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Herbert McCabe on the Eucharist: Entering a New World

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Abstract

In this discussion, I aim to offer a sympathetic reading of some central themes in Herbert McCabe's 1969 paper 'Transubstantiation and the Real Presence'. I begin by setting out McCabe's core claims, before introducing an analytical framework that is intended to throw further light on their import and importance.

Keywords

McCabe, Eucharist, Narrative, Neighbour Love, Eschatology

Introduction

In this discussion, I aim to offer a sympathetic reading of some central themes in Herbert McCabe's 1969 paper 'Transubstantiation and the Real Presence'.[1] I begin by setting out McCabe's core claims in this paper, before introducing an analytical framework that will, if we are fortunate, throw some further light on their sense and significance.

I am old enough to have met Herbert McCabe on various occasions, and in fact a friend from home arranged for me to meet him, soon after I arrived as an undergraduate student in Oxford. I think my friend thought that I was in need of spiritual orientation of some sort, for reasons that I don't now recall, and that McCabe would be a reliable source of counsel. In the event, that meeting was very brief, five minutes at most, no doubt in part because of my nervousness! But over the years since, not least because of the influence of my first teacher in the philosophy of religion, and later my doctoral supervisor, Brian Davies OP, I have found that my friend's intuition was right – and Mc-

[1] The paper was first published in the Spring 1969 issue of the *Ampleforth Journal*, and is reproduced in McCabe's collection *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 2010), Ch. 10.

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Cabe's thought has indeed been for me a source of spiritual, as well as philosophical, instruction. And all these years after that initial encounter with him, I am glad to have this opportunity to contribute to this collection, as one way of recording my appreciation for what I have learned from him.

A McCabean account of eucharistic change

So let's begin with McCabe's paper. At the outset, McCabe introduces two views which he takes to flank a properly informed account of the Eucharist. Here is a first approach which McCabe wishes to distinguish from his own perspective:

> … to say that Christ is present in the Eucharist is not to say that the food and drink are in themselves in any way different from other food and drink, it is to speak of the role which they play in a certain religious ceremony. (116)[2]

On the view repudiated here, the change in the eucharistic elements, which allows us to speak of Christ as present in the Eucharist, amounts to a shift in their function that derives from their location within this ritual context. Of course, McCabe is not denying that the bread and wine may indeed acquire a new importance of this kind, but on the account he endorses here, the change in the elements is not reducible to any such adjustment in role.

For McCabe, there is a further, contrary, view that any properly informed account of the Eucharist should also exclude, one he characterises in these terms:

> … to say that Christ is present is to say that the food and drink have changed in themselves, have become something altogether different from food and drink, but that this change is hidden from us. (116)

Whereas the first account of the change in the elements is, we might say, too superficial, since it concerns simply a shift in role, or simply a shift in how the elements are hooked up to a context that is extrinsic to them, this second account of the change in one sense takes too seriously the idea that the change must amount to a change in the elements themselves, rather than a change in their relationship to some context – since here the elements are taken to have become something other than food and drink, or to have undergone some process of, as McCabe also puts the point, 'chemical change' (116). Given these two ways of framing the limits of what can permissibly be said of eucharistic change, we

[2] All quotations from McCabe are taken from his paper 'Transubstantiation and the Real Presence', and the page numbering follows the version of the paper that appears in *God Matters*, Ch. 10.

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are interested to know, naturally, what kind of change this can this be, if it is neither a matter of the elements standing in a new relation to some context – as when a thing undergoes a change in role – nor a question of intrinsic change – of the kind that arises when a thing is subject to a process of chemical change. Having defined in this way the boundaries of the conceptual space that any satisfactory understanding of the change in the eucharistic elements will need to occupy, McCabe begins to develop his own, positive account of the matter.

