

## Critique of the moral teachings of Father Herbert McCabe OP the greatest modern theologian

### MORALITY IS ABOUT MEANING IN LIFE NOT RIGHT AND WRONG

McCabe denied that morality is about working out what is right and what is wrong. It is about doing what gives the most meaning to our lives.

For McCabe, morality is absolute. In other words, it is based on actions that are either always good no matter what the circumstances and actions that are bad no matter what the circumstances. An absolute morality does not care about the circumstances. When the absolutist says that lying for example is wrong and this is a moral absolute she does not mean that lying is necessarily very bad. She means it is never right to do it. It's being always wrong does not mean it is always very bad.

McCabe argues that killing children is never loving so it is wrong no matter what the situation is. He rejects situation ethics which says that an act is right if it is the best under the circumstances. The problem is that you cannot know all the relevant circumstances or if you do if each one is as important as you think.

REPLY: It is odd to say that situation ethics is wrong just because we cannot know all the circumstances. What if we did? Would it be right then? McCabe cannot say it is wrong in principle. If situation ethics is the ideal morality for it cares about the very best under all the circumstances, then any other version of morality is a necessary evil. It is just something we follow for the sake of being practical.

And no matter what decision you make, you cannot know all the circumstances but we all take it for granted that we must act according to the best light we have even if it is not much.

McCabe may have challenged right and wrong thinking in terms of morality. But surely if morality is about giving value to our lives and the lives of others then right is what facilitates this and wrong is what lessens it? And what about the fact that we think things give our lives meaning without realising that they don't? And what about the fact that nobody agrees on what gives value to our lives? Why do you think there are so many different religions?

McCabe believed that to judge the action of X as bad is not saying X is in any way bad inside. Judging the action not the person is pointless. It leads to you saying, "Ann hit her grandmother across the face. I cannot call Ann selfish or wicked. Perhaps she has some strange beliefs and things that hitting the grandmother saves her from evil spirits or something. In that case she does not intend to be selfish." And you are judging yourself as having the right to oppose what she has done if you don't have a record that is just as bad as her's? If you are really saying, "I don't want to think about if she is responsible or not for this terrible deed but I want to judge the deed" you cannot expect anybody sane to believe you. And you are encouraging the likes of her to fail to take responsibility for their actions. People tend to do that only when others encourage or challenge them to do it.

### MCCABE ON SIN

McCabe sees sin as refusing to love and to let yourself be loved.

McCabe contradicts the Bible doctrine that God has the right to accuse and judge.

"Sin is something that changes God into a projection of our guilt, so that we don't see the real God at all; all we see is some kind of judge. God (the whole meaning and purpose and point of our existence) has become a condemnation of us. God has been turned into Satan, the accuser of man, the paymaster, the one who weighs our deeds and condemns us...It is very odd that so much casual Christian thinking should be worship of Satan, that we should think of the punitive satanic God as the only God available to the sinner. It is very odd that the view of God as seen from the church should ever be simply the view of God as seen from hell. For damnation must be just being fixed in this illusion, stuck forever with the God of the Law, stuck forever with the God provided by our sin" (155-156).

His [the God of Christianity] love does not depend on what we do or what we are like. He doesn't care whether we are sinners or not. It makes no difference to him. He is just waiting to welcome us with joy and love. Sin doesn't alter God's attitude to us; it alters our attitude to him, so that we change him from the God who is simply love and nothing else into this punitive ogre, this Satan. Sin matters enormously to us if we are sinners; it does not matter at all to God. In a fairly literal sense, he doesn't give a damn about our sin. It is we who give damns. We damn ourselves because we would rather justify and excuse ourselves, and look on our self-flattering images of ourselves, than be taken out of ourselves by the infinite love

of God...Contrition, or forgiveness, is self-knowledge, the terribly painful business of seeing ourselves as what and who we are: how mean, selfish, cruel and indifferent and infantile we are (157).

REPLY: So sin or evil means doing something that makes you see God as judging you! Worshipping God then is worshipping Satan until you see that God never accuse or judges.

It is true that sin cannot matter to God. God has no needs. Thus he has no right to care about sin.

