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Honest to Robinson

J. C. HINDLEY

The ecclesiastical world in England received a jolt in March, 1963, by the publication of a slim 'paper-back' under the title *Honest to God*. The author, Dr. J. A. T. Robinson, had won scholarly acclaim for his work in the New Testament field and in the liturgical movement. But the new volume was an agonizing re-appraisal of his theological position, written after its author had for several years exercised the office of a bishop in the Anglican Church.

I

In general Dr. Robinson is concerned in this book to raise questions about the interpretation of Christianity in the twentieth century. He would probably consider himself an apologist rather than a systematic or creative theologian. He believes that just as the 'three-decker universe' (which characterizes God as 'up there') gave place to a new special symbolism, commensurate with a post-Copernican view of the world (God 'out there'), so we must now undertake a further revolutionary change in our symbolism. For modern man, claims Robinson, the idea of a 'transcendent world' with God as a 'super-person' is untenable. Instead, we have to learn to understand God as 'the depth of our being'. What then do we mean by a *personal* God? A somewhat lengthy quotation will enable Robinson to reply in his own words:

'Theism . . . understands by this a supreme Person, a self-existent subject of infinite goodness and power, who enters into a relationship with us comparable with that of one human personality with another. The theist is concerned to argue the existence of such a Being as the creator and most sufficient explanation of the world as we know it . . . But the way of thinking we are seeking to expound is not concerned to posit, nor, like the antitheists, to depose, such a Being at all . . . For this way of thinking 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.'¹

¹ *Honest to God*, p. 48 f.

In Christology the consequence of this view is that we should no longer speak of God *becoming* man. The Christmas story belongs to the 'supernaturalist' scheme and can survive only as myth 'to indicate the significance of the events, the divine depth of the history'.² In place of this traditional type of statement, Robinson offers the following: 'Jesus is "the man for others", the one in whom Love has completely taken over, the one who is utterly open to, and united with, the Ground of his being. And this "life for others, through participation in the being of God", is transcendence. For at this point, of "love to the uttermost", we encounter *God*, the ultimate "depth" of our being, the unconditional in the conditioned.'³

The inspiration so far has been mainly (as Robinson acknowledges) from Paul Tillich and Rudolph Bultmann, and the themes theological. In passing to the corollaries of these views in worship and ethics, Robinson finds a similarity to the anti-supernaturalism of Tillich and Bultmann in what a third German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, has written concerning 'Christianity without religion'. Robinson expounds this to mean the discovery of God not so much in special acts of withdrawal—prayer times, worship, retreats and the like—as in the depth of encounter between persons. The holy is the 'depth' of the common, and in his chapter on 'Worldly Holiness' Robinson gives moving personal testimony to his sense of real prayer in the midst of the practical pressures of answering the telephone and keeping up with his diary.

In ethics also we have to work towards a 'New Morality', in which love, and the demands of every unique interpersonal situation, shall be given priority over the 'absolutes' of legalistic codes to such matters as divorce. Such responsive love can take over from the external dictates of law when a man is 'in Christ'.

II

There is little if anything that is new in this book. As Robinson himself admits, he is heavily indebted to Tillich, Bultmann and Bonhoeffer, and has written because he believes deeply that they can speak the gospel to twentieth-century (Western) man and that their message must be assimilated and used in reconstructing our understanding of Christianity. The book is also a mixture of tentativeness and assertion so that one is never quite certain when one is dealing with a firm affirmation and when with a somewhat nebulous indication of the sort of conclusions which might follow if . . . Robinson admits that he has written out of perplexity, and it is often difficult to know on which side of certain important fences he has finally landed.

² Op. cit., p. 68.

³ Op. cit., p. 76.

In short, the book is not a major contribution to theological thought, and would not have attracted one-tenth part of the attention it has received except for two facts: first, that it was written by a bishop of the Church of England, and, second, that hitherto the majority of British churchmen had not really faced the type of thought popularized by Tillich in America and by Bultmann and Bonhoeffer in Germany.

Yet there is an urgency and concern for integrity about the author, and an ardent desire to meet the non-believer in humility and openness, which lead one to strive to discover, behind the elliptical expressions and frequently unjustified transitions of thought, a prophetic message for our times.

III

The first question to be asked is whether Robinson's formulations are true, or at any rate (as he himself would doubtless wish to say), whether they point in the right direction. The central issue is the nature of the transcendent: how far is Christianity committed to the belief in a transcendent personal God?