At the beginning of the paper, he notes that at the core of his position is the idea that in the Eucharist, 'our language has become [Christ's] body' – adding that 'much of what follows will be devoted to trying to make sense of this enigmatic utterance' (p. 118). Given his own assessment of its importance for his approach in the paper, any account of McCabe's position, as formulated here, will clearly need to throw some light on what might be meant by this 'enigmatic' claim. To set the claim in its literary context, we should note that McCabe writes:

> Christ is present to us because our language has become his body. This is what is meant by saying that his body is present to us 'sacramentally' – not exactly by being signified or symbolised, but by being our sign, our symbol. (118-19)

So here is a third McCabean desideratum for any account of the change in the eucharistic elements, this time a matter of prescription rather than proscription. In brief, we need to find a way of understanding how it might be that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a matter of his body having become 'our sign' or, equivalently it seems, of 'our language having become his body'.

There is one further McCabean theme that I hope to be able to consider using the analytical framework that I am about to introduce. The title of this paper records another key constituent of McCabe's position, namely, the idea that through their participation in the eucharistic rite, the Christian is in some sense able to 'enter a new world'. McCabe introduces the expression 'entering a new world' in the following passage:

> The characteristic of revolution as opposed to reform is that it involves entering a new world, not merely a modification of this world. (121)

So revolutionary change is a matter of entering a new world, and is not reducible to, as it were, a reshuffling of the elements of the world as currently constituted. McCabe is clearly of the view that eucharistic change is revolutionary in this sense, and he seeks to substantiate this claim by reflecting, first of all, on the kind of change that is involved in resurrection, before then returning to the case of the Eucharist.

On McCabe's account, resurrection entails entering, in some relevant sense, a new world, and is therefore a case of revolutionary, rather than reforming, change. But we ought not to conclude that resurrection

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is, therefore, a matter of quitting this world for another. As McCabe explains:

> Death and resurrection, then, does not mean a departure from this world to some other separate world, it does not mean substituting another life for this one. It means a revolutionary transformation and hence intensification of this bodily life. (124-5)

In turn, McCabe draws out the meaning of this claim – that resurrection, while a case of revolutionary change, is not a matter of 'substituting another life for this one' – by citing the appearances of the risen Jesus, which provide one way of understanding what it would be to enter a new world, without quitting this world. For McCabe, the resurrected Christ belongs to the new world, and in some sense indeed he is the new world, but in the resurrection appearances he is presented to his disciples under the forms of this world. As McCabe puts the point:

> … in these appearances Jesus presents an intersection of future and present. He is the future world, the body in whom our bodies are to find unity and final humanity, the medium of communication in which mankind is ultimately to realise itself, he is the future world but he appears as a body of the present world. (125)

So there is on McCabe's view a conceptual thread running from the idea of revolutionary change, to the idea of entering a new world, to the idea of resurrection as revolutionary, and therefore a matter of entering a new world, to the thought that in the resurrection appearances of Jesus, this new world is presented to us under the appearances of this world, so that in this context, revolutionary change, and entering a new world, takes the form not of quitting this world, but of a future world in some fashion intersecting with the present world. It is worth noting too that in this text, McCabe clearly takes these themes to be connected to the other strand in his positive account of eucharistic change that we have touched upon – namely, the idea that in the Eucharist, Christ in some sense becomes 'our language' or, as he frames the matter here, becomes a 'medium of communication'.

Finally, McCabe applies this train of reflection to the case of eucharistic change, since here too revolutionary change can be understood in terms of the idea of the future being presented under the sensory appearances of the present:

> Now what I want to suggest is that in the Eucharist we have a similar intersection, we have food and drink of the future world which appears as food and drink of this present world. (126)

On this understanding, the change in the eucharistic elements is a case of revolutionary change: rather than comprising simply a reshuffling of the constituents of the current world, in eucharistic change, the elements come to occupy, in some fashion, an intermediate position

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between this world and a new world, the 'future world' – where this further, future world is in some sense made manifest under the appearances of this world.

We have now picked out four themes that ought to structure any broadly McCabean understanding of the Eucharist. In sum, on McCabe's view, an account of the Eucharist should be clear that the change in the elements is neither simply a change in role, nor simply an intrinsic change, such as that involved in a change of chemical constitution. Moreover, and more positively, an account of the Eucharist should in some way illuminate how it can be that in the Eucharist, 'our language has become Christ's body', and how eucharistic change can be revolutionary in the sense that hereby a future world is presented under the appearances of this world.

