

HONEST TO GOD. John A T Robinson. (SCM 1963)

*[In my estimation the most influential British theological book since the war!
~ for good or ill?]*

“For in place of a God who is literally or physically ‘up there’ we have accepted, as part of our mental furniture, a God who is spiritually or metaphysically ‘out there.’”
He ‘sends’ or ‘visits’, like a sophisticated version of Old Man in the Sky.

1949: ‘The Shaking of the Foundations’ Paul Tillich, talked of ‘depth’, equally a spatial term but meaning the Ground of our Being.

1953: ‘Letters & Papers from Prison’, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, recognised a generation which lives without religion or sense of sin. Need for new way to think of God.

1953 (Eng translation) : ‘New Testament and Mythology’, Rudolf Bultmann, said myth was language which seeks to characterise Gospel history as *more* than bare history like any other history.

THE END OF THEISM?

Traditional theology based on ‘proofs’ for existence of God. But one cannot argue if ‘ultimate reality’ exists as they did but rather what ultimate reality is *like!*

Deists: God is Supreme Being ‘existing’ like a great aunt in Australia – out there.

Here God is *a* Being. But as Laplace said to Napoleon, ‘I find no need for this hypothesis’. Huxley said as much but thought ‘Religion’ was good for human spirit.

Bultmann points up the Bible uses Supernaturalistic terms: Obviously the historical event of Jesus shows us ultimate in our world but Bible uses ancient spatial concepts to express that and is objectified as a supernatural transaction. But Bultmann gets bogged down in existentialist reasoning.

Bonhoeffer asks what happens when questions such as death, guilt, etc are answered without recourse to God hypothesis, as Julian Huxley et al seek to show? Bonhoeffer says answer is reject Religious premise (not God) in way St Paul rejects circumcision as requisite for Gospel.

Atheist argue against a Supreme Person – but Christians have refused to call God a Person, saying that for Trinitarian persons *of* the Trinity which is God. Such a supreme person might even keep humans in subservience and not liberate their

adulthood and let them come of age. What atheists (and some Christians still) take Christianity to be – this Supreme Person – is sort of neurotic illness Freud described. So we must validate transcendence for modern humanity without these shackles.

THE GROUND OF OUR BEING:

Tillich uses word ‘depth’ to show that to find God we don’t turn up from, out from, the world at all, for ‘FGod is not at the borders of life but at its centre’. Word ‘God’ denotes ultimate depth of all our being, not just *a* being however grand or ‘supreme’. Within this conditioned world we touch the hem of the eternal. Love is not just what *should* be the truth but *is* the ultimate, the ground of our Being. Statements about God are acknowledgements of transcendence in all relationships but supremely in our relationships with other persons. This conviction does not derive *from* our relationships with other persons, but the sacredness of love discloses the ground of *all our being*. Being ultimately has this character. It is ‘beyond’ ‘in the midst’, not remote. To ban God into a nether (supernatural) region is a *loss* of transcendence! The question of God is: whether this depth of being is an illusion or real, not whether there is a being somewhere else!

God in the Bible:

Tillich says Psalm 139 says, “man is not equal to his own experience; he attempts to forget it; and he knows that he *cannot* forget it.” (remember Freud) But God is “nearer to us than our own selves.” St Paul juxtaposes ‘flesh’, which is life in its shallowness, with ‘spirit’ and says: the spirit searches everything, even the depth of God (I Cor 2:10) And again in I Cor 2:12-16, “We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God... But we have the mind of Christ.”

Likewise the thrust of the prophets is that it is only in response to neighbour that claims of God can be met and known. Similarly in the Sheep and Goats Matt 25, the test is ‘how deeply have you loved?’ and that question posed by Jesus has nothing to do with Religion. So God is the ‘depth’ of common non-religious experience, open to anyone, whilst prayer etc refers back to that common experience, since usually people don’t recognize their experience or fathom where it derives.

