. 2005, p.73 See here STh Ia, q75. On the background ideas in Aquinas, again interpreted through a Wittgensteinian lens, see Kenny 1993.

[36] McCabe 2005, pp. 72-3.

[37] McCabe 2007, p. 47.

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Incarnation and found it wanting. McCabe speaks to this context, maintaining that a defence of Chalcedon can only proceed on the basis of attention to fundamentals.

Chalcedon maintained that Jesus was truly human, ruling out docetism, the view that he only appeared to share the fullness of our humanity. McCabe recognises, and applauds, in the *Myth of God Incarnate* authors a desire to avoid docetism,

> They reject it, however, not because the Church long ago threw it out as an option incompatible with her life, a heresy, but because it is found to be incompatible with the European way of life in the second half of the twentieth century. It seems odd for a Christian to reject a doctrine on these grounds, since it is the very heart of the gospel to challenge conventional and accepted attitudes in any age; still, they do reject docetism, and that can't be bad.[38]

The problem, as McCabe sees it, is that the authors cannot see a way to affirm belief in the Incarnation without avoiding docetism.[39] And that is because they have confused incarnational belief itself with docetism, and this in turn is because they have an inadequate doctrine of God. McCabe regards the doctrine of God as pivotal for an adequate christology, since if one regards God as simply one more item in the world's inventory, albeit a supremely powerful one, then one will be tempted to think that God competes for metaphysical space with creatures. If one wants to maintain that Jesus is divine then, on this picture of God, something creaturely will need to be displaced to 'make room' for his divinity, and he will in consequence be less than fully human. The solution is to do the work of apophatic theology, to strip away our inadequate anthropomorphic pictures of God, and so to see that divinity and humanity are not in competition.

McCabe thinks that the *Myth of God Incarnate* authors (and, by implication, the occupants of a wider current of scepticism about incarnational belief) have not done this apophatic work. So in response to Michael Goulder's saying,

> Once the world was on its way God did not interfere with it; but he surveys it with his loving care, triumphing in man's loving response, agonizing with his suffering.[40]

[38] McCabe 1987, p. 54.

[39] He quotes Frances Young, 'A literal incarnation doctrine cannot avoid some element of docetism and involves the believer in claims for uniqueness which seem straightforwardly incredible to the majority of our contemporaries' (Hick 1977, p. 56).

[40] Hick 1977, p. 57.

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McCabe writes,

> You would think that two thousand years of Christianity would have got this idolatry of a celestial Housemaster out of our system once and for all. (We would also avoid such hair-raising sentences as, 'To reduce all of God to a human incarnation is virtually inconceivable'. What could possibly be supposed to be meant by *part* of God?)[41]

God, as thought about in the way outlined above, is not the kind of thing that could interfere with anything. Nor, being perfectly simple, does God have parts. McCabe considers the authors' failure to sign up to a doctrine of God that prevents there being a trade off between the reality of the Incarnation and the genuineness of Christ's humanity as partly issuing from a lack of philosophical theological work. Faced with Hick's assertion that to say, without explanation, that Jesus is both God and man is akin to saying that a circle is a square, McCabe retorts,

> It is with statements like this that these theologians illustrate the perils of not having done much theology in Maurice Wiles' sense.[42]

This sense is a critical, intelligent, philosophically engaged one. We'll return to Hick's circle-square comparison in a moment. Before that we should note that McCabe identifies another root of the *Myth* authors' inadequate doctrine of God: neglect of historical theology. For all that they are interested in immediate Christian origins – New Testament and early patristic writings – they engage little with any theology written between this period and the twentieth century.

The issue here goes beyond *The Myth of God Incarnate*, which now itself belongs to the history of theology, and represented the high water-mark of a theological liberalism in England. University syllabuses and a culturally ingrained drive towards constant innovation militate jointly against sustained attention to historical theology, let alone to sympathetically articulating it. McCabe thinks that this is nothing short of disasterous for theology because the coming together of biblical revelation and philosophical learning in the middle ages enabled Christian theologians, especially Thomas, to craft an account of God the creator as radically distinct from creatures. If we ignore that legacy we are in danger of falling into confusion when we talk about God's dealing with creation, in general, and the Incarnation, in particular. This is precisely what McCabe takes to have happened with the *Myth* authors.