Next, I want to introduce an analytical framework that will enable us, I hope, to sketch an account of eucharistic change that respects these McCabean desiderata. I am going to take my initial cue from McCabe's suggestion that in the Eucharist the present world in some sense intersects a future world, so that in this sense, through participation in the rite, we can 'enter a new world'. Let's approach this theme by thinking first of all about the connected, and perhaps rather more accessible, idea of an intersection of present and past.

The intersection of past and present

We are all familiar with the thought that the history of a place can enter into its significance in the present. To take a religious example of this phenomenon, pilgrims to a place such as Lourdes are moved, I take it, not simply, nor most fundamentally, by the thought that miracles of healing continue to occur at this site, in the present, but by the belief that an event of divine disclosure once happened here. In the background of such practices seems to stand the idea that the history of a place can call for practical acknowledgement in the present. For the pilgrim, the history of a place as a site of divine disclosure is to be acknowledged in the present, when located at the site in the present, by taking up the relevant practical comportment – one connoting, to put the point in general terms, reverence. So in this respect, the history of such places does not simply concern the past, but as it were reaches into the present, by virtue of requiring us, or at least inviting us, to comport ourselves in certain ways, when located at the place in the present, as a condition of giving due recognition to its past. In this sense, we can speak of the history of a site as being as it were stored up, and then encountered in the present, in the form of an ethical demand, or at least invitation, concerning how we are to conduct ourselves when located at the site in the present.

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It would not be difficult to multiply examples of this phenomenon – which is of course pervasive in human life, in secular as well as religious contexts, and with respect not only to places, but also to people and everyday sensory objects. In all of these cases, often rather unreflectively, we allow our knowledge of the history of a thing or place or person to enter into our assessment of its significance in the present, by supposing that our attitudes and behaviour towards this thing or place or person in the present can be assessed for appropriateness by reference to that history. The phenomenon is perhaps clearest in the case of persons. To take a rather drastic example, if I were to be given the choice between continuing to live with the individual with whom I have – happily – shared my life over the last twenty years and living instead with a perfect psychophysical replica of that individual, who has, let us suppose, been newly created, then I would of course choose to live with the first individual, notwithstanding the fact that if the second were, unknown to me, to be substituted for the first, then my experience of the world would unfold in subjective terms in precisely the way that it would have done had there been no such substitution. Here, by assumption, the only point of difference between these two individuals is their history – and it is clear, then, that in this case, it is the difference in history that grounds our judgement that these otherwise indistinguishable entities hold a very different significance in the present.

So here is one way of making sense of the idea of an intersection of past and present. On this account, people and places and things are the bearers of storied identities, so that their past concerns not just the past, but can be presented to us in the present, in the form of an ethical demand concerning how we are to relate to them in the present, as a condition of giving due recognition to that past in the present. In this sense, our everyday experience is over and again one of past worlds intersecting with the present world, so that the past is in this sense presented to us under the sensory appearances of things in the present.

Let's now try to take a further step in the direction of the particular case that interests McCabe – namely, eucharistic change – by thinking about how it might be that in our present experience, a future world can intersect with this present world. Thomas Aquinas's account of the rationale for what is, from a Christian point of view, the defining ideal of the ethical life offers one helpful route into this question.

The intersection of future and present: the case of neighbour love

Neighbour love is, of course, the object of a dominical command, and for this reason alone, it is obligatory for Christians. (See Mk 12:31 and parallels.) But in his discussion of the question of why the attitudes and behaviour that constitute neighbour love are for Christians fitting, and indeed required, Thomas Aquinas develops a rather different

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account of the significance of the practice. In the following passage, from the *Summa Theologiae*, he is considering whether the angels are properly the objects of neighbour love. This might seem to be a somewhat specialised kind of concern, but the reasoning that Aquinas rehearses here is the same as that he adduces when addressing the question of why human beings are properly the objects of neighbour love, and we can therefore take this passage to bear on this further question. Aquinas writes:

