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Editorial

NO doubt both author and publisher are pleased, and perhaps surprised, that the Bishop of Woolwich's small book *Honest to God* (S.C.M., 143 pp., 5s.) has proved to be an immediate best-seller. Churchmen of liberal theological views and non-churchmen of rationalistic views have given the book an enthusiastic welcome. Though we cannot share their enthusiasm, we appreciate the evident candour and sincerity by which Dr. Robinson is animated. Candour and sincerity in presenting a case, however, are in themselves no guarantee that that case is right and true. In our judgment, the cause which the book serves is that of ethical humanism, not New Testament Christianity. It propounds "another gospel"—a "gospel", indeed, which will be acceptable to many who do not even profess to be Christians, and which will make it possible to call sinners saints—but not an alternative Gospel.

The seriousness of the situation created by the appearance of a book of this kind in popular paperback form from the pen of a bishop has been underlined by the censures expressed by the Archbishop of Canterbury on more than one occasion. In his presidential address to the Convocation of Canterbury last month he spoke of his "obligation not to allow the position of our church to be obscured and to prevent the spread of serious misconceptions about the faith to which we are pledged". While acknowledging that the questions discussed in *Honest to God* are real questions, the Archbishop said that "the book appears to reject the concept of a personal God as expressed in the Bible and the Creed". A few days earlier Dr. Ramsey had been in Belgium giving a lecture on Christian Spirituality and the Modern World at the University of Louvain. In the course of this lecture he very rightly emphasized—with reference to the concept of "Christianity without religion" (a concept proposed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and seconded by the Bishop of Woolwich in his book)—that "when all the accretions of pietism have been pruned away, religion remains as a native and elemental impulse of man, rooted in his relation as creature to God as Creator". Again, in a monograph entitled *Image Old and New* (S.P.C.K., 15 pp., 1s. 6d.) the Archbishop has dismissed Dr. Robinson's ridicule of the New Testament accounts of our Lord's coming to earth and ascension into heaven by observing: "I have, however, never met either a 'simple' Christian or a theologian who believed that God travelled through space to visit this planet. The true background of the orthodox doctrine is the contrast between Creator and creature. That is the point of the imagery about 'coming down'. One who is divine, the Creator, by an act of divine humility took upon Himself our creaturely human existence."

Among the most incisive comments are those of the Archbishop of Wales which were published in *The Observer* of 24 March. "The picture of God on a throne, high and lifted up," he says, "was combined in the mind of Isaiah with the picture of God in personal control of human history, which is the biblical view as a whole. If modern

secular man no longer believes it, his disbelief does not make it untrue. The idea that modern man has outgrown religion seems to me to be completely false. Religion expresses itself in worship, and modern man worships gods many and lords many. The vast majority worship the god called Money, using Stock Exchange lists, football pools coupons, bingo cards, or betting slips as prayer books. Many worship the transient gods and goddesses of the film world, or the current pop singers. Sex is another popular goddess, with a whole range of pornography as the bible of her devotees. A few worship the god called Humanism. There is nothing new in all this. Only the outward form of the idols has changed, and we shall not get rid of these idols by changing the image of the true God." Most important of all was Dr. Morris's criticism that "the Bishop makes no mention of man's need of grace, redemption, salvation. Modern man, it seems, has become not only the measure of things but also the measure of God. I see no Gospel in this doctrine."

A penetrating examination of *Honest to God* from the pen of the Warden of Latimer House, Oxford, appeared in the *Church of England Newspaper* of 3 May, in which it is asserted that the position championed by the Bishop of Woolwich is not a re-affirmation of Christianity, but a denial of it, and that the choice he offers us "is not between two images of the same God, but between two Gods, two Christs, two histories, and ultimately two religions". Dr. Packer expressed the attitude of many in describing it as "a grave matter when a bishop drives a coach and four through the plain and acknowledged sense of Scripture, the teaching of the Thirty-Nine Articles, and the beliefs of the mass of English churchmen. It distresses clergy and layfolk to find their constitutional leader undermining the Anglican faith". Indeed, there have been voices calling for Dr. Robinson's resignation of his office, including those of the *Church Times* and the *English Churchman*; for if the views he has propounded are scandalous, the scandal is all the greater because they have been advanced by a bishop, whose function should be to promote and safeguard unity in the doctrine of the apostles.

