

FIFTY YEARS ON FROM *HONEST TO GOD* (1963) AND  
*OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN BELIEF* (1963)

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Bishop John A.T. Robinson's *Honest to God* was exceptionally successful. In the decade following its publication more than a million copies were sold in seventeen different languages. Robinson was aware that numerous awkward questions were being asked about traditional Christian beliefs, which it was no longer possible to ignore. His purpose was not so much to question traditional ideas of God as to suggest alternatives for those who found them unsatisfactory (8). He wanted to convince such persons that an inability to believe what is stated in the Bible or the prayer book does not disqualify them from calling themselves Christians and presenting themselves at church. He speaks of traditional Christian beliefs, as stated in the New Testament, as a 'language' (24) and thinks that Christianity should be conveyed to people in a variety of languages. By employing, as he does, the language of such Christian scholars as Bonhoeffer, Tillich and Bultmann, an atheist may find himself able to call himself a Christian. But the old familiar language of the Bible remains more pleasing to most of God's children, particularly to his 'older children' (43), so we must not give it up, although he allows that it is becoming increasingly unpopular, so that without 'the kind of revolution' he is advocating, 'Christian faith and practice ... will come to be abandoned' (123).

Robinson claims that 'by definition, God is ultimate reality'. There must, he holds, be some reality that is ultimate, so that we cannot question whether it exists, only what it is like (29). And his proposal is that 'the word "God" denotes the ultimate depth of all our being' (47). It follows that to be an atheist would be to deny that being has any

ultimate depth (cf. the quotation from Tillich on page 22). It also follows that 'the ordinary way of thinking' of God as 'a supreme and separate being' is erroneous (17). God 'is not outside us, yet he is profoundly transcendent' (60). Robinson appeals here to what he calls Tillich's great contribution to theology, namely 'the reinterpretation of transcendence in a way which preserves its reality while detaching it from the projection of supernaturalism' (56).

Robinson goes on to extend the meaning of the word 'God' to relationships between persons. Statements about God, he says, are 'acknowledgements of the transcendent, unconditional element' in such relationships (52). So he reaches the conclusion that the love and trust of others inherent in human relationships form the essence of man, identical with God (49–50). If, then, the doubters can recognize that a relationship of goodwill with one's neighbour is something of great value, then they may call themselves believers.

Robinson faces what he calls 'the problem of Christology', namely to show 'how Jesus can be fully God and fully man and yet genuinely one person' (64–65). His solution is that Jesus is God and man not in the sense that a supramundane personage came to Earth in human form (although that is the doctrine of numerous New Testament passages), but because so much of his behaviour proceeded from what Robinson has specified as the essence of human personality, indeed of all reality, namely love. It is surely quite arbitrary to suppose in this way that human tendencies less pleasing than love and kindness are ephemeral or less fundamental. But for Robinson Jesus is 'the disclosure of the final truth not merely about human nature ... but about all nature and all reality' (128). He is the man who lived 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' (76).

It is hardly necessary to point out that Jesus as the man of love is a view based on a very one-sided selection of the

utterances and behaviour ascribed to him in the gospels, where he rules that unbelief is a cardinal crime (John 3: 18 and 36) for which whole communities are to be frightfully punished (Matthew 10: 14–15: cf. 11: 21–24). He vilifies the scribes and Pharisees as ‘ye serpents, ye offspring of vipers, how shall ye escape the judgment of hell?’ (Matthew 23: 33). And at Luke 14: 23 he declares: ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple’.

*Honest to God* is essentially a restatement of views that can be found in Bultmann, Tillich and Bonhoeffer. They are not views that are lucid and readily intelligible, and – most damningly – Robinson admits that they were not clear even to him: ‘I am struggling to think other people’s thoughts after them. I cannot claim to have understood all that I am trying to transmit’ (21). There can therefore be little chance of his key abstractions being valuable ideas, and his phrase ‘the ground of all our being’ is a signal example of misapplication and distortion of a real idea which we adopt in our practical reasonings. When we have ascertained the properties of an object, we try to distinguish the less constant from the more durable ones, or the ones that concern us most from the others, and in this way we come to speak of what a thing is, of its being. Such a distinction is a matter of our convenience, and there is nothing absolute about it. In the case of man, it is arbitrary to suppose that he has a basic nature of love and kindness, and that his other tendencies are less integral to his make up.