> the friendship of charity [that is, neighbour love] is founded upon the everlasting happiness, in which human beings share in common with the angels. For it is written (Mt. 22:30) that 'in the resurrection … human beings shall be as the angels of God in heaven'. It is therefore evident that the friendship of charity extends also to the angels.[3]

On the account that Aquinas presents here, we ought to show the 'friendship of charity' – or neighbour love – to the angels, as to our fellow human beings, for the reason that they will share with us in the 'everlasting happiness' of the beatific vision. So the fittingness of neighbour love is here being rooted in a certain claim about the future. In ordinary situations of choice, we commonly appeal, of course, to the future when considering how we are to act in the present, and typically such reasoning takes a consequentialist form. But Aquinas's interest in the future, in this passage, is not, I take it, of that kind: his thought is not that we should relate to other human beings (and the angels) in certain ways in the present because thereby we will make certain outcomes more likely. That is, he is not appealing to the causal, or instrumental, efficacy of the ways of acting that we associate with neighbour love. The proposal seems, rather, to be that in relating to others, here and now, as our neighbours, we thereby give due acknowledgement to the truth that they will one day, in the eschatological future, stand in a certain relationship to us.

If that is the right way of reading Aquinas's thought in this text, then we could say that his proposal is that, rather as the past can intersect with the present, when some feature of an individual's history makes a practical and attitudinal claim upon us in the present, so the future, and specifically the eschatological future, can intersect with the present, when our relations to others in the present are subject to some requirement that is rooted in that future. Or as we might say, to put the matter in McCabean terms, the Christian practice of neighbour love is founded upon the truth that a future world – the world of the eschatological future – can be presented to us under the conditions of this world, by virtue of the fact that this eschatological future makes a certain ethical

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae 25. 10, ellipsis in the original. Here and elsewhere, I am following the translation of the Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012, available at: https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I, accessed 4 January 2022.

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claim upon us, in our relations to other human beings, here and now, in the present.

This account rests in particular on the idea that we will, in the eschatological future, stand in a relationship of friendship with other human beings – one that is founded upon our sharing in the fundamental good of 'everlasting happiness'. The background thought is, I take it, that by virtue of sharing with others in this most fundamental of creaturely goods, we will thereby enjoy a special kind of solidarity with them, or as one translation puts the point elsewhere in this same question, a special kind of 'fellowship' with them.[4] We can find a counterpart for this proposal in our attitudes towards past friendships: if a person was once my friend, then, we are inclined to suppose, my relationship to that person in the present can be held accountable to this truth about our shared past – and this will be so, at least in some measure, it seems reasonable to say, even if the friendship has now lapsed. And similarly, Aquinas seems to be suggesting, if my relationship to another person will one day involve the unsurpassably profound form of friendship that consists in sharing in the beatific vision, then my relations to that person in the present can be deemed more or less appropriate relative to this truth about our shared future.

If we were to ask Aquinas, how is it that this future truth about other human beings can be afforded due acknowledgement in the practice of neighbour love, he would say, I take it, that the pattern of life that we associate with neighbour love gives due recognition to the eschatological identity of others as our prospective friends on account of the fact that it is itself a form of friendship, since it is, as he says, 'the friendship of charity'.[5] Accordingly, we may say that neighbour love reckons appropriately with our shared eschatological future by virtue of foreshadowing that future.

[4] See Aquinas's reply to the first objection in this same article, where he writes: 'Our neighbour is not only one who is united to us in a common species, but also one who is united to us by sharing in the blessings pertaining to everlasting life, and it is on the latter fellowship [sharing] that the friendship of charity is founded'. The Latin text reads: 'proximus non solum dicitur communicatione speciei, sed etiam communicatione beneficiorum pertinentium ad vitam aeternam; super qua communicatione amicitia caritatis fundatur'.

