

***HONEST TO GOD: An Experiment in Progressive Christian Thought?* Revd Dr Alan Race**

I have been asked to reflect on *Honest to God*, a small paperback book by the British theologian, John A. T. Robinson, first published by SCM Press in England in 1963, subsequently translated into many languages and now enjoying its half-centenary. I live not far from where Robinson himself lived, and had I been ordained by 1963 and employed in the Episcopal Area of Southwark Diocese in south London he would have been my bishop. So I feel a certain latter-day kinship with the man, the book and its issues.



The book caused a storm of debate, but that had a lot to do with the front-page headline a week earlier in the Sunday newspaper, *The Observer*: ‘Our image of God must go’. It is a mark of the times that such an unashamedly theological headline about God was thought worthy of the front page of a national and much-read newspaper. To be sure, the headline was there because the newspaper spied an ecclesiastical wrangle in the wind and helped promote it, but even so, God was still newsworthy. The Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, Michael Ramsey, reacted badly to the headline and the book and this added fuel to the row. He thought the book might unsettle the laity too much. To his credit, he later repented of his earlier irritation.

It is worth pausing to reflect on the title of the book as such. Robinson wanted to be ‘honest’, by which he meant coming clean about how we think of the reality of God in relation to both Christian sources and modern perceptions of reality through critical thinking. The headline had it right: Robinson was concerned to reconstruct the ‘image’ of God and not reject the ‘reality’ of God altogether. The relation of ‘image’ to ‘reality’ was what was at stake. I think this point was lost on many of the critics of Robinson’s book of dynamite.

Robinson had caught a mood – of change, of questioning, of seeking relevance. This idea of ‘relevance’ was what the churches needed, it seemed, in the disturbing 1960s when attendances started to decline. It is easy to dismiss the term as representing a shallow purpose, for what might be ‘relevant’ at one cultural moment might become ‘irrelevant’ at a later cultural moment. And, anyway, was the Gospel not eternal and therefore beyond ‘relevance’? The critics of relevance, however, surely have a case to answer. For it may be that ‘God’ in 1963 had not so much been argued out of existence as simply dropped out of view, that is, become ‘irrelevant’. This is captured beautifully in a monologue theatrical moment in the play *Racing Demon*, by the playwright David Hare. The parish priest of an imaginary run-down parish in south London offers the following cry from the heart:

‘God, where are you? I wish you would talk to me, God. It isn’t just me. There’s a general feeling. This is what people are saying in the parish. They want to know where you are. The joke wears thin. You never say anything. All right, people expect that, it’s understood. People also think, I didn’t realise when he said *nothing*, he really did mean absolutely nothing at all. You see, it’s this perpetual absence – yes? – this not being there – it’s that – I mean – let’s be honest, it’s just beginning to get some of us down. You know? Is that unreasonable? There are an awful lot of people in a very bad way. And they need something besides silence, God. Do you understand?’

‘Let’s be honest’ – there’s the resonance with Robinson’s book. How relevant was the available image of God to the Christian gospel, and how relevant was the reality of God to people’s lives?

Honest to God achieved classical status – as is evidenced by the volumes of essays produced subsequently, after 25, 30 and 40 years, each seeking to assess its continuing impact. (I contributed to the 25th and 30th anniversaries). But in the twenty-first century the mood has changed again: there

seems little interest now in *Honest to God* from within the institutions of the churches and in some respects there is positive animosity. Conservative and reactionary currents have been in the ascendant, whether of a 'Radical Orthodoxy' or an 'Evangelical Alpha' kind. In a bid to offer a critique of society these currents seem to make a virtue out of Christianity's marginalisation rather than articulate a Christian voice from a position of critical engagement with what we know to be the case about our world from other disciplines of human thought and outlook. Only liberal and progressive groups are seizing the half-centenary moment to talk about *Honest to God*. The churches have largely turned to obsession with numbers, money and survival – and that's tragic. Without theological renewal there will be no renewal of Christian impact.

So why keep *Honest to God* alive? I believe there is one main reason: the questions the book raised are still intensely pertinent to our own times. For example, since *Honest to God* the distinction between 'religious' and 'spiritual' has come very much to the foreground. My hunch is that Robinson would have understood how this has arisen. The spirituality which many people seek to give orientation to their lives is not reflected in the churches and most of all in the 'image' of God which the churches project. God has an image problem! We still need a credible view of God: a match between *reality* and *image*. As I have already said, the central question for me that the book addressed is the connection between image and reality.