[41] McCabe 1987, p. 57. The reference is to Hick 1977, p, 35.
[42] McCabe 1987, p. 57

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Logical Space

Can we say anything more about the nature of this confusion? Recall Hick's comparison of a profession of incarnational faith to the assertion that a circle is a square. We understand, of course, that no circle can be a square. Circles and squares occupy a shared logical space, we can talk about them in combination, compare and contrast them to one another, make inferences concerning them both, and so on. As McCabe puts the point,

> Circles and squares and triangles and such occupy their mutually exclusive territories in the common logical world of shapes. It is part of the meaning of a circle that it is not a square or any other shape; hence to say that something is both a circle and a square is to say both that it is and is not a circle, and this… is to say nothing at all.[43]

Are divinity and humanity in the same position as circularity and squareness, such that to say that one and the same person is God and a human being is to, as McCabe would have it, 'say nothing at all'?[44] We know that circularity and squareness are in this position because they occupy a shared logical space, that of shapes, of which we have a grasp and about which we can reason. Circles and squares are the same kind of thing (shapes) and because we understand what it is to be that kind of thing, we understand likewise that nothing can be both a circle and a square simultaneously. Along exactly the same lines, we understand that nothing can be both a human being and a dog simultaneously: being human and being a dog exclude one another within the shared logical space of animals.

But what, now, about being a human being and being *God*? Humanity and divinity do not occupy a shared logical space. Indeed we cannot understand what God is, let alone classify God within some way-of-talking shared with creatures,

> A circle and a square make two shapes; a man and a sheep make two animals: God and man make two what? It may be part of the meaning of man that he is not any other creature; it cannot be part of the meaning of man that he is not God. God is not one of the items in some universe which have to be excluded if it is just man that you are talking about. God could not be an item in any universe.[45]

The importance of McCabe's doctrine of God for his christology is apparent here. Apophaticism safeguards the doctrine of the incarnation

[43] McCabe 1987, p. 57.

[44] I set aside here the issue of whether thinking of statements like 'the circle is a square' as saying *nothing* is correct (one reason you might think it is not is that you want to say that the statement is false, but surely it has to be saying something to be capable of being false). All that matters for our purposes is that there is something radically *wrong* with such statements.

[45] McCabe 1987, pp. 57-8.

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against the charge of incoherence.[46] We do not know what it is to be God. We do know, however, that God is no kind of thing whatsoever, and in particular therefore God is not the kind of thing which excludes humanity within a shared logical space.

Christ's Humanity

For all that McCabe wants to defend a Chalcedonian view of Jesus, indeed precisely because he wants to defend this view, he is wary of claims that have conventionally been made about Jesus which seem to undermine his humanity. This is particularly clear in his treatment of the claim that Jesus possessed human knowledge of a kind and amount going vastly beyond that enjoyed by other human beings. McCabe's treatment of Jesus' human knowledge is also interesting because it is a clear case of McCabe breaking with Aquinas' view.[47]

Aquinas held that Jesus enjoyed the Beatific Vision, the vision of the divine nature enjoyed by the saints in glory, whilst still on earth.[48] In virtue of this he possessed knowledge obtained by this participation in this vision. In addition to this he possessed knowledge supernaturally infused by God into his human intellect. By virtue of these two sources, his knowledge was enormously more extended than that of other human beings in this life. Through his sharing the Beatific Vision and by divine infusion, thinks Thomas, Christ knew all things past, present and future.[49] We might describe this view in terms of Jesus having *superknowledge*.

Wiles rejects the claim that Jesus had superknowledge, and takes this rejection to exert a pull away from believing in the Incarnation. McCabe agrees that Christ did not have superknowledge, but insists that there is no logical connection between this and the Incarnation,

> I know that large claims have been made for Jesus's human knowledge, not only by Professor Mascall[50] who is quoted here with proper disapproval by Wiles… but by many other Christians, including St Thomas Aquinas, but none of these claims have any logical connection to the incarnation. They seemed 'appropriate' to Mascall and to Aquinas; they do

[46] On this, see Hewitt 2020, Ch. 9.

[47] On Aquinas' account of Christ's human knowledge see Pawl 2019, pp. 170-176.

[48] For discussion and defence of Aquinas' view here, see Gaine 2015.

[49] STh III qq 10, 11.

[50] Mascall: 'Is it… unreasonable to suppose that the content of Christ's human mind will include not only experimental knowledge which is acquired by him in the course of his development from infancy to manhood in a way substantially the same as, though immeasurably more consistent and unimpeded than, the way in which we acquire ours, but also an infused knowledge which is directly communicated to his human nature from the divine Person who is its subject, and which is a participation in the divine omniscience and is limited only by the receptive capacity of human nature as such' (1946, pp. 56-7)?

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> not seem appropriate to Maurice Wiles (or to me), but anyway to deny them has nothing to do with denying the doctrine of the incarnation any more than to assert them has anything to do with docetism.[51]

I would want to query the suggestion here that the attribution of superknowledge to Christ has nothing to do with docetism; we will come to that point when we discuss McCabe's possible reasons for not thinking superknowledge 'appropriate'. First we should consider the thought that denial of superknowledge has 'nothing to do with denying the doctrine of the incarnation'. Why does McCabe think this?