[5] We might wonder how this picture is supposed to work if we are not universalists about salvation, since neighbour love is meant to extend, clearly, to all human beings. This is not a question we need to consider in any detail here, but one response would run as follows: even if I should believe that not all human beings will participate in the beatific vision, I cannot be sure, presumably, that this particular individual before me now will not do so. And in that case, it seems that I ought to apply a precautionary principle, by acting on the assumption that this person will participate in the beatific vision, because it would be a more serious failing not to treat them as my neighbour when they will share in the beatific vision, than to treat them as my neighbour when they will not share in the beatific vision. Why think so? Because in general, treating a person better than they deserve is a less serious failing, if a failing at all, than treating them worse than they deserve, since only the second involves any breach in what the person is owed.

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In sum, on this understanding, neighbour love constitutes a response to the future-referenced identity of other human beings in, we might say, the ethical mode: in the practice of neighbour love, we recognise the depth of our solidarity with them in the eschaton, by subjecting our relationship to them in the present to a radical ethical demand. And the appropriateness of this response is founded on the fact that hereby we bring our relations to others in the present into alignment with this future truth about our relations to them, so far as we can, by living already, even if still in inchoate form, as their friends.

It's worth noting how this reading of the significance of a certain conception of our eschatological future differs from a related approach. It might be said: shouldn't we think of a representation of the eschatological future – say, the idea that we will one day share with other human beings in a newly intimate relationship with God – as serving simply as a regulative ideal? That is, shouldn't we think of a conception of the eschatological future as offering an idealised picture of the human community, one to which our existing forms of social life should, therefore, approximate, so far as they can, even if fully exemplifying this ideal under our present conditions of life is not possible? This proposal resembles the one that I have been developing to the extent that it takes a conception of our shared eschatological future to provide a pattern against which we are to measure our relations to others in the present. But there remains this difference: on the account that I have been giving – here following Aquinas, I take it – it matters that the eschatological future, so conceived, should be realised, since the object of neighbour love is to measure up to, or give due recognition to, what is in fact the future of human beings, and not simply to approximate, so far as we can, to some picture of what that future might, ideally, be. In other words, to put the point in McCabean terms, on this account, the appropriateness of neighbour love is tied to the fact that hereby we are able to acknowledge a future world, under the appearances of this present world.

So far, we have been considering the idea that the past and also the future, including the eschatological future, can intersect with the present, in so far as the past and future of human beings, and we may add of places and things, can call for practical acknowledgment in the present. Let's now take a further step in the direction of the case that interests McCabe, by considering how we might understand the idea that the future and the present intersect in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist as an intersection of future and present

On Aquinas's understanding, our eschatological future consists not only in a perfected relationship of friendship with other human beings – the aspect of that future with which we have been focally concerned

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to this point – but also in the vision of God, where these two states of affairs are of course connected: this future friendship to other human beings runs deep because it involves a sharing in the unsurpassable good of the vision of God. If we follow Aquinas's account of neighbour love, as I have expounded it here, then we should say that neighbour love constitutes a fitting response in the present to the first of these two strands of the storied identity of other human beings – namely, the fact that we will one day share with them in a perfected relationship of friendship. And we might wonder, then, whether there is a pattern of life open to us in the present whereby we can also give due recognition to the second, God-directed element of the forward-looking, storied identity of other human beings – that is, to the fact that this friendship will take the particular form of a sharing in the beatific vision.

As we have seen, for Aquinas, neighbour love constitutes a fitting response to the truth that we will one day share with others in a perfected relationship of friendship for the reason that it is itself, even if only imperfectly, a form of friendship. And we might wonder whether, similarly, there is an activity open to us in the present that will allow us, in some fashion, to foreshadow the truth that our relations to others in the eschatological future will be founded upon a sharing in the vision of God. In other words, can we find some activity, available to us in the present, that will anticipate the God-directed character of our future relations with other human beings in rather the way that neighbour love anticipates the fact that those relations will take the form of friendship?

