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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Not the Faith of the Incarnation

H. E. W. TURNER

THOSE WHO HAVE kept abreast of the theological development of John Robinson will have a strong sense of having been there before in the greater part of the present book.* His aim remains the same to offer a reinterpretation of classical doctrines in a contemporary idiom while preserving all that is essential in the historic faith. His personal devotion to Christ is beyond question and his integrity complete. He disclaims any intention of being reductionist though this will be the impression left on many readers after a careful study of his argument. In some respects he is relatively conservative. Particularly in his footnotes he rejects many of the more extreme positions which have been put forward. His evaluation of the historical elements in the Fourth Gospel and his assignment of a relatively early date to the Gospel and his discussion of the sinlessness of Christ will make a strong appeal to many. While noting the obvious discrepancy between the contemporary world view and the axioms of classical christology, he gives a clear warning against treating conformity to modern world views as the acid test of Christian belief. He correctly notes the tendency of some older christologies to undervalue the significance of the humanity of Christ and makes this his starting point in christology. Certainly this was where the earliest disciples began; it is not where the church ended though at least theoretically it retained in its most mature documents like the Chalcedonian Definition and the Tome of Leo the requirement that Christ was solid with ourselves. He is also right in claiming that Christianity is not tied down to a particular philosophical tradition. There is no single *philosophia perennis* (whether Platonism or Aristotelianism) which is the sole effective instrument for the expression of Christian doctrine. In the classical period the search for categories went hand in hand with the development of doctrines and it was always a question whether the doctrines would

* *The Human Face of God* by John A. T. Robinson, SCM Press, 1973, 269 pp., £2.50.

mould the categories which were employed to their new uses or whether the doctrines themselves would become subtly altered in the process. Normally I hold (though Robinson would disagree) that it was the former and not the latter which took place. But he is in precisely the same position himself. Are his intellectual coordinates adequate to the content which he wants them to convey or has christology suffered a quite undesigned sea-change in the process of intellectual transplantation? There is a grave danger that this may be the case.

According to Robinson four fundamental shifts have taken place which have shattered the classical framework of christology. The revaluation of the idea of myth has invaded the second article of the Apostles' Creed. He claims that myth should be taken as an interpretative category, a rubrication of special importance and not as a guarantee of an event in the past, present or future. This is more successful as an explanation of fall as an expression of man's fallenness than as a substitute either for creation (presumably as a paradigm of dependence) or the parousia (presumably as a pointer to the consummation of all things in Christ). The flight from metaphysics calls in question the use of ontological categories in theology. Robinson admits that we cannot dispense with metaphysics altogether but it must be kept within the limits of what is currently recognised as to be knowable. Yet only ontological categories in the older sense seem capable of pointing reliably to the priority and self-existence of God and may still have a claim to use, though possibly not to exclusive use, in christology. This he denies on the ground of what van Buren called the dissolution of the absolute. This is true of much contemporary thinking but may be necessary if we are not to 'reduce' or even to travesty the content of Christian doctrine. Finally there has been a shift in the attitude to historicity in which he recognises that Christianity has had a considerable stake. Here his position is far from extreme in practice but he claims that the old securities in history on which christology was based may be undermined beyond repair. Between absolute scepticism and absolute certainty there is a position of relative risk which is logically tenable and where I would stand a good deal further to the right than Robinson. His position here leads him to suspect the place of event in the divine economy. The decisiveness or once-for-allness which concerns many of us deeply is suspect to him. His later section on the risk of historicity with regard to the empty tomb and the resurrection narratives clarifies his position here. It is an uneasy combination of the critically conservative and the theologically radical.

The upshot is the doctrine of the two languages offered as a replacement for the doctrine of the two natures. The two storey theory of the supernatural and the natural must now on his view be replaced by the two stories which we are compelled to tell about a single series of events. The one is natural, scientific and descriptive, the other

