

# Critique of Father Herbert McCabe OP the greatest modern theologian

## WHY IS THERE ANYTHING RATHER THAN NOTHING? ANSWER: GOD

**It is clear that we reach out to, but do not reach, an answer to our ultimate question, how come anything instead of nothing? But we are able to exclude some answers. If God is whatever answers our question, how come everything? then evidently he is not to be included amongst everything. God cannot be a thing, an existent among others. It is not possible that God and the universe should add up to make two. Again, if we are to speak of God as causing the existence of everything, it is clear that we must not mean that he makes the universe out of anything. Whatever creation means it is not a process of making.**

REPLY: People talk about creation out of nothing but it is better to word what they are trying to say as, "Creation not out of anything". It is clearer.

Creation by God from "not from anything" means that where there was 0 there is now 1. It does not mean 0 was turned into 1.

This is very important. It means that though something cannot just pop into existence it can if there is a God to cause it to pop. But that is contradictory.

McCabe denies that God really makes all things. He creates them. Making implies that nothing is turned into something making nothing a kind of material out of which anything is made. God does not really make all things because making implies that he is using nothing or something or himself to make the universe.

He says that God creating all things does not add to anything. In other words, God and the universe make 1 not 2. God alone and no universe still makes 1. If God and the universe do not make 2 then we see the contradiction in the notion of creation.

McCabe says that the doctrine of creation is best understood as saying that all things depend on God 100% to exist and to function.

It is interesting how the question is never "Is love behind the existence of all things?" It is never that question even for Christians. They still pretend that the "how come?" is a religious, not scientific, question. But it is not religious in itself. It is a secular question. What right have they to tell science what it should not and cannot discover? This arrogance is at the root of their faith.

McCabe makes God as the answer to why is there anything rather than nothing central to everything in life and religion. He says that we don't know what the answer is in the sense that we cannot really know God except as a mystery. He denies that we don't know in the sense that the answer could be anything or even something totally unlike any God. He means that God is the answer and we don't know what God is. This is a trick with words. The answer being a mystery does not mean that the mystery is God. McCabe says God is a mystery and it is very hard to sufficiently know what God actually means. He should just say that the answer to the question is that it is a mystery. It is cheating to define God as a mystery and then to say that this means God is the answer. If it is a mystery the mystery might be God or it might not be. To argue, "The answer is that it is a mystery therefore it is God" is an argument from ignorance and pretending to know what you don't know.

Suppose a creating God is logical. Such a God could create a grain of dirt and nothing else. It would have no purpose. But he could create it. The real answer to the question of why anything instead of nothing for the religionist is, "God just decided to create and that is all there is to it". That is not the answer religion wants to hear.

In his book *God Matters* McCabe considers the dog Fido. Why does Fido exist instead of nothing? He then says to ask that is to implicitly ask why everything else exists too. To ask why Fido exists is to put him in the context of the entire universe. So it becomes the God-question. McCabe says it becomes a question about why anything exists thus it is a God question for only God seems to be the answer. For McCabe it is not how the universe exists that is the mystery but that it exists.

McCabe talks about Fido the dog. He says the question is not "Why does this dog exist and not another?" The question is not why do we have Fido the dog and not Fido the giraffe? The question is why Fido instead of nothing. This is clearly saying Fido does not have a purpose. He is just made by God and that is all.

Why not ask why is there free will when there could have been none? Religion says we exist because we are meant to have a relationship with God. Even if we go out of existence at death that is still what God wants. The notion of being created by God for God does not necessarily imply we have eternal life because God might have a reason why we have to be eliminated at death. If you knew your baby was only going to survive for a day you would still have it. If we have free will so that we can use it to connect to God and achieve the purpose for which we exist which is supposedly then it is more important to ask why free will exists instead of there being no free will than it is to ask why there is something rather than nothing. If God is a mystery it follows that you cannot be dogmatic about there being a life after death. To embrace a mystery and then trimming it is not embracing a mystery at all. It is falling into the idolatry that McCabe warns against.