On the traditional Christian understanding, the Eucharist bears, I take it, precisely this significance: it is most simply, of course, a memorial meal, looking back to the Last Supper, and thence to Christ's passion, as well as recalling the Passover, but it also looks forward – to the heavenly banquet, wherein we will enjoy a newly intimate relationship to God, and thereby a new kind of solidarity with other human beings. This account of the proleptic significance of the rite can be grounded very directly in the biblical text. On the Christian understanding, the Last Supper looks forward to the day when Jesus will be reunited with his disciples, where this reunion is imaged in terms of his once again sharing a meal with them. Hence in Matthew's account of the Last Supper, Jesus remarks: 'I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom'.[6] And for Christians, this understanding of the anticipatory significance of the Last Supper, as a meal that foreshadows the heavenly banquet, which is to be shared with Christ as the incarnate God, is of course transferred to the Eucharist, which also looks forward to the day when the Christian community will be reunited with Jesus. Hence

[6] Mt 26: 29. See too Mk 14:25 and Lk 22:18. Here and elsewhere, I am following the New International Version translation.

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when summarising the teaching on the Eucharist that he received, Paul comments: 'For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'.[7]

So in brief, on this understanding of the significance of the Eucharist, we can think of this shared meal as a foreshadowing of our eschatological future, both with respect to the dimension of that future that concerns our relations to other human beings, and with respect to the dimension of that future that concerns our relationship to God, where the second relationship stands as the ground of the first.

Perhaps it will not be too much of a diversion to consider how Aquinas's treatment of the idea of Jesus's bodily presence in the Eucharist can be folded into this account. Aquinas maintains that it matters that the body of Christ should be present in the Eucharist 'in very truth' and not 'merely as in a figure or sign' – both because this is what follows from the plain sense of Jesus's words at the Last Supper (when he remarks 'this is my body' and 'this is my blood'), and because it is a mark of friendship that friends should be present to one another in bodily form.[8] As Aquinas explains the latter point:

> because it is the special feature of friendship to live together with friends, as the Philosopher [that is, Aristotle] says (Ethic. ix), He promises us His bodily presence as a reward… Yet meanwhile in our pilgrimage He does not deprive us of His bodily presence; but unites us with Himself in this sacrament through the truth of His body and blood.[9]

It is notable that as in his discussion of neighbour love, so here, when thinking about Christ's presence in the Eucharist, Aquinas appeals to the theme of friendship. So on this approach, friendship turns out to be integral to the Christian life along several related dimensions. First of all, when Christians extend the regard of neighbour love to other human beings, thereby they enter into a form of friendship with them, one whose appropriateness is defined by reference to the truth that we will one day, in the eschaton, share with them in a deep-seated relationship of friendship. Moreover, according to the passage just cited, in the Eucharist, the Christian is related to Christ as to a friend, by virtue of Christ's bodily presence in the sacrament. And in turn, since the individual Christian's eucharistically-mediated friendship to Christ is shared with other participants in the rite, the Eucharist therefore stands as a proleptic enactment of the God-directed form of human community that will be realised in perfected form at the 'heavenly banquet'. And from this final consideration, it follows that, in the Eucharist, Christians can pre-figure, or proleptically enact, this shared future both along the dimension of inter-human friendship, and along the dimen-

[7] 1 Cor 11: 26.

[8] For Jesus's words at the Last Supper, see Mk 14: 22-4 and parallels.

[9] *Summa Theologiae* 3a 75. 1.

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sion of friendship with God – where the latter stands as the basis for the former.

And from this truth in turn, it follows that just as neighbour love offers a way of living congruently, or appropriately, with respect to the inter-human dimension of the eschaton, by virtue of being itself a form of friendship, so eucharistic practice constitutes an appropriate acknowledgement of the inter-human dimension of our eschatological future along with its God-directed ground – because in the Eucharist, we can foreshadow that future both with respect to our relations with other human beings, and with respect to our relationship to God, and in such a way as to recognise how the first of these states is grounded in the second. In sum, eucharistic practice, on this reading, gives due recognition to our eschatological future: it acknowledges in the present the eschatological identity of other human beings, by foreshadowing both the inter-human and God-directed strands of that identity, and the relationship between them.