The Bishop of Woolwich is apparently prepared to concede that the Freudians are right when they explain that the God of traditional Christian theology is a projection, not a reality. Further, Sir Julian Huxley, well known as an opponent of Christianity, is welcomed as a prophet of the new faith who is "performing a valuable service" by detaching Christianity from "supranaturalism", and whose approved pronouncements include the following: that "the god hypothesis is no longer of any pragmatic value for the interpretation or comprehension of nature", indeed, that God is beginning to resemble "the last fading smile of a cosmic Cheshire cat", so much so that "it will soon be as impossible for an intelligent educated man or woman to believe in a god as it is now to believe that the earth is flat". Dr. Robinson applauds prophet Huxley's testimony that "the sense of spiritual relief which comes from rejecting the idea of God as a supernatural being is enormous". After all this, the assurance that "our concern is in no way to change the Christian doctrine of God" strikes one as almost farcical.

But what kind of God is it that the Bishop of Woolwich sets before us as being acceptable to modern man who has now, we are informed, come of age? God (though whether the term itself should be retained is a question) is granted to be *personal*, but not in any sense of being some other person, above, beyond, or apart from us. The concept of "God" is defined as denoting "the ultimate depth of all our being": more fully, "to say that 'God is personal' is to say that 'reality at its very deepest level is personal', that personality is of *ultimate* significance in the constitution of the universe, that in personal relationships we touch the final meaning of existence as nowhere else". Accordingly, theological statements become "not a description of 'the highest Being', but an analysis of the depths of personal relationships". For some unstated and invisible reason we are invited to accept as "the specifically Christian view of the world" the assertion that "the final definition of this reality, from which 'nothing can separate us', since it is the very ground of our being, is 'the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'"—an assertion which, by definition, can mean nothing more than the love manifested between man and man in human relationships. This is utterly different from what the New Testament means and what the Church has always understood by "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord".

Bishop Robinson's treatment of the New Testament, and especially the great cardinal doctrines of the faith it proclaims—incarnation, atonement, resurrection, ascension—is cavalier, to say the least. In fact, he spurns, or explains away, so much that is plainly taught by Christ and His apostles that it is quite incongruous for him to pick a passage here and a statement there, which he feels can be used to shore up his theories. Either the New Testament is authoritative as a whole, and in particular in the fundamental principles and teachings which it enunciates, or it is not authoritative at all. The word "incarnation", we are told, "of course is not a biblical term"—as though that automatically rules out the possibility of the incarnation being a biblical doctrine. Dr. Robinson's gratuitous "of course" follows only from the logic of his own presuppositions which lead him to caricature the concept of the incarnation as implying that Jesus "was God for a limited period, taking part in a charade", that, however much He resembled a man, "underneath He was God dressed up—like Father Christmas"; whereas he prefers to think that "the whole notion of 'a God' who 'visits' the earth in the person of 'his Son' is as mythical as the prince in the fairy story"!

This is part and parcel of his belief that for modern man the "supernatural" is incredible and *ipso facto* discredited. This being so, Jesus Christ is not "from above", nor "God become man", but belongs entirely to our earthly level—"the surface level of 'flesh'". His significance is as "man for others", who, at this level of human relationships, reveals the ultimate depths of man's being. Again, the doctrine of Christ suffering vicariously for us on the cross is dismissed as "frankly incredible to man 'come of age'". Indeed, we are told that "at no point does the supernaturalist scheme appear less compelling" than in "the 'full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world' supposed" (yes,

supposed) "to have been 'made' on Calvary"—which requires, it is added, "for most men today more demythologizing even than the Resurrection". It is hardly surprising to find the Archbishop of Wales sardonically commenting: "I should like to know how the Bishop performs the verbal gymnastics needed, say, when celebrating the Holy Communion, to translate the Prayer Book into language expressive of his present views. It must be very exhausting. Fortunately he does not have to do it audibly". (The same might equally be said about Dr. Robinson's use of the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Creeds in public worship, since these are full of the images, concepts, and doctrines which he has abandoned.) And it is no more surprising to find a Unitarian cleric inquiring with happy anticipation: "Will the Bishop take the honest step and join a faith that can permit, welcome, and encourage adventurous thinking? Or, perhaps, will he encourage his Church to welcome Unitarians as Christians? For we seek to follow Jesus, but, like the Bishop, do not believe he came from and returned to 'up there'".