The elusive nature of Robinson’s abstractions is further illustrated when he writes of ‘the structure of our relationship to the ground of our being’ (130). When the term ‘structure’ is used meaningfully, it implies a recognisable set of elements or units and some principle according to which they are grouped or combined. Thus one may explain the difference between the properties of graphite and diamond structurally, saying that both consist of the

same units (carbon atoms), but grouped in entirely different ways. 'Structure' cannot mean any sort of relationship between parts, otherwise one might speak of structure in the burlblings of lunatics or in the contents of a dustbin. It is therefore important to specify both the units and their relationship, otherwise the mere statement that something has a structure conveys no information except a belief that there must be something for which this word stands, if only we knew what it is.

A telling feature of Robinson's style is his use of three common prepositions instead of one to express a relationship: something is encountered 'in, with and under' something else (53, 60, 114). In intelligible contexts the meaning of such prepositions is suggested by the words they serve to link; but if these include words like 'the transcendent', 'the unconditional' or 'the eternal *Thou*' and hence are themselves not sufficiently clear, then the prepositions can convey nothing. J. S. Mill had occasion to note, in his *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1872) that 'a large portion of all that perplexes and confuses metaphysical thought comes from a vague use of those small words'. We meet the same three of them again when Robinson says that the Holy Communion should be 'the place at which the common and the communal point through to the beyond in their midst, to the transcendent in, with and under them' (86). In this type of writing one thing is said to 'point to' another when an author wishes to posit some connection between them, but has no intelligible relationship in mind. This kind of thinking involves few restraints on inference, analogy, generalization or any of the logical processes which are so difficult to perform reliably with true abstractions, and so facilitates the attainment of any desired conclusion.

One cannot account for Robinson's ideas without allowing for the strong emotional drive which informs his thinking. He writes of something's 'depth and ultimate significance' (60), of its 'ultimate depth and ground and meaning' (114), even of its 'creative ground and

meaning' (47). All these adjectives and nouns sound important, and the suggestion is that the manifold associations of each one of them somehow belong together and contribute to an overall sense. He calls experience of God an awareness of 'the transcendent, the numinous, the unconditional' (52), again juxtaposing important-sounding terms for the same purpose. He is also fond of such words as 'finally', 'ultimately', 'deep down', 'in the last analysis'. Analysis involves breaking up a complex whole into simpler parts or aspects in order to find familiar elements in what is at first unfamiliar. Were one to say that the human body is, in the last analysis, made up of carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, and so forth, one would mean that these are what is left if we carry the analysis far enough. But there is no intelligible analysis in such statements as 'to be convinced of the personality, of the Christ-likeness of God' means 'in the last analysis' knowing that "home" is Christ' (130). One sees from such statements that today 'analysis' has come to mean any sort of talk about anything. The scientist is always being pulled up by the necessity of making his theories accord with brute facts. But those who theorize as Robinson does can get away with what is meaningless provided it sounds impressive.

*Honest to God* certainly created what the Anglican scholar John Bowden has called 'a mood of expectancy', but, he adds, in the upshot 'nothing tangible emerged' and the churches soon seemed to be reverting to 'a new conservatism as though nothing had happened'.<sup>1</sup> David Edwards, who was editor of SCM Press when *Honest to God* was published, said that really Robinson 'believed in God the Father and Creator', not in God as 'a nice word to describe what is best in us'.<sup>2</sup> Lay radicals who met him were disappointed, John Bowden tells us, to find that 'in temperament he really was an Anglican bishop and was in no way prepared to abandon his biblical theology'.<sup>3</sup>

Turning now to the lectures by four theologians published as *Objections to Christian Belief*, we find arguments that are quite intelligible and not all like Robinson's ideas,

although in spite of the book's title, they are in the main a defence, not a criticism of Christian doctrines. This is very obvious in the case of the two least substantial of the four – those by D. M. Mackinnon and H. A. Williams. Mackinnon discusses Christian attitudes to pre-marital sex, extra-marital affairs and the remarriage of divorcees. He argues, convincingly enough, that there is a place for restraint in morality, indeed that restraint is 'of supreme importance in human life' (17, 25). He is aware that it has often been lacking in 'the pervasive cruelty of the servants of God', and cites 'the horrors of the Albigensian crusade' as an example (29f.). But he concludes that it is to Jesus that 'we must look if our moral understanding is to be renewed' (33f.). Williams, for his part, allows that human imperfections in the first Christian communities 'must have coloured their accounts of what Jesus said'. But, he adds, although 'we must sometimes reject as untrue or unworthy a sentiment he is reported to have held, in practice, it will be discovered that this still leaves us with incalculable riches' (56).