supernatural, mythological and interpretative. The former views the course of events in the categories of an evolutionary cosmology, the latter in terms of 'moments' like the creation, the fall, the incarnation, the parousia. What is at stake here is a prior issue in the doctrine of God which is at least partly determinative for christology. Robinson himself calls attention to possible implications of his christological stance for the doctrine of the Trinity. While he does not expand this, his functional approach to christology would be consistent with a purely economic trinitarianism replacing an essential or immanent doctrine of the Trinity. He admits that the concept of pre-existence is found remarkably early in the New Testament but reduces its significance by appeal to the personification of divine attributes like Wisdom and Word in the later layers of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha. Apart possibly from the middle chapters of the Book of Wisdom this is probably correct exegesis, but the use of the concepts in the New Testament to clarify the continuing impact of the Risen Christ in the later Paulines and the Fourth Gospel marks a new application of former usage. The doctrine of pre-existence which antedates these theological explorations seems to mark a simple theological reflex from the post-resurrection impact of Christ ('Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and for ever'). Robinson's exegesis of the New Testament passages which are normally interpreted in this sense is minimising and unconvincing. He is least successful with Hebrews and the Fourth Gospel and, while his exegesis of Philippians 2: 5-11 is at least possible, the Lightfoot exegesis cannot be excluded. The evidence in the Gospels pointing to the unique filial consciousness of our Lord is interpreted functionally but points equally well to the existence of a divine hinterland behind the humanity of Jesus. Robinson's suspicion of ontological categories in theology is well known but, qualified by the use of analogy (for which 'myth' may be a modern equivalent!) they still remain a more satisfactory mould for theology than any other. What God does he antecedently is (*operari sequitur esse*) and, while modern evolutionary cosmology is certainly our contemporary framework for understanding the universe, it does not necessarily provide the best possible tool for our exploration of God. Robinson seems to favour the Process Theology of Hartshorne though he describes his own stance as panentheism. While this should be clearly distinguished from pantheism, which emphatically Robinson does not hold, it has a similar heavy emphasis upon divine immanence. This means in practice a displacement of the incarnation as a divine descent into human existence and a deep-seated suspicion of specialities of divine action beyond the level of a new emergent in the evolutionary process (Whitehead's concept of a genuine novelty). It may well be that the classical doctrine of the Enhypostasia is a development from Chalcedon viable within its own categories but untranslatable into other thought forms, and that the much more satisfactory moderate

kenoticism of the Weston Forsyth type is exposed to damaging but not fatal objections. These (like other christological theories) are merely attempts to take rational trouble over a mystery. The wrong solution is to drop the dimension and to try to pack as much as possible into the remaining coordinate rather than to work from both ends at once, even if there are muzzy edges in the middle. Ancient christologies started either from the divinity (in which case, as Robinson amply shows, there was a reduction of the humanity) or from the humanity (with the inevitable effect of relaxing or appearing to relax the unity of the two natures). Both starting points were indispensable though neither solution taken by itself was satisfactory. The Leonine statement 'totus in suis, totus in nostris' is not in itself a solution but a statement of the ingredients (and of the dimension) of the problem.

Robinson starts from the humanity. In Geraint Jones' terminology it is an anagogic approach without the balancing rhythm of a katagogic christology. Jesus must be regarded as a man, a human individual with a single human centre of reference. To describe him as Man without taking this further step will not serve. While the doctrine of the Enhypostasia not only in Barth but also in Aquinas spoke of the human nature of Christ as individual, and not as a mere collective term, this did not prevent Aquinas finding it difficult to keep Jesus within proper human limits. Robinson quotes with approval Bonhoeffer's criticism of the doctrine that 'Christ the God is substance, Jesus the man is accident'. Whether Robinson does more than reverse the roles is arguable. What is at stake in the description 'a man' is not merely the environmental conditioning of Jesus (kenoticism can easily take care of that) but the physical determinants of genes, chromosomes and possible sexuality. On this proposal the virgin birth must go, although the historical sources could admit nearly as favourable a treatment as Robinson gives to the resurrection. Many will prefer Barth's interpretation of the two miracles as the boundary limits of the mystery which lies between them with Barth's rider that the mystery creates the miracle, not the miracle the mystery. Robinson's obvious suspicion of special divine events seems to influence his judgment here. The section on the sexuality of Jesus will cause pain to many who do not suffer from crypto-docetism. It would however be unfair to make this the decisive point in the book. All Robinson appears to be asking is to be free to raise the questions. So indeed he may, but this does not imply they are either sensitive or sensible questions, still less that they are soluble in the light of the evidence. Nineham's comment on the lack of evidence on similar questions seems more relevant than Robinson's attempt to press his point. Respect for gaps in the evidence is at least as important a factor as natural modesty for not exercising a freedom of this kind. With many people, especially the great saints, such questions either do not arise or are not worth the asking.