Let me briefly say something now about the context of 1963. Here is a random list of things:

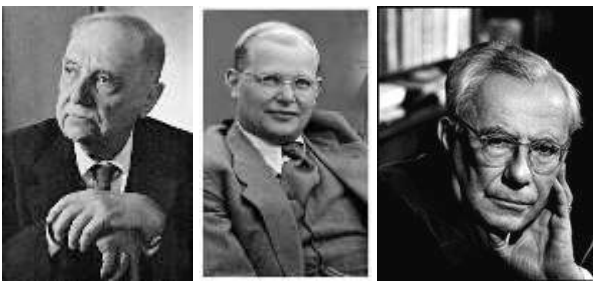
- a) Western colonialism was being dismantled
 - b) sexual emancipation and women's emancipation were emerging
 - c) anti-war movements and social justice movements were stirring
 - d) authority was being questioned everywhere
 - e) men were going to the moon
 - f) it was the year in which President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas
 - g) the poet Philip Larkin claimed that sexual intercourse was invented between the publication of D H Lawrence's book, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and the Beatles' albums. (Don't forget that Robinson had defended in court the right for *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to escape the censor's axe; and he claimed that sexual intercourse could be considered an act of holy communion between people who love one another
 - h) eastern forms of spirituality and meditation were being explored
 - i) 'drugs, sex and rock n roll' were exciting the media
 - j) in religion, the secularisation thesis was being championed – the thesis which said that the institutional hold on society by the Christian and other religion would diminish in proportion to the advancement of modernity, rationality and technology.
- Robinson saw the impact of all of this: the world was changing rapidly. But how might the church change?

Of course, much has changed since then. In Christian terms we have seen the rise of Liberation and Feminist Theologies, the emergence of interfaith dialogue, a rise in interest in the dialogue between 'science' and 'religion', an increase in interest in spirituality of many kinds. These forays sit alongside a generally conservative stance pursued by the churches and in many ways also by the academy. In addition, so-called postmodernism has given us theological non-realism. In this light, Robinson's project seems more like a bid for a middle way between the general conservatism of many theologians and the pressures for non-realism. He wanted to be *honest*, and this would pitch him against inherited conservative patterns of Christianity; but also be honest to *God*, and this would make him stop short of embracing non-realist trends. Robinson was accused of being part of the 'Death of God' movement in the 1960s but this was a criticism which was wide of the mark.

If the central issue for Robinson was the credibility of the reality of God, how did he frame his discussion? He wanted to free the reality of God from a) the mythological worldview of biblical

thought, with its 3-decker universe of heaven above, hell below, and earth in-between, and b) the classical philosophical framework of Catholic Thomist thought. The biblical mythology was obscurantist for modern people and Thomism could not do justice to the connectedness between the world and God which Christianity assumed: God remained remote and abstract. Moreover, it was hard to avoid the popular image of God as *a being* occupying some supernatural dimension ‘out there’, even if that view was always something of a theological caricature.

Robinson employed three German theological voices to assist in his project: Rudolf Bultmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Paul Tillich:



Bultmann Bonhoeffer Tillich

These were very different Christian thinkers, all German protestants and all men. It led critics to accuse Robinson of producing a mish-mash of three voices which, though excellent in their own individual ways, did not really belong together on the same page. To some extent this was a valid criticism, though it did not warrant the spiteful comment of the hard-line evangelical, Dr J.I.Packer: ‘... it is just a plateful of mashed-up Tillich fried in Bultmann and garnished with Bonhoeffer.’ (*Keep Yourselves from Idols: a discussion of Honest to God by John A. T. Robinson*, Church Book Room Press, London, 1963). It needs to be remembered that *Honest to God* was not intended as a systematic treatise of Christian thought.