It must be observed that Robinson's arguments at least do not disprove supernaturalism. He begins his chapter 'The End of Theism?' with a rejection of the traditional proofs for the existence of God. This will be widely accepted. But to reject the proofs as such (and the possibly implied view of God as an 'object') does not dispose of the transcendent. By the transcendent I mean that which exists over and above the world as experienced (what Robinson means by the 'supernatural').⁴ To agree that we cannot 'prove' the transcendent does nothing to show its non-existence.

The latter conclusion (drawn by Robinson) only follows, I believe, from the very special ontological analysis which philosophers such as Tillich give to 'existence' as an attribute which marks the transition from 'essence' to 'existence'. In *this* sense existence is necessarily an attribute of finiteness. But to my knowledge, G. E. Moore's demonstration that 'existence is not a predicate' has been by-passed but not refuted.⁵ If existence is not a predicate, then to say God exists is not to do anything impossible, viz. to think of God as sharing the limitations of finitude. We can neither prove (with Anselm) nor disprove (with Tillich) the proposition 'God exists' by an analysis of the concept of existence.

I venture into this somewhat technical discussion all too hastily and inadequately merely to suggest that on the purely

⁴ When Tillich and others translate 'transcendent' by 'the unconditioned' it is useful to regard the distinctions drawn by H. D. Lewis in *Our Experience of God* (1959), p. 65 ff. A very clear analysis is given by G. F. Woods in his contribution to *Soundings* (1962, Ed. A. R. Vidler).

⁵ G. E. Moore, 'Is existence a predicate?', reprinted in *Logic and Language* (Second Series), Ed. A. G. N. Flew.

philosophical level the questions which Robinson regards as closed for 'modern men' who have 'come of age' are in fact still wide open.

Robinson appears to identify philosophical supernaturalism with crude myth-making. This identification really will not do. Moreover, if Robinson is right in saying that myths and symbols hitherto used are now inadequate, he does not thereby prove that the thing symbolized is false or non-existent. Yet this appears to be Robinson's conclusion. He presses the parallel between the transition from the geocentric view to the Copernican (the move from God 'up there' to God 'out there') and the transition from the Copernican formula ('God out there') to his own re-statement, 'God in depth'. But while the former is merely a change of symbol, the latter would appear to involve a totally different understanding of the thing symbolized.

Robinson is rightly sensitive to the difficulty of distinguishing his own position from an out-and-out naturalism or pantheism. He believes that Tillich has shown the way to a position beyond naturalism and supernaturalism. Is this belief justified?

Robinson writes, 'There are depths of revelation, intimations of eternity, judgements of the holy and the sacred, awarenesses of the unconditional, the numinous and the ecstatic, which cannot be explained in purely naturalistic categories without being reduced to something else . . . The question of God is the question *whether this depth of being is a reality or an illusion*, not whether a Being exists beyond the bright blue sky, or anywhere else. Belief in God is a matter of 'what you take seriously without any reservation', of what for you is *ultimate reality*.'⁶

Two questions are here confused: (a) Are the things of value indicated in these experiences *really* valuable? (b) Is the transcendent Being to whom these experiences *seem* to point really there? (Not, of course, 'above the bright blue sky'; but we need hardly point out the question-begging nature of Robinson's use of that phrase.)

Robinson's position establishes an affirmative answer to the first of these questions. It equally clearly requires a negative answer to the second, and for most people this will imply that the experiences of transcendence are in fact an illusion. To deny this (as Tillich does) in the name of 'self-transcending naturalism' is simply playing with words.

When Robinson writes, 'statements about God are acknowledgements of the transcendent, unconditional elements in all our relationships, and supremely our relationships with other persons',⁷ one is reminded of some of the Logical Positivists' paradoxes, such as that of A. J. Ayer, that historical statements are *really* statements about the future (reading documents which will

⁶ *Honest to God*, p. 55.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

verify one's historical statements, etc.). In neither case is the translation adequate. If it were so, the word 'God' would in fact be semantically superfluous. If you mean 'the depth of personal relationships', why not talk about the depth of personal relationships, and drop the word 'God' altogether? The point was well put by a thoughtful young man of my acquaintance who represents the sophisticated literary group of non-believers in England whom Robinson is trying to reach. He said, 'The Bishop of Woolwich believes what I believe as a Liberal (atheistic) Humanist, but has not the courage to say so.'⁸ It is hard to find any *reason* in Robinson's book to support his refusal to draw this sceptical conclusion.