Religion says the question why something why not nothing is about asking what the meaning of life is. It is not. Asking why have we free will instead of having no free will is the question that asks that. Religion does not like that question because there is no evidence for free will. Free will is only popular opinion. And if we are not sure if we have free will, we cannot know if our reasoning about God and the supernatural is right. If we have no free will, wrong ideas are soon refuted by experience and that programs us to rethink and accept what we have learned. But in relation to God and the supernatural, we have no such bolt out of the blue to make us conform to reality.

McCabe says what matters is that the universe exists not how it exists. In fact if a God cannot create the universe then the how is important not the that. McCabe is reasoning, "There is a universe so God must have created it." The question is, "Can God create?" That is about the how. Zoe is found dead in the kitchen with a knife in her heart. She couldn't have done it herself and nobody could have got in. So you must ask how the knife ended up in her heart. You don't reason, "She has a knife in her heart so somebody killed her."

The believer ignores the how and says we don't know for we cannot understand the supernatural. The believer says that the universe was made miraculously. That is like saying that because you don't know Zoe ended up dead that a witch with magical powers may have done it. It is a cop-out.

If the how is not a mystery or like a miracle, then what do we want to believe in God for? It would follow that there is nothing remarkable then that the universe exists.

To anybody who wonders why God exists rather than nothing, McCabe says that though our logical laws don't cover that issue, there are logical laws we know nothing about. So for some reason God not existing is impossible. Only God understands it. God simply has to exist for the same reason that 1 has to be 1.

Is it logical to use arguments like that? Is it rational to say that there are laws of reason nobody on earth can know anything about? No.

Suppose our logical thinking tells us, "There must be a God who created all things". Why not say, "That is what our logic tells us. But there could be logical laws we know nothing about or cannot think of. Our thinking is necessarily limited because we are merely human no matter how smart we are. Thus it could be logically impossible for there to be a God though logic from our perspective says different"?

Rational people deny that there could be some undetectable logic. To affirm that there could be casts doubt on our logic. What if there is a law that shows that our reasoning that 2 and 2 are 4 is wrong? If logic cannot tell us that 1 and 1 is 2 then it is no good at all. If the concept of God demands that there is some logical reason we will never grasp why God has to exist and why his non-existence is illogical or logically impossible then the concept is incoherent and contrary to our logic. It makes our logic useless.

What is the lesser evil?

Supposing that there might be a higher logic that shows God must exist.

or

Supposing that there might be a higher logic that shows God cannot exist.

Neither is logical. God is a very big claim that you cannot make lightly. So if you are going to be irrational, it is worse if you are irrational in order to believe in God than not to believe. Assuming God does not exist is better for even you are wrong, God should still be able to work in you and do good through you for he should be bigger than your errors.

In fact supposing that there is no such higher logic is the best option.

At least McCabe is not saying that our logic shows that God must exist. He has to admit that he could be wrong to assume that some kind of logic that is beyond our grasp shows why God must exist. He doesn't know so maybe there is no such logic at all! There is in fact no reason to believe there is. The matter only arises for those who want to believe in God in the sense that McCabe understands God as the infinite creator and source of all things.

McCabe: "God is not first of all our creator or any kind of maker, he is love, and his life is not like the life of the worker or artist but of lovers wasting time with each other uselessly. It is into this worthless activity that we enter in prayer. This, in the end, is what makes sense of it." (225). So for McCabe the question of why anything rather than nothing is used in religion to propel people towards seeking meaning in life. But the inconsistent McCabe also says that it is in the worthlessness and ultimate uselessness of existence that we feel it ends up making sense. This is nothing more than the atheist principle that if life is useless we can still feel it is useful and enjoy it.

Prayer as in forming a relationship with God helps facilitate this process according to McCabe. Prayer is being conscious of our total dependency on God. This idea denies that prayer is necessarily talking to God or singing psalms or Masses or whatever. McCabe says it is okay to ask God for anything you want as long as it is seeing that you need God 100% for anything. But surely if anything arouses the feeling of meaning prayer is not an essential? McCabe makes out it is and that is dangerous for many people for prayer is not what is going to work for them.

Perhaps McCabe is giving us a paradox. Perhaps it shows he should not object to atheists who say life is useless and it is up to us to make it feel useful.