Bultmann helped Robinson with the objective of de-mythologising the New Testament text: the desire to free gospel truth from the world picture in which it was initially set, and so become more existential than straight realist. Bonhoeffer helped him with driving home the impact of secular existence, leading to the expression ‘religionless Christianity’: we are to live grown-up without the props of religious dependency and as though God did not exist; we bear responsibility for our own thoughts and actions. Tillich, the most important for him, supplied the notion of God as ‘Ground of Being’ or ‘Being-itself’ (Tillich’s preferred language) or ‘Power of being’. For Tillich, God was one’s ‘ultimate concern’, what you take seriously without reservation. It is identified with the depths of existence, with an encounter with Being itself, such that we are not transported away from life but more keenly immersed in it. Put together, for Robinson this amounted to a rejection of a whole way of thinking:

‘We are being called... to far more than a restating of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms ... A much more radical recasting, I would judge, is demanded, in the process of which the most fundamental categories of our theology – of God, of the supernatural, and of religion itself – must go into the melting.’

As I have said, Robinson’s struggle was with the notion of God ‘out there’ or ‘up there’, a being greater than all beings but nevertheless a being, and this could not be right. In some respects, Christian art has not helped either. For example, it is difficult to get away from Michaelangelo’s well-known beautiful Sistene Chapel ceiling in its depiction of God’s creation of Adam:



Michaelangelo's Sistene Chapel ceiling

God creates Adam, external to God's heavenly world, so that any movement of God to the world must proceed out of the heavens and extend into a separate world. Robinson might have said that what we want is the relatedness (the fingers) in our understanding of relationship with God but not the personification of God (as fatherly being).

The mention of relatedness is also the clue to what informed *Honest to God* but never articulated on the surface: Robinson's PhD thesis entitled 'Thou Who Art'. This was an exploration of the Jewish Martin Buber's philosophy of the I-Thou encounter as fundamental to our meaning as human beings. Sometimes this is called the philosophy of personalism and it became prominent in the mid 20th century. The PhD was 160,000 words long and according to John Baillie the Scottish Presbyterian theologian it was the best PhD he had ever read. It was the book which Robinson never published and it would have explained everything he ever wrote. God is the Thou lying in the depths of every I-thou encounter between human beings and between human beings and the world.

Robinson wanted to establish what he called a 'biblical philosophy', by which he meant a view of God which was neither mythological nor philosophically theistic but grew out of the biblical story, and Buber helped him to articulate 'the personality of God' – in other words, articulate God in relationship to human experience and not God in isolated perfection. If you ask what defines a human being, the classical philosophical definition was that from Boethius: a human being is 'an individual substance of a rational nature'. A human being was an individual sharing characteristics with other individuals, sure, but the characteristics such as our capacity for creativity or laughter or feeling would be add-ons to a substance of a rational nature. In contrast, Robinson substituted Buber for whom a person was constituted by relationship with other persons:

'What Buber is in fact saying is that the different relationships into which a man enters are not additional to the essence of personality but constitutive of it.'

This view we now take for granted I think but it was not always so. Robinson again:

'Every contact of an 'I' with a finite 'Thou' points beyond itself to encounter with an infinite 'Thou'.'

God outside of relationships is not God. Some writers had even said that the divine personality itself was unthinkable in isolation.

Now you might think that all this talk of 'thou' and of personality is rather anthropomorphic, and yet the task Robinson set himself was how to maintain a hold on this personal sense of relationship but NOT be saddled with an anthropomorphic view of God. It's a difficult task. For on the one side we have experienced the slide into Christian fundamentalism which maximises the anthropomorphism, and, on the other, there is non-realism which exorcises it. Robinson desired a middle way. You might say that it is what the theological community has been trying to achieve ever since. If so, *Honest to God* really did mark a significant turning-point in theological development.

But what might be the way forward? Robinson turned to a view which has been labelled Panentheism. It is a position midway between theistic dualistic separation between God and the world and the pantheist view which collapses the world and God into one another. There is some

dispute as to whether or not Robinson articulated this view in *Honest to God* but it is certainly there in later writings, particularly his book *Exploration in to God*.

The term Panentheism seems to have been coined by a Roman Catholic German philosopher, Karl Krause (1781-1832). It became popular in modernist movements, Catholic and Protestant, at turn of the 20th century, and among process theologians in mid and late 20th century. You also find it in some liberation theologians and among theologians who are also scientists. It is popular among such scientists because it allows the world to be investigated on its own terms without recourse to divine interventions and the like.