IV

Is Robinson's position, then, Christian? Despite the fine sensitivity with which Robinson discusses our personal relationships and despite the central position which he (along with Tillich) assigns to the ultimacy of love, it is difficult to answer this question in the affirmative. Confining ourselves to the doctrine of God as 'the ground of our being', we must ask (if this is the *whole* truth about him), can there be adoration, reconciliation, or any concept of creation and lordship? I cannot *adore* the ground of my being whether in myself or in others. To be united with the ground of one's being may be to experience ease of tension, but it is not to enter into a personal relationship with a God of love. To be aware of the depth of existence is not to affirm the dependence of all things on God, who is their lord, and who could exist without them.⁹

If the doctrine of God is unsatisfactory, it is even more obvious that the Christology offered by Robinson will fall short of what has hitherto been known as Christian truth. Once again there is fine perception, particularly in Robinson's analysis of the Fourth Gospel's teaching, 'Jesus reveals God by being utterly transparent to him, precisely as he is nothing in himself'.¹⁰ Yet Robinson fails to distinguish the two possible interpretations of this as (a) the moral relationship and (b) the metaphysical relationship of Jesus to the Father. This confusion is particularly apparent in Robinson's use of the idea of *kenosis*. He begins by applauding the kenotic theory as 'the only one that offers much hope of relating at all satisfactorily the divine and human in

⁸ A similar conclusion is reached by Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the acutest minds, who has worked recently on problems in philosophical theology. In his article 'God and the Theologians' (*Frontier*, September, 1963) he describes *Honest to God* as 'the combination of a religious vocabulary with substantial atheism'.

⁹ Tillich's answer of course is the doctrine of symbols (*Systematic Theology*, vol. II, p. 7 ff). So far as I understand this, I do not find it at all satisfactory. Compare the extremely acute (and to my mind convincing) criticisms by W. P. Alston in *Religious Experience and Truth* (1962), Ed. S. Hook, pp. 12-26.

¹⁰ *Honest to God*, p. 73.

Christ'.¹¹ Yet he goes on to interpret the kenosis purely in terms of Christ's 'utter self-surrender to others in love'. Now whether right or wrong, the older kenotic theory did at least see that the problem is to relate the transcendent with the empirical, the infinite and the finite, the supernatural with the natural, the divine with the human. Robinson seems to cut the knot by denying (covertly but effectually) that the first in these pairs of terms has any validity. He would seem to be right in challenging us to state the christological problem in terms of meaningful personal existence rather than the abstract 'substance' and 'natures' of Chalcedon. But his own formula does not get beyond the idea of a moral union between Jesus and God, if indeed it gets so far. Traditional Christianity at least has never been satisfied with this.

V

The criticisms advanced so far have been negative, for the supreme importance of the subject makes it vital to discern as clearly as possible the true from the false. But if (as it seems to me) in his theoretical formulations Robinson is nearly always wrong, pastorally and existentially he is essentially right. Again and again there are prophetic words. Robinson is right to reject an 'object' God who is merely the conclusion of an argument or who is introduced merely to stop the fast diminishing gaps of scientific knowledge. He is no doubt also right in suggesting that the symbol 'depth' is somehow of profound relevance to our generation. God is indeed encountered in the depth of personal relationships. He is right also in stressing that the humanity of Jesus is the place where his divinity is revealed.

I submit, however, that in all these areas there are three possibilities in the relationship of the natural to the supernatural (not only two as Robinson seems to suppose): (1) The supernatural is objectified as the conclusion to an argument, the remote God of Deism; (2) the supernatural is the 'depth' of the natural; (3) the supernatural is *known* in and through the natural, yet in its essential being it is beyond the natural. We may agree with Robinson in rejecting (1). I find (2) to be quite inadequate. There do not, however, appear to be any arguments in *Honest to God* which refute (3), which is after all the ancient and honourable position that God is both immanent and transcendent.

VI

There is space only for a brief comment on Robinson's treatment of worship and ethics. In both these areas, it seems to me, Robinson has things of enormous value to say. Without endorsing every point of the analysis, one feels that his treatment of worship in religionless Christianity is a challenge which needs to be

¹¹ Op. cit., p. 74.

taken with the utmost seriousness. The distinction between Christianity and religion would seem to be one of the great gains of recent theology. As a 'religion', with the paraphernalia of legalistic codes of conduct, liturgy and the rest, Christianity is constantly under judgement. Dr. Robinson has a vital word to both 'liturgical' and 'non-liturgical' traditions; to his own people (in a sphere where he has been an acknowledged leader) he *almost* says (again the tentativeness!) with Tagore, 'Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads . . .'¹² The non-liturgical among us, however, have no scope for complacency. Have we (unless we are Quakers) taken as seriously as Robinson wants us to do the *depth* of personal relationships in love as the place where we find and reveal God who is love?

On moral questions, the 'New Morality' may seem even more revolutionary. Yet in essence it is surely a healthy re-statement of the non-legalism of Jesus, in the light of which our church teaching and practice (not least in India) may well have to be revolutionized.