The notion that God matters because God is love is really saying that it is love that matters and love just happens to be God. But if God is love, then surely the atheist who loves is finding meaning in life through loving? Surely you don't need faith in God in order to have meaning in life?

Consider these two ideas about your existence.

#Existence is ultimately useless. It does not matter about the ultimate value of my life. There is no such value.

#Yet I can make my existence useful enough for me to want to stay alive. It is up to me to bestow enough value on my life.

If you can only have one or the other, then clearly the second item on the menu, the decision to make your life feel important enough to you is the one to go for.

In fact, unless you start off with what YOU are going to do to give value to your life there is NO point in worrying about ultimate value. Ultimate value will mean nothing to you and people telling you it should will only damage you.

Most religion claims to offer you a way to achieve the ultimate purpose of your life. Such religion might feel good but is fundamentally cheating you.

## ON GOD NOT BEING A THING

McCabe says God is the mystery that causes all things to be. He is not the supreme being. He is not a big ghost. He is existence itself so there "is no God who is a being, an item in the universe, a rival person; there is just the unknown beyond and behind the whole universe itself, the mystery at the heart of my being myself. In Christ, says St. Thomas, we are united to God as to an unknown."

One thing he is careful to reject is the notion of talking about God as if he were the most powerful or biggest thing in the universe. It is suggested that seeing God that way is the worst mistake a theologian or philosopher or anybody can make. McCabe says the person that does this falls into the most delusional form of idolatry.

McCabe sees God as an objective reality. But he counsels against seeing God as a thing or entity in the way anything in the universe is. "The only God who matters is the unfathomable mystery of love because of which there is being and meaning to anything that is" God Matters.

REPLY: McCabe sees God as a mystery of love who is real but who is not an item in the universe. God does not have feelings but he loves for he only does what is best for his creation. It is love in action. Nobody really wants such a God. Believers at least privately do invent a God who has feelings for them. What you worship outwardly says nothing about what you worship inwardly.

Idolatry means the worship of a God who does not exist. If God is perfect then it follows that to adore a God who does not exist is to worship a bad version of God and will lead to bad principles and bad moral leanings. Idolatry is bad for it means we worship a human construct and anything human should not be elevated to divine status for that is making a god out of errors and of course human beings are too dangerous too often and that will be reflected in their man-made gods. What is human needs constant checking out and correcting not adoration. It would be cruel for people to be led to think they have a relationship with God and are putting him first when that God is man-made. If you love what you think your wife is not what she is, you cannot be inspired by her. So to become more loving like God you need to have the real God and not a mental idol.

McCabe is severe against the "idolatrous notion of God as a very large and powerful creature – a part of the world." The reason this idolatry is so terrible is that if God is the source of all and you see him as a creature and not the source of all and upon whom even our power to choose depends, you see yourself as largely independent of the divine and will take pride in the good you do. This pride would be very mistaken if you think what is coming from you in fact is not. It would be like failing to honour your wife for giving you a gold bar and saying that you got it through a magic spell and she was under your control so you really gave it to yourself. It would get in the way of love.

McCabe sees idolatry as terrible because you are failing to see and respect the love of God.

It is strange that somebody like McCabe would reject the idea of God as having most of the power in the universe as idolatry when their belief that God is the power that is the reason the universe exists instead of there being nothing gives him in fact more power! The source of all things would be a greater power than any super-god in the universe. If it is idolatrous to think God is the most powerful being in the universe, it is more idolatrous to think he is all the power there is.

McCabe would answer that seeing God as a power is not the same as seeing him as the source that all things depend on thus meaning that he is the reason they exist instead of nothing. But it is the same. It would be strange if there was a difference to see the God of power as an idol and God as source as not an idol. A source of all things by definition is power.

If seeing God as love is all that matters then we should not care about why something instead of nothing. God being source of all is not the same as God being love.