Recall that central to McCabe's thinking about the Incarnation is that God and humanity do not occupy a shared logical space. In talking about God, I am not talking about the same sort of thing as human beings – indeed God is no sort of thing. Because Jesus is both God and a human being, we have two ways of talking about him, two *grammars*. When I talk about Jesus using expressions appropriate to human beings, I can say things that tell you what he was like, empirically: he had olive skin, let us suppose, was shorter than six feet, and spoke Aramaic. But in talking about God, I am not saying how things are in the world, not giving you an empirical description of how some particular things are. To suppose otherwise would be to have failed to learn the apophatic lessons we encountered from McCabe above. To say that Jesus is God is not to say one more thing about him on the same level as his having brown eyes and dark hair. Nor is it to say something which allows us to predict empirical facts concerning Jesus, including, crucially, the extent of his knowledge. Does that mean that speaking of Jesus as God is contentless? No, insists McCabe,

> '[I]t does' not tell us of his life but of the *significance* of his life. It authorises us to say, for example, because of the life of Jesus, that our God was whipped and spat upon, and that God has experienced total failure and death itself.[52]

The doctrine of the Incarnation tells me *who* it is that lived in Palestine, was crucified and rose again, namely the Eternal Word of God. It does not, in itself, tell me *how* that life was. In particular, it does not tell me that Jesus possessed superknowledge.

Here, then, as is typical for McCabe, the doctrine of God, and in particular the refusal to think about God as an object in the world, plays a motivating role in his theology: it is because God is not one more item in the universe's inventory that the claim that Jesus is God cannot be thought of as occupying the same logical space as empirical descriptions of Jesus. However, merely noting that superknowledge is not entailed by the doctrine of the Incarnation doesn't settle the

[51] McCabe 1987, p. 58.
[52] McCabe 1987, p. 58.

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question of whether, in actual fact, Jesus possessed superknowledge. A succession of figures in the Christian tradition held that he did. In a recent defence of the view, Pawl cites not only Aquinas, but also thinkers of such impressive pedigree as Cyril of Alexandria and Gregory the Great as proponents.[53] Why does McCabe disagree with them?

McCabe does not tell us much about his reasoning here, and we will have to extrapolate. Surely crucial is his remark, quoted above, that he does not think it 'appropriate' that Christ possessed superknowledge. The idea that a doctrine's being 'appropriate', or fitting, is a reason to assent to it harks back to Aquinas who appeals to *convenientia*, what Sarah Coakley terms 'the fittingness of divine salvific condescension in Christ', in constructing his own christology.[54] Addressing the question whether it was fitting that God should become incarnate, Aquinas writes,

> It belongs to the essence of the highest good to communicate itself in the highest manner to the creature, and this is brought about chiefly by "His so joining created nature to Himself that one Person is made up of these three—the Word, a soul and flesh," as Augustine says. Hence it is manifest that it was fitting that God should become incarnate.[55]

Twentieth century theology, done in the shadow of two World Wars, of Auschwitz, and Hiroshima, was characterised by a revived recognition of the need to emphasise that in Christ God has genuinely 'joined a created nature to himself', and has undergone the sufferings that characterise our lives in that nature, in saving solidarity with suffering humanity. Some of those sufferings are epistemic: the pain of not knowing what has happened to a loved one, the agony of not knowing what will happen to ourselves. If God wills to identify himself with suffering humanity in Christ then, it could well be argued, it is not fitting that Christ possess superknowledge. Whether this was McCabe's thought we do not know. Certainly a similar idea, with an emphasis on Christ's function as teacher, finds articulation from Raymond Brown,

> 'A Jesus' who walked through the world, knowing exactly what the morrow would bring, knowing with certainty that after three days the Father would raise him up, is a Jesus who can rouse our admiration, but still a Jesus far away from us. He is a Jesus far away from a mankind that can only hope in the future and believe in God's goodness, far from a mankind that must face the supreme uncertainty of death with faith but without knowledge of what is beyond. On the other hand, a Jesus for whom the future was as much a mystery, a dread and a hope as it is for us, and yet at the same time a Jesus who would say, 'Not my will, but

[53] Pawl 2019, pp. 176-8.
[54] Coakley 2016, p. 224
[55] STh III, q1,a1, co.

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> yours!' - this is a Jesus who could effectively teach us to live, for this is a Jesus who would have gone through life's real trials.[56]

McCabe, in conclusion, holds that the ineffable God has lived as a human animal, and that through this life humanity has been united to the unknowable God: the mystery has become *our* mystery. McCabe's writing on God and humanity articulates and defends this central Christian claim in the context of a world not at home with mystery. It deserves an ongoing audience.

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[56] Brown 1967, pp. 104-5.

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