Panentheism has three basic premises:

- 1) G is not separate from cosmos
- 2) G is in some sense affected by the cosmos
- 3) G is more than the cosmos

This is a view which is keen on relatedness and therefore suited Robinson's so-called biblical philosophy. It coheres with a view which gives importance to religious experience, whether of the intense mystical kind or the ordinary level kind which is reported by many surveys and documented by research organisations such as the Alister Hardy Society for research into religious experience. I might add that Robinson maintained this view right up to the end of his life, when in a final sermon preached before his death from cancer, he entitled it 'God is in the cancer'.

Here's another statement of the implications as Robinson saw them:

'The transcendent is nothing external or 'out there' but is encountered in, with and under the *Thou* of all finite relationships as their ultimate depth and ground and meaning.'

"In, with and under" – these are the trigger terms for Panentheism. Robinson's substantial content in *Honest to God* was supplied by Tillich, as I have said, and it is Tillich's criticism of realist theism which regarded externality as being characteristic of the finite world. God, on the other hand, is by definition infinite, and there is nothing that can be external to the infinite. So the infinite must include the finite. Ergo, God includes the cosmos.

Of course the implications for the whole of Christian theology were enormous. Our understanding of the person of Jesus Christ, for example, would undergo a shift from his revelatory power being anchored in a view of his humanity as being somehow different in kind from the rest of us, as the classical scheme had it, to one of being different in degree in his God-consciousness. There would be a shift in Ethics towards taking situations and consequences seriously as part of ethical decision-making, rather than simply relying on directives from scripture or the classical tradition. Liturgy would have to be reshaped in order to reflect the human experience and the struggle to discover God within the lattice-work of the world and not outside of the world.

All of this has become common-place now, even in many mainstream Christian communities, but it was far-reaching then. Robinson himself said that it would take about 100 years for his ideas to be assimilated into the churches. He was right in that judgement I think. Some of it has become mainstream but in many respects it also feels that there remains a long way to go. This can be illustrated with reference to debates with the so-called New Atheists. In their recent onslaughts against the Christian and other religions the New Atheists have railed against classical theism with its imagined view of God as a bigger version of a human being existing somewhere beyond the clouds. Many liberals have repeatedly asked the atheist critics to consider alternative views of God and spirituality which have been around for some time now and at least since Tillich and *Honest to God*. My point is that the New Atheist attack has often been against a straw version of the reality of

God, and this demonstrates that other views have not yet entered the mainstream consciousness sufficiently.

But there is help around from other sources in addition to that from the philosophers who can sometimes come across rather abstrusely to many people. Take, for example, the following definition of faith from the great historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. ‘Faith is,’ he said:

‘an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one’s neighbour, to the universe; a total response, a way of seeing whatever one sees and of handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at a more than mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of, a transcendent dimension.’ (*Towards a World Theology*, Macmillan 1982)

On Smith’s reckoning, ‘religion’ was a two-fold product of ‘faith’ plus ‘cumulative traditions’. And faith arose within the human as an orientation towards the transcendent. In other words, Robinson could have borrowed from the insights of historians who were beginning to suggest that the religions were not fixed entities where ‘belief’ is the sole determinative of what a religion is. Smith published his ground-breaking book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, also in 1963. It was equally challenging but coming from a different angle. (I sometimes wonder if it was eclipsed by *Honest to God* because of the latter’s media infamy). On Smith’s definition, a religion’s ‘cumulative traditions’ move and shift with time, but ‘faith’ is, we might say these days, hard-wired into the personality as a disposition of what it is to be human. What Christianity was in 4th century is not the same as in the 10th or the 18th or the 21st centuries. Interpretations vary according to culture and place and difference. *Honest to God* was promoting one more shift in the interpretation of Christian faith, and seeking relevance for a different period of history. Smith and Robinson might well have enjoyed one another’s company.