Seeing God as love suffers from the problem that everybody's view of what is loving and how loving it is, is inaccurate. This is because we are not all good, because we prefer what we want good to be to what good actually is, because we are prone to error, because there is often a thin line between right and wrong, because to judge what the best thing to do is a matter of huge complexity for you have to consider the long-term for as many as possible and because we are weak. We tend to give sympathy to people who get seriously ill but we are secretly glad that it is them who suffer and not us or our loved ones. We are good at using good as a mask. Also, you cannot prove that anything you do is fully free. You could be partly programmed. Thus the God adored will only be love up to a point. You cannot bring your whole self to learn from the love of God. Your thinking and perception of God are limited by the fact that your free will is incomplete. Your perception of God limits what your perception should be of God for you are so small and imperfect. If there is a real God of love he will not approve when you honour a semblance of him not him. It is no wonder people like the thought of a Jesus or a saint to pray to. By relating to a being like themselves they deal with their inner sense that the God they have is in their heads. But idolatry is a universal problem. And insurmountable. The atheist sees that no God would want us to believe in him.

Also, people mistake the good they see in others for the activity of God and that is where their "learning" about God ultimately comes from. People feel that God is acting when people do good for them. This is a form of idolatry for human goodness cannot mirror God's. And we are always being taken in by good people who show their true colours. Their goodness was one dimensional. Also, people can do a lot of good and we remain unimpressed but something they do something that does impress us. We are selective in the good we want to see and adore. So if believers claim find God in the goodness of others, we atheists may find that amusing and arrogant.

God cannot be known like a human person can for God is hidden from us. Thus to adore God is to risk adoring what you think he is or want to think he is. Thinking is no use. If you have the right ideas of God, you could have the attitude, "I just happen to be right. If I were not right I would still have the perception of God I have." Thus you see that being right about God is still no protection against idolatry.

Valerie Tarico in Christianity is Not Great outlines the research of Kahneman that in general "much of our mental activity has little to do with rationality and is utterly inaccessible to the conscious mind." So we are not the rational decision makers we might claim to be. We are seldom rational. Our devotion to God is not as rational as it may seem.

We all have our delusions. That is why even if God has revealed a religion to man, we cannot be completely sure that it really is from him. Man is too imperfect to claim to be God so he has to pretend to speak for God for that is the next best thing and will gain the best chance of fooling others. God revealing a faith to me does not mean I accept it for the right reasons or because he says so. And even if I do accept it because he says so, then to what degree? Perhaps I think I do it mostly because he says so while in fact I only do so because it suits me to accept it. And if God revealed the faith to your religion, it does not follow that anybody in the religion cares that he revealed it. They may follow it or look as if they follow it for their reasons not his.

McCabe tries to get away from the God of power. It would be odd to worship God as if his power does not matter.

What if a person wants to see God's love not his power? Why not worship your cat or anything else you see as loving? If the power does not matter and the love does then why not?

The notion that divine love matters and not divine power rules out anybody adoring God because they think they will get a Heavenly reward or be kept safe from all evil at some stage. Virtually all attempts to get the meaning of life from the God concept presuppose that God has the power to make your life important. Nobody wants to simply hold that their life matters just because God loves them even if he can do nothing at all for them ever. Nobody wants to hold that the reason our lives are important is that they can please God - they don't want it to be all about valuing God. If you had to suffer eternal agony in order to be moral you wouldn't do it.

If being loved is what matters even if people can do nothing to help you ever then what do you need God for? You don't!

#### THE MYSTERY OF GOD AND OUR GOD-TALK IS ALL METAPHORS

McCabe says that our talk about God and what he is like is not to be taken literally. The description of God as loving or compassionate is to be taken as metaphorical. The love of God is not literal but an approximation. It is an alternative to saying nothing. Talk about what God is not is that bit more accurate than saying what he is. McCabe says that calling God Father is better than calling him God. The idea that God is Father speaks of what he is like better than the more difficult and abstract term God. McCabe says that using terms for God risks mistaking the terms for God. There is a risk of metaphor being mistaken for the real God. The risk is justified because it is worse to say nothing about God.

REPLY: Few know of this teaching so most believers in God are really idolaters. It is not God they adore even if he exists. A religion that fails to stress McCabe's teaching is creating a disconnect between people and God by having them adore a God who does not exist and thus who is not all-good. It will corrupt them.

If people are idolaters, we will not respect or listen to them when they tell us what God wants!