It must be observed, however, that these matters of worship and morals are not as closely linked to the rejection of supernaturalism in philosophical theology as Robinson seems to think. It is of great significance that he can appeal directly to the teaching of Jesus for what he has to say on worship and ethics, whereas in theology and christology he appears to be negating the words of our Lord.

VII

Certain more general points of great importance arise.

First, as Robinson is aware, his position involves a very curious attitude to the actual teaching of Jesus. While Jesus is still held to be the revelation of God, his teaching about God (and his very clear sense of filial relationship to a Heavenly Father¹³) are demythologized away. Ought we not rather to pay more attention to the alternative 'either God or man'? May not the teaching and experience of the historical Jesus (accepted as 'the Christ') be in fact a cardinal element in leading us to accept the idea of a transcendent personal Father as ultimate?¹⁴ I personally suspect that this line of approach must more and more become central in establishing Christian supernaturalism. According to Robinson, 'Jesus claims to bring God completely.'¹⁵

¹² *Gitanjali* No. 11. The whole poem presents a remarkable approximation to 'religionless Christianity', a fact which perhaps indicates the strength and weakness of the position as one in which a Christian can finally rest.

¹³ This of course is denied by some N.T. scholars, not, it seems to me, with any cogency.

¹⁴ Moderns are worried about anthropomorphism. May one not characterize Tillich's system as 'mechanomorphism'? His favourite words ('structure', 'polarity', 'dimension') are still metaphors, drawn from the sub-personal instead of the personal realm.

¹⁵ *Honest to God*, p. 73.

Can we accept this while denying that God is ultimately what Jesus conceived him to be?

Secondly, what is the criterion of truth in these matters? Robinson comes perilously near to saying that it is what modern man can accept. This is because he has convinced himself that the differences between 'traditional' Christianity and his own formulas are mere differences of language. 'Any alternative language, e.g. of depth, is bound to be equally symbolic. But it may speak more profoundly to the soul of modern man.' We have seen reason to dispute this analysis. But *if* 'modern thought' really necessitates the kind of translations which Robinson offers, it would seem to be more honest to declare that, however beautiful and uplifting the Christian myth may have been, it has now had its day and may be abandoned.

Thirdly, the question must be raised of the relationship between the 'new Christianity' and other religions. The conclusion to the last paragraph can be avoided in England partly because Robinson (and perhaps also Tillich) do not realize how close their position has come to that of Hinduism. But a 'ground of being' which ultimately cannot be affirmed as 'personal' is not easy to distinguish from Sankara's Brahman. And Robinson's merging of the theology of incarnation and atonement is strangely reminiscent of *tat tvam asi*.

The trend of some Western theology is remarkably vedantic, and a peculiar responsibility rests upon the Church in India to examine this development. If it is true it must be accepted. It is, however, an issue of life and death for the Church. If this interpretation of Christianity were to prove true, it would mean the end of the mission of Christianity (except in the questionable sense allowed by Arnold Toynbee).¹⁶ If on the other hand an immanentism of the type adopted by Robinson is false, we in India have the duty of pointing clearly to the danger inherent in it of betraying the Gospel.

Finally, *Honest to God* raises very sharply the question of integrity within the Church. Dr. Robinson apparently finds no difficulty in affirming *both* that the traditional symbols are wrong, *and* that they may continue in use by those who are helped by them. He quotes with approval Hugh Montefiore's words, 'Our search is *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking rational expression): and so long as the search can and does continue, the insufficiency of our theology need not affect Christian faith or conduct or worship'.¹⁷ This kind of double-think is peculiarly easy in a tradition which is deeply wedded to the liturgical use of formularies from the past. Now no theological formula can claim to be literally adequate. Nor do we wish to reduce poetry to prose, or eliminate the essential role of myths which points beyond

¹⁶ A. Toynbee, *Christianity among the Religions of the World*.

¹⁷ *Honest to God*, p. 73.

themselves and convey the numinous reality of God more truly than any type of exhaustive treatise on metaphysics. Nevertheless, the faith which seeks must have some specifiable content. The content is Christ as revealed in Scripture, and it is to him that the Christian is committed. This formula cannot, however, be used as a blank cheque to be cashed in terms of any symbols which happen to have a psychological reaction upon us. While we still 'see in a glass darkly', our experience of God in Christ leads to commitment to at least a certain *range* of specifiable interpretations of the universe over against others.¹⁸ I cannot avoid the conclusion that Robinson has moved beyond the limits of that range.

¹⁸ Hence the theologian's tension in relation to the 'search for truth' as academically understood. To be a theologian at all he must be committed, cf. the profound analysis of this situation in Karl Barth's *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*.

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