Ethics, likewise, we are invited to regard as a field of merely human relationships, of living the life of "the man for others", however "secular" its form may be. The corollary to this is that there are no such things as divinely given laws or absolute standards: "The sanctions of Sinai have lost their terrors, and the people no longer accept the authority of Jesus even as a great moral teacher". In their stead we are offered "an ethic of radical responsiveness, meeting every situation on its own merits, with no prescriptive laws". On this basis one can understand why Bishop Robinson was prepared to give his vote in favour of the adulterous association between Lady Chatterley and her gamekeeper. This was doubtless a splendid, though fictional illustration of the "radical 'ethic of the situation', with nothing prescribed—except love". The ruling that "nothing can of itself be labelled as 'wrong'" includes also within its scope sex relations before marriage and homosexual associations. If this ethic, which can boast the open support in print and on television of prominent churchmen, is to become the norm of the Church's morality, we must expect to see the youth of our day plunging headlong, like the Gadarene swine, over the precipice into the abyss of godless unrestraint.

In the *York Diocesan Leaflet* for last month the Archbishop of York made some pointed remarks about the present "flood of books which, to put it mildly, fail to treat sex as the sacred thing it is. Many of these books," he said, "make great claims to be works of literature which only those who are behind the times will fail to read. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of those who read them could hardly care less about their literary merits. Their reasons for reading them are distinctly non-literary! Those responsible for the welfare of young people should realize that such stuff can act like a *cancer* in the minds of the readers. It is strange how often those who would warn youngsters against going near an open sewer fail to warn them against the greater perils of dirty literature, films, programmes, etc." The flood-gates have indeed been opened. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* has been followed by *The Tropic of Cancer* in which, according to reviews, "four-letter words" occur much more profusely than in the former

volume ; and we must look for an increasing number of these sex-obsessed elucubrations, if only because it does not require a clairvoyant to predict that they will be bought and avidly read by hundreds of thousands who are being encouraged to stuff their lower natures with this poisonous swill.

Equally alarming, in the field of publication, is the information that a series of volumes entitled *A Scientific and Cultural History of the Development of Mankind*, which has a number of atheistic editors, including Sir Julian Huxley, is being prepared by UNESCO, and is intended for use in the schools of every member country. According to reports, paperback editions are planned for all American schools and it is anticipated that the attempt will be made to introduce them into the British educational system. The extreme danger to our children of immoral literature and godless text-books is too obvious to need elaboration. But if we are not on our guard against these developments, and active in our opposition to them, we shall awake too late to the realization that the rising generation has been trained, under our very noses, for the kingdom of antichrist.

The fundamental fallacy in the Bishop of Woolwich's plea that we should replace the images of "height" (of God as above and other than man) by those of "depth" (of "God" as the ultimate depth of all our being) is that he is under a complete and fatal misconception as to the real character of human nature. The depth of man is a *depth of fallenness*. Man's nature is perverted by rebellion against God. He is the opposite of free, God-centred, self-sufficient, however much he may like to think that he is all these things. Human nature is in bondage to Satan, sold under sin, separated from the source of its meaning. It is *no longer natural*, but corrupt and distorted. As our Lord Christ Himself taught, the things that defile a man proceed from the depth of his nature : "From within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness : all these evil things come from within, and defile the man" (Mk. 7: 21f.). This is the explanation of all the world's troubles. It is the explanation also of man's need of salvation and of Christ's coming into the world to save sinners. It is the setting of the Christian Gospel. Only through becoming a new creation in Christ can man recover his true nature and the meaning and dignity of his existence. What the Bishop of Woolwich offers us is humanism, not evangelism. Can he not see that he is playing into the hands of the destructive powers of antichristianity ?

Personalities do not enter into this. Dr. Robinson is well known for his qualities of sincerity and graciousness as well as for his scholarship. If earnestly contending for the faith once delivered has compelled us to disagree with him, our motive has been that of charity as well as honesty. May God by His Holy Spirit establish us in the faith of His Holy Word !

P.E.H.