If sin is a mere attitude then your harmful actions cannot matter. It would follow that it is okay for Christians to murder Muslims as long as they think it is somehow right in the eyes of God. What would McCabe have to say to the Nazis in the concentration camps? "I don't want you killing in order to judge yourselves. Try not to judge yourselves. It is better to kill and not judge yourself than to kill and judge yourself. This is about you. The victims don't matter." It would involve encouraging people to think of a way in which the evil they plan will serve God.

McCabe says that sin damages you not the person who you hurt.

If belief in God implies we should not care about what evil people do to their victims or threatens that care in any way then atheists should go to war against faith in God.

The Bible is clear that God has established a moral law and sin is breaking that law in your heart. That is not the same thing as saying sin is merely a hostile or a loveless attitude towards God.

### MCCABE'S INSANE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS

McCabe discussed the parable of the prodigal son as follows. "The ... story is not about the father forgiving his son, it is about the father celebrating.... This is all the real God does, because God, the real God, is just helplessly and hopelessly in love with us. He is unconditionally in love with us."

God does not forgive you when you repent. He forgives you when you sin. Repentance is about connecting to this forgiving God and not about doing something so that he might pardon you.

"You confess your sin, recognise yourself for what you are, because you are forgiven."

"It is very odd that people should think that when we do good God will reward us and when we do evil he will punish us. I mean it is very odd that Christians should think this, that God deals out to us what we deserve.... You could say that the main theme of the preaching of Jesus is that God isn't like this at all."

McCabe suggested that the error that keeps people in Hell for eternity is failing to realise that God is waiting for them to see that everything is okay as far as he is concerned and all they need to do is relate to him and form a relationship.

REPLY: A judge who unconditionally loves his daughter might still have her punished.

Real forgiving includes being able to hate the person but refusing to. Real forgiveness alternatively could be hating the person and ceasing to. God cannot hate the person so he cannot really forgive.

Forgiving somebody because they sin and not because they repent is unfair.

Forgiving somebody because they sin is essentially no different from, "There is nothing to forgive".

McCabe is trivialising human evil. He shows how belief in God leads believers into being weak on evil.

### MCCABE ON LAW

You need to be protected by the law of the land but having to obey it makes you a sort of slave. "It is a mysterious fact about human beings that even to conform to the law of our own being is to be restricted. We naturally tend beyond ourselves".

REPLY: True. The law of God makes you a bigger slave if it is based on truth.

Truth is narrow. Error is wide. It is easier to err about something than to hit the truth. Truth makes you a slave to it for you cannot create or have any other kind of truth. What is, is.

Error is said to enslave. This is true - you may feel free but you are in fact kept back by your errors. They distort the truth and block you from embracing it. But truth makes a slave of you too but in a different way. The worst slavemaster though is error.

## MCCABE ON THEOLOGY

McCabe on theology. Theology "is not concerned with trying to say what God is but in trying to stop us talking nonsense."

"I am only trying to say two not very original things: that the only God who matters is the unfathomable mystery of love because of which there is being and meaning to anything that is; and that we are united with God in matter, in our flesh and his flesh."

REPLY: McCabe says God is sympathetic to suffering though he cannot suffer. God is not stoical. This means that God has no feelings but he reacts when we suffer because he wants to help us.

He denies that God's inability to change means that God is static. A God who cannot change indeed can still help us if he is the kind of God who will help. The best way to understand what he is saying is that God cannot change at all but God acts eternally meaning when he acts it does not mean he has changed. It looks like he has changed from our perspective but we are in time not eternity.

So we see God is a being who acts in a way that looks like he feels for us but he doesn't feel and cannot feel.

Love is doing whatever is best for the wellbeing of yourself or another. We need people to feel affection for us. We need more than their good deeds for us. The love of an emotionless God will not please us. We have been misled to think we want God. We do not.

## LIVE AND LET LIVE

McCabe is that love is giving people the courage to do the right things and thus the freedom to do them and thus they can be themselves. The problem is that indifference can be very like it. Indifference means that you don't care what people do or how they sin. God is said to love us infinitely but we are told this should not be read as saying he does not care about sin.

REPLY: It is scary how what seems to be lovingly letting people be free could be in fact be mere indifference.

## FINALLY

McCabe shows up contradictions in religious morality which mean it is not really a morality but a convention. Refuting such spiritual morality shows that if God is about morality then God is a lie.