I said earlier that Robinson’s project placed him mid-way between classical theism and no-God-at-all non-realism. It was a vulnerable position, for he could be accused either of giving up on tradition too easily or not giving up on it enough. Some orthodox critics have at least one good point in their favour and it is a point which has come to the fore in recent years, though it was already present in Karl Barth in the middle years of the 20th century. This is the objection that without an emphasis on the transcendence of God we have no strong reference point from which the nonsense of the world might be challenged. By nonsense I mean the world’s systemic violence, whether in overt warfare or economically within late capitalism’s aggressive appetite for endless consumption. Others assert the need for transcendence as a spirituality which holds our tendencies to self-aggrandisement to account, what Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, thinks of as the world’s narcissism. I agree that these are inclinations from which we need to be rescued. But I am less convinced by the strategy of the critics which is simply to re-position oneself and the churches under the umbrella of Christian orthodoxy as a second naiveté. The epistemological difficulties associated with Christian orthodoxy do not disappear so easily. It is a cheap accusation to say that Robinson was in thrall to secularism and it is secularism itself which has been found wanting in the light of postmodern critiques. Secularism *is* limited, but that doesn’t restore God’s omnipotence automatically. So there seems no option but to find a way forward for the *Honest to God* project in our time.

Robinson wanted the Gospel to speak to people in ways which commanded intellectual respect. He did not substitute secularism for Christian Good News, as critics have caricaturingly said.

One biblical scholar in the UK was interviewed and she said that the debates of Robinson’s period – for example, whether or not miracles happen or what the historicity of this or that incident in the Gospel accounts may be – have simply dropped away. Those issues may have their place but the human interest has shifted, she continued: ‘What many would say, what grips people is what biblical texts can mean to us, and how, in that way, we can believe.’ I think there is nothing in this

aspiration with which Robinson would have disagreed. The question which follows, however, is how that meaning fits with the rest of what we know to be the case about reality. These critical questions remain, no matter how much gospel stories may, appropriately and rightly, inspire Christian followers.

The meaning of texts is not to be confined within the worldview in which meaning first arises. This is current orthodoxy in hermeneutical circles. But neither can texts float entirely free from what we know through other disciplines about how the world works. Robinson's strategy was to shift talk of transcendence 'out there' to 'transcendence-in-the-midst', borrowing from Bonhoeffer, a sense that whatever meaning or spirit or inference which arose through the I-thou encounters of the world was not exhausted by the encounters themselves. They could act as pointers to a bigger context than what we see, touch and feel in our ordinary sensory lives.

Exactly how to articulate an understanding of God in these circumstances was not easy, for it could become very abstract sounding, as some of Tillich's 'Ground of being' language could sound. Or it could begin to sound like nothing remarkable at all, such as Robinson's use of Bonhoeffer's 'Jesus, the man for others'. It's worth remembering, however, that Robinson would say that the faith statement 'God is love' is not the same as 'Love is God', for God's love as agape is the ground of all human forms of loving.

Robinson was fond of saying that 'reality at its very deepest level is personal, and personality is of ultimate significance in the constitution of the universe.' Evolutionary biologists who are also Christian believers say something similar when they say that in human beings evolution itself becomes self-conscious. That self-consciousness requires explanation. God is to be found 'in, with and under the conditioned relationships of this life,' said Robinson. This faith depends on nothing religious in the sense of having to perform certain rituals before love can be put into effect, and it is made real in our entirely human concerns, for example, over food, housing, the healthcare or prison services etc. Yet religious ritual, religious belonging in community and the symbolic language of theological endeavour help to focus and inspire our actions and in the process reveal the meaning of God to us. In this respect, the language of the Kingdom of God, or the self-emptying language of Buddhism, or that of the Bhagavad Gita which invites us to act morally without guaranteeing the fruits of our actions, all have their place. In later years, Robinson turned to issues of religious pluralism and wrote a fine book, *Truth is Two-Eyed*. He would have relished today's growing interfaith dialogue movement, for that too is a form of I-thou encounter which has the potential to reveal the meaning across traditions of what Christians have called 'God'.

In conclusion, it is possible to ask: can we claim *Honest to God* as a formative text for the progressive Christian movement? I think the answer has to be a resounding 'Yes'. Not because it explains all things (how could it?), but because it gave permission for Christians and the churches to think outside the box. The two headlines – one heralding *Honest to God* ('Our image of God must go') and the other announcing his fearless facing of cancer ('God is in the cancer') – act as bookends on Robinson's theological journey and draws it into a whole. They are as challenging to progressives as to traditionalists alike, and that alone makes him worth co-opting as an early champion of theological thought progressively renewing itself.