A. R. Vidler's lecture advises Christians to approach unbelievers in a spirit of compromise, and not to 'try to lay down a hard and fast line between what are the essentials and the non-essentials of belief' (77). He finds that 'the hard core of the Christian story' may have some legendary embellishments even in the canonical gospels, and that to make up our minds about the story of Jesus we need to take into account not only the Old Testament, of which it purports to be a fulfilment, but also 'the subsequent history of the Christian movement', 'the total Christian phenomenon in history'. But this is surely dangerous ground, since for most of its history Christianity has not been a tolerant religion; and Vidler concedes that 'the Christian movement in history has a brighter and darker side' (72f.).

Vidler goes on to appeal to the emotions a participant in Christian ritual experiences. He may feel that 'there is something there which, despite all his puzzlements, holds him and speaks to the deepest levels of his being' (76). It

is of course true that emotions of awe and wonder can be evoked by the solemn music of, for instance, a cathedral service, by the voice of the intoning priest, the candlelight, and so on. But this does not authenticate the doctrines on which the ritual is based, nor even necessarily go with clear ideas about them.

The final of the four lectures was given by J. S. Bezzant. It is the only one which makes really substantial objections. Bezzant outlines the scheme of salvation according to traditional Christianity, finds it quite incredible, and declares that the relevant doctrines have been 'so shattered' that the mere recital of them has 'the aspect of a malicious travesty' (82–84). He is also repelled by the theological doctrine, far from extinct, that the only ingrained bias in human nature is towards evil. He mentions 'innumerable acts of devotion to duty by multitudes of men and women', which are not to be discounted by 'theories based on short passages in the writings of an apostle' (97f.). 'God cannot be regarded as revealing or inspiring notions that are destined to be found ethically or otherwise defective by man himself' (100). Nor is it allowable to make the validity of the assertions of historical Christianity depend upon 'the therapeutic function it plays in healing fractures in the souls of believers'. How, asks Bezzant, 'can it ever have this healing function unless it can be believed to be true?' (91). Moreover, unintelligible elements in Christian doctrine are not to be represented as 'a profound mystery' (94). 'Alleged revelation which is incomprehensible, whatever else it may be, is not *revelation*.' (101)

Bezzant is well aware that 'the effectiveness of beliefs of any kind depends not upon their truth but on the intensity which which they are believed' (105). He goes on to specify feelings and activities such as awe, prayer and need of purification which are found in many religions and are not to be dismissed as 'universal illusion'. The feelings and activities are, then, real enough, but the question is whether they are directed towards nothing or towards an invisible entity which provokes them. Bezzant's view is that

to abandon belief in God would be to hold that the cosmos 'has no meaning or enduring value' (109). One naturally asks: to whom or what is this meaning or value to refer? But like other theologians he is unwilling to admit that the cosmos is indifferent to human interests. He is aware that some critics have protested that 'Christianity overpersonalizes the Divine', and he notes that 'no thoughtful person can ignore the fact that the universe, as modern astronomy reveals it, reveals no sign of *personal* activity'. However, he believes that 'personality is the highest category we know which the world-ground has produced', and so he decides to 'ascribe personality to its originator' without 'overpersonalizing him' (103–106). The difficulty for the theist is that an abstract God without human qualities is of really very little interest. Prayers and sacrifices can be supposed effective only when dealing with a being having human emotions and intelligence, even though it is his superhuman powers that make it worth while to cultivate him.

In spite of the objections to Christianity, to which 'there are at present no convincing answers' (107), Bezzant will not desert his master, and thinks it 'entirely reasonable for any man who studies the spirit and the facing of life as Christ faced it, and his recorded teaching, to decide that by him he will stand'. He finds comfort in the fact that the less than comfortable situation of the modern Christian is nothing new: for hundreds of years during the rise of the churches 'the decisions of bishops in councils and otherwise were bewildering in their contradictions, and there was an insufferable strife of tongues which must have made it impossible for the ordinary man to know whether or not he was an "orthodox" Christian' (109f.). Yet, he adds, 'Christianity survived, and it will survive present difficulties, objections and uncertainties, though perhaps in a different form'. He thinks we ought to go on trying to make sense of it with the same energy and perseverance with which we persist in trying to find a cure for cancer. So far none has been found, but 'the sponge is not thrown in with anything



like the same ease with which difficulties in and objections to Christianity are allowed to be negatively effective' (82).

Progress in the treatment of cancer has been considerable since 1963. Can the same be said of Christian apologetics?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bowden, J. *Voices in the Wilderness* (London: SCM, 1977), 11, 17.

<sup>2</sup> Edwards, D. L. 'Why the Conservative Backlash?' in James E. (ed.), *God's Truth: Essays to Commemorate the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Publication of 'Honest to God'* (London: SCM, 1988), 94.

<sup>3</sup> Bowden, J. 'Honesty is not Enough', in James (ed.), as cited above, page 45.