That difference does not of itself destroy solidarity (though not in this

respect) is admitted in the next chapter devoted to 'Jesus as the Man' (Luther's 'proper man' or the perfect man of patristic usage). Here there is little to dissent from and much to applaud. Robinson's discussion of the sinlessness of Jesus is cogently argued and conservatively applied. Naturally he appeals to Luke 2: 52 and the Epistle to the Hebrews. The real gap here is between an *ex officio* sinlessness (*non posse peccare*) and the actualised possibility of not sinning (*posse non peccare*). The Alexandrine christology adopted the first, the Antiochene christology the second. Chalcedon leaves the matter open echoing the Epistle to the Hebrews that he was without sin. Perhaps this is one of the muzzy edges in the middle for those who find it necessary to operate in christology from both directions at once. A moderate kenoticism of the Forsyth type in which kenosis and plerosis are conjoined may be the most hopeful approach.

The next chapter on 'The Man of God' admits the pressure to say divine things about Jesus in some form. He is veridical both about God and about man. Much of the chapter is devoted to demolition work on the traditional framework on which sufficient comment has been made. Among the rejected positions is the doctrine of the two natures which many still find indispensable. It is more important to see what Robinson will put in its place and whether it can achieve what he intends it to do. Already from *Honest to God* days the doubt was expressed whether the Man for others and the Window into God at work were equipollent descriptions. The bias towards the humanity seemed to destroy the balance which the two natures doctrine seeks to maintain. The limitation which Robinson imposes on himself is that Jesus must be in any sense a human being like the rest of us.

First Jesus is God's man, the predestinate man, the man of God divinely commissioned. Jesus is called to the unique role of living as God's Son or personal representative. Unlike other men all that the Father has is his. This is distinguished from mere adoptionism because Jesus was born to be all this and was not an ordinary man who was adopted or chosen for this role. Robinson recognises the early date and frequent use of the concept of pre-existence, often combined with an emphasis on the humanity of our Lord. The two natures theory can handle both aspects readily enough on kenotic lines. But Robinson agrees with John Knox that the choice is either humanity or pre-existence but not both, and labours learnedly but not wholly convincingly to reduce pre-existence to his own categories. At times he seems not too sure whether he has succeeded. 'Jesus was fundamentally a man, with all the antecedents of every other man, who was yet called from the womb to embody this unique role. *Qua* Son, indeed he is not of this world and does not have his origin in time and space, where anyone can know and locate it.' This affirmation cries aloud for the two natures doctrine to give it a solid framework.

Secondly Jesus is God for us. Robinson is in no doubt about what

was really at stake in the classical claim that he is Very God of Very God. Jesus is the direct expression and implementation of God in action, not simply a man doing human things divinely but a man doing divine things humanly. The last distinction is drawn from Austin Farrer, though whether Farrer would have been content with Robinson's interpretation of the second half is more arguable. It is not that Robinson denies the Christian affirmation but that he wants to rephrase it. He finds three representations of reality, the mythological (the biblical categories), the ontological (the Greek thoughtforms of the classical doctrine) and the functional. He does not deny that we must push beyond the first. Doctrinal construction is certainly necessary. The second speaks in terms of substances and therefore appears more solid to us. The third is for him an equally solid way of expressing identity but in terms of verbs rather than of substantives. Christ is the one who does what God does, who represents him. This way of thinking is alike more primitive and more contemporary.

The section 'The Man who lived God' supported by material largely derived from Pittenger is crucial to Robinson's argument. What is at stake here is not only the adequacy of functional as a replacement for ontological categories but also a defective sense of divine transcendence. Objections to Robinson's functional interpretation of Father-Son terminology in the New Testament will not only come from 'those who prefer to take their religion from the Authorised Version'. Others too will suspect that somehow we are being 'sold short'. 'Christ is the very exegesis of the Father, and indeed is himself *theos*.' So Robinson paraphrases the Fourth Gospel, but the qualification 'because as a man he is utterly transparent to another' is woefully inadequate. Moral union or unity of will is certainly part of the story, but is it the whole? The paradox of 'the man who lived God' needs to take its place within the even more staggering paradox that God, the pre-existent and eternal Word descended into perfect humanity, respecting its limits but making it his own in a supreme salvific event. This is what the two natures doctrines within an ontological framework is trying to say but what Robinson for all his insight and integrity fails to provide. The anagogic or 'upsurge' christology needs the katagogic or 'downthrust' christology if it is to work. As Barth puts it, 'The Son of God in the far country' is the precondition and the implicate of 'the Homecoming of the Son of Man'. The latter phrase in isolation is highly approved by Robinson. Kenosis and plerosis mutually imply each other and cannot be treated as identical terms, as Robinson (following Moule) appears to treat them. The functional follows from the ontological and cannot serve as its replacement either with the doctrine of the Trinity or the incarnation. Although Robinson sincerely disclaims reductionist tendencies, the omission of one necessary coordinate inevitably exposes him to this danger. C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas—la foi de l'incarnation'!