McCabe on the Eucharist: some further reflections

Let's return now to McCabe's essay, and consider the extent to which the picture that I have been sketching meets the desiderata for an account of the Eucharist that he lays down there.

As we have seen, McCabe represents eucharistic change – the change as he says in the eucharistic 'food and drink' – as a revolutionary change. And as we have noted, that proposal involves, in turn, the idea that this change cannot be understood simply in terms of a reshuffling of the constituents of this present world. And in turn that thought suggests (if we take the resurrection appearances of Christ as our guide) that in the Eucharist a future world in some way breaks into our current world, and is given to us under the appearances of the present world. The account we have just been developing does not capture all of the nuances of McCabe's position, of course, but it does offer one way of making sense of this central idea that in the Eucharist, a future world is rendered present under the appearances of the existing world. Specifically, if we allow that the past and equally the future of an individual can be presented to us under the sensory appearances in the present in so far as their past or future makes an ethical demand upon us in the present, or in general calls for acknowledgement in the present, then by extension we may say that, on the Christian view, the eschatological future is presented to us not only in the person of our neighbour, in the form of an ethical demand, but also in the eucharistic elements, in so far as through our relationship to those elements we are able to take up a pattern of life that foreshadows our eschatological future, with respect to both its inter-human and God-directed dimensions.

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To sustain this comparison with the case of our relationship to our neighbour in the present, we need to suppose that Christ is present in the eucharistic elements in a robust enough sense to ensure that through their relationship to those elements, the Christian is able to live congruently with, or give due acknowledgement to, their relationship to Christ in the eschatological future. And on a standard Christian conception of the matter, by virtue of his words at the Last Supper, when saying 'this is my body' and 'this is my blood', Christ licenses Christians to take him to be present in this sense, whatever precisely that might require in ontological terms. Of course, there are other ways in which we might try to bring our lives into alignment with the eschatological future – for instance, we could simply call to mind the idea that we will one day share with other human beings in the life of God and perhaps, in addition, relate to them as our neighbours on that basis. But if we adopt this relatively robust reading of what it is for Christ to be present in the Eucharist – for example, if with Aquinas, we allow that the elements can mediate a relationship of friendship to Christ in the present – then it will follow that this purely intellectual or simply ethical acknowledgement of the eschatological future, while of course of some importance, will fall short of the deeper kind of reckoning with that future that is made possible through our participation in bodily terms in the Eucharist.

Analogously, we sometimes suppose that we can acknowledge an event with a particular kind of seriousness when located at the place where the event took place, or acknowledge a now deceased person with a particular kind of seriousness when present at the place where their body is interred. And plausibly, this is because we suppose that in these cases, we are able to acknowledge the event, or the person, not just in thought, but in deed, by taking up the requisite bodily demeanour in our dealings with the material world, so that the whole person is thereby implicated in this act of recognition. So similarly, we might say, given the licence provided by Christ's words 'this is my body' and 'this is my blood', in the Eucharist, the Christian is able to orient themselves to the eschatological future not only in thought but in deed – and accordingly to acknowledge that future with a special kind of seriousness, and indeed from a Christian point of view, definitively.

As we have seen, McCabe supposes that there is a connection between this understanding of the Eucharist – according to which in the rite, a future world breaks into this world – and his 'enigmatic' claim, according to which 'Christ is present to us [in the Eucharist] because our language has become his body' – or again because he has become 'our sign' (pp. 118–19). We can read these comments in the light of McCabe's observation that:

> when we speak of communication we are not necessarily talking about the passing of messages. Communication is the sharing of a common world of meanings.

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And on this perspective, he adds, we should recognise:

> … the fundamental importance of the body in all communication. The body is the source of all communication. (120)

Given the picture we have been sketching, we may say that by taking up a certain enacted relationship to relevant portions of the material world, in the Eucharist, the Christian is able to acknowledge, with a particular depth and seriousness, the eschatological future – which is to say, I take it, that through their bodily comportment in this rite, the Christian is able 'share a common world of meanings'. So in these respects, the conception of the Eucharist we have been outlining lends itself very readily to the thought that the Eucharist is a communication in the sense that McCabe describes here – and of course it is also one that is very evidently grounded in the dispositions of the body.