THE MAN FOR OTHERS:

The traditional Council of Chalcedon definition of God talks of Jesus in same way as thinking of an amalgam of oil and water since God and Man were of different spheres. No wonder popular Christianity could see how oil and water really are one, so docetic notions occurred of Jesus only being God in disguise. Word incarnation is not biblical term but can indicate God ‘hiding inside’ a man, as in ‘taking our nature upon him’ or ‘veiled in flesh the Godhead see’. QED: if two beings, one from outside invading the one inside, seek to mix, the two natures rip apart. This Chalcedon approach can only succeed as myth – and of that it does a good job.

Even if we say Jesus shared all qualities of God it doesn’t add up to One God.

Jesus in the Bible:

It says only that Jesus was ‘word of God’, that God was in Christ, and Jesus is Son of God’, but not Jesus is God. However, John 1 says “καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος” which the so-called Authorised Version renders ‘the word was God’ but better in New English translation: ‘what God was, the Word was.’ i.e. look at Jesus and you see God for he is the ultimate expression (word) of God. Similarly the centurion by the cross sees that Jesus is more than just a man, but son of God, a ‘window into God at work’. Jesus seems to have denied being God just like that when he said, ‘Why do you call be good? No one is good but God alone’ (Mark 10:18) And questionable whether he claimed to be Son of God because in Matthew he answers Pilate equivocally so why was Matthew reluctant to go all the way as did Mark who he was ‘copying’? New Testament does repeatedly claim that God is utterly transparent in Jesus especially when Jesus empties himself. “For he who is the bearer of the final revelation must surrender his finitude – not only his life but also his finite power and knowledge and perfection... he became completely transparent to the mystery he revealed.” (Tillich, Systematic Theol I, p148). This is why Paul says it is ‘Christ crucified’ who is ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God.’ (I Cor 1:23f) It is his ultimate surrender of self, in love to the uttermost that Jesus is so completely united to the Ground of his Being and can say ‘I and the Father are one.. I Father is in me and I am in the Father.’ (John 10: 30&38). This is known as the Kenotic theory of Christology. He ‘empties’ himself not of his Godhead but of himself or any desire to focus upon himself.

Christ for us Today:

This life for others, through participation in the Being of God is transcendence, because in love at its uttermost we encounter the depth of our being, the unconditional in the conditional. Religion only focuses on power of God to aid us in distress, Bible directs us to powerlessness of suffering God: only a suffering God can help us. (Bonhoeffer) Idea of Virgin Birth is trying to say Jesus is born not of this world's will to self, but of love.

Atonement: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself', Old view said, God is 'outside' and only an 'insider' can make us and God one, so God comes 'inside' as Jesus, and sorts it out. This now sounds very lame.

Today we can acknowledge our alienation, that we are 'estranged' from the origin and aim of our own life. Meaninglessness, emptiness. We don't know where we're going so we hide our ultimate despair, which is Hell. But like the Prodigal Son, as we come to ourselves we feel received home to what we have been created to be – and that we call 'Grace'. Grace because we cannot will it of ourselves but usually comes to us in the dark night of our emptiness that light breaks in so you know *you are accepted*. Don't need to understand it but everything is then transformed. And accepting our life we can then accept life of another which reforms our alienation and our exclusions. This is as 'the man for others'.

So at Gethsemane Garden we are challenged to be awake to sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world, "could you not watch for an hour?"

"It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the sufferings of God in the life of the world." (Bonhoeffer)

WORSHIP AND PRAYER WITHOUT RELIGION?

The eucharist, is a Holy Communion, because it asserts the beyond in the midst of our life. The Holy Communion is the point at which the common and communal becomes carrier of the unconditional. To think to make our communion with the God out there is a Religious perversion of Holy Communion, for we do not withdraw from the world into the holy of holies for the curtain has been ripped and the false separation and distinction of two spheres, the secular and sacred, demolished. God is in no way separated from the world and it is blasphemous to suggest it ~ yet many do. Within this sacrament we move from proximate concern for others (liking with limited commitment) to ultimate concern (the purification and correcting of our love). This brings reconciliation for us and the community. This is why the BCP

stipulates that the bread at HC must be ‘such as is usual to be eaten’. Similarly to have priest face away from people for HC is to place God ‘out there’ as we turn from the world. “The test of worship is how far it makes us *more sensitive* to ‘the beyond in our midst’.”