We can read McCabe's 'enigmatic utterance' similarly, by taking the expression 'our language has become Christ's body' to mean that by adopting the requisite relationship to the eucharistic elements – considered as Jesus's body in whatever sense is licensed by Jesus's words at the Last Supper – we can thereby reckon with our eschatological future, with respect to both its inter-human and God-directed strands, and accordingly with a kind of seriousness that would not otherwise be possible. So in this way, in the eucharistic rite, our relationship to the elements, considered as Christ's body, constitutes a communicative act with a very particular content.

It is worth noting the difference between this sort of account and one that understands the change in the eucharistic elements simply by reference to the idea of transubstantiation. The doctrine of transubstantiation tells us that the elements have become in some relevant sense the body and blood of Christ. But without further specification of this claim, we do not as yet know how this development is to be appropriated within a human life. By drawing on the McCabean themes of the Eucharist as an intersection of future and past, and of our bodily relationship to the Eucharist as constituting a certain kind of communicative act, we can address this lacuna. In brief, on the McCabean view we have been examining, eucharistic change is not simply a matter of some change in the bread and wine considered in themselves, but an event that makes possible for human beings a new and revolutionary mode of life, one that is founded upon the inbreaking of a future world, where that world is presented to us in the Eucharist in the form of a radical ethical and also theocentric demand.

These reflections suggest a way of reading the first two of McCabe's desiderata for an understanding of the Eucharist. On the account we have been sketching, following McCabe, it would be a mistake to represent Christ's presence in the Eucharist as simply a matter of the elements changing in themselves, where that change is, as McCabe says, 'hidden from us'. (116) Why is this view mistaken? Because such an

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account leaves unresolved the fundamental question of how Christ's presence in the Eucharist, and the associated change in the elements, enables a change in human life. Or to put the point in McCabean terms, such an account does not place in the foreground the question of how eucharistic change can be incorporated into a new kind of communicative act, and thereby a new and revolutionary mode of life. And to that extent, we might conclude, such an account is not religiously serious.

At the same time, it equally will not do to represent Christ's presence in the Eucharist, and the associated change in the elements, as simply a matter of – to follow McCabe's form of words – 'the role which they [the elements] play in a certain religious ceremony' (116). Why not? Because this view does not take sufficiently seriously the ontology of eucharistic change: on the McCabean view, this change is not simply a matter of the elements assuming a new role, relative to the various human projects that define the rite, but of the breaking in of a 'future world', which under these conditions, is rendered present under the appearances of bread and wine. In brief, we might say, that the first account McCabe rejects (the account that speaks of a hidden change in the intrinsic character of the elements) fails because it is in a sense unduly metaphysical, and so neglects the importance of the Eucharist in enabling a revolution in human life, and that the second account (cast in terms of a change in role) fails because it is in a way unduly social, because it does not reckon sufficiently seriously with the idea that in the Eucharist, a future world is presented under the appearances of this current world.

To conclude, it is, I would say, a central strength of McCabe's account that it squarely addresses each of these two kinds of error in an account of the Eucharist – the error of being exaggeratedly metaphysical, which he repudiates by drawing attention to the role of the Eucharist in enabling a certain kind of communicative act, and the error of being exaggeratedly social, which he addresses by representing eucharistic change not simply in terms of a change in role, but as an intersection of the world of the eschatological future and the present, everyday world.

The excitement of reading McCabe on these as on other themes consists not least in the fact that he is able so clearly and tellingly to integrate a metaphysical vision and a call to radical social and cultural change, so that neither of these perspectives is allowed to unfold entirely independently of the other. It is McCabe's capacity to see the Christian life as anchored in the action of God, and the eschatological future, and at the same time as a communicative act in which we human beings give due recognition to our responsibilities to one another, that marks out his work, I would say – on the Eucharist as on other matters

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– as enduringly important, both as a body of scholarly reflection and as a summons to a new and indeed revolutionary mode of life.[10]

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