Private Prayer:

Even ‘arrow prayers’ place God out of the picture and assumes prayer is withdrawal. We carry guilt feelings that our prayer is not up to standard, but that standard is medieval pattern who have a different expectancy. Surely unconditional engagement is the moment of revelation, not withdrawal.

Dialectic between engagement and withdrawal is essential but the engagement is primary. We never have to come away from the world to meet God. We must take time to withdraw in order to let the encounter sink in to our whole self, to allow time for the fruit of the encounter to be brought to perfection ~ to put onto tablets the experience on the mountain. The quiet time is the overspill of the prayer-laden life. It must be our whole self in relation to God not just the quiet time away from others. Ecclesiasticus 38:34 says ‘their prayer is in the practice of their trade’, and for many this is the true experience.

Intercession is being in God’s presence with the prayed for, both before the Ground of our Being, so that our concern for that person our ultimate concern.

On our daily round our mind (must be) set to hallow all we find.

Augustine: Love God and do what you like (better, Love and *then*, what you will, do)

SITUATION ETHICS:

Assertions about God must be assertions about Love, the ultimate ground and meaning of our relationships.

Some traditionalists demand we see God as the one who sends down a law for all time independent of the local situation or consequences, but Jesus says ‘Sabbath is made for Humans, not humans for Sabbath’ [remember Sabbath was one of 10 Commandments!] Examples would be the Divine Right of Kings which was grounded, they said, in the eternal order of things. We also talk of the ‘sanctity’ of marriage, saying marriages are metaphysically ‘made in heaven’. Jesus however goes behind Moses’ Law to the story of Creation when asked about marriage, and bases his answer on love in creation. His Beatitudes are ‘the kind of thing you will do when

you are open to the ultimate ground of your being in love with all.’ Love therefore is able to find a way for each circumstance, whereas Law comes from outside, regardless of the circumstance. When we ask, why obey that law, if we have no depth of awareness of the ground of our being then we substitute a reckless lawlessness, issuing in every kind of ethical relativism and subjectivity ~ utilitarianism, existentialism, etc. Instead we must ‘let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus,’ (Phil 2:5) having no absolutes but his love. Love has its own built-in moral compass. The Talmud endlessly ‘made rules for the breaking of rules’, ending in a tangle of legalisms. A directive of the Law may always turn out to be right, but it is not intrinsically so and must always be measured by Love. Persons are even more important than standards.

RECASTING THE MOULD

The last war did not call forth any religious reaction – people have moved on from that. But as one idol is knocked down another replaces it, so Bultmann’s ‘demythologising’ replaced traditional ‘supernaturalising’ and we are looking to replace ‘religion’. Will our thinking be idolised too? So the dispute of St Paul at the Areopagus must never be closed, for Christian Gospel is forever at odds with images of God we set up for ourselves. They must not become our new gods.

The humanist things Love should have the last word, but Christians believe that Love always does have the last word about life, for ‘there is nothing... in all the world that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

We can only affirm love as ultimate character of reality because we see it in Jesus who, we believe, is ‘of one substance’ (homo-ουσιος) with the Father.

Pantheism questions the existence of God as a ‘separate’ being, but we are not pantheists because we welcome the distance to be ourselves which only Love offers. So we glory in the ultimacy and the intimacy of God, of the Ground of our Being ~ it is the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

All this may be impossible to imagine and so we are granted our myths and figures but do not think them more than that.

The Church: not an organisation for the religious and must be stripped down to the form of a servant, equipping λαος by quality of its loving to enter secular strivings of life and find God there. Don’t cling to the church buttresses but “Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted.”