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The Bishop of Woolwich and Man's Conception of God

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THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT that the Bishop of Woolwich's paperback, *Honest to God*,¹ has proved to be a startling catalyst in the British Isles, and the effect of the controversy it has aroused will be increasingly evident in North America and elsewhere. Already over 350,000 copies have been sold, and the book is currently being translated into seven languages. Indeed, the editor of the Student Christian Movement Press has gone on record as saying that it "appears to have sold more quickly than any new book of serious theology in the history of the world."² Now a second volume, *The Honest to God Debate*, has appeared, and this fascinating collection of documents may well arouse even more interest than the original monograph.

Much discussion has centred on the reasons for the phenomenal response to the Bishop's questionings, but it seems to be generally agreed that he has spoken to the inarticulate and widespread perplexity about religion both inside and outside the ranks of professed Christians, though the obscurity of his initial treatment of the concept of God has left many more confused than they were before. Some have concluded that Robinson, in rejecting the images of the God "up there" or "out there," has virtually embraced an atheist position, while others assert that he has restored to them a faith which they can at last conscientiously hold. But the prevailing mood seems to be one of bewilderment: the belief that the Bishop has begun to say something of paramount importance, which "finds" his readers in their groping, and at the same time an inability to comprehend what this means or to state it with any clarity.

The source of the confusion lies in part in the unexpectedly large and diverse range of people who were encouraged to read the book through the publicity given to it by press, radio, and television. Indeed, the Bishop himself confesses that much misunderstanding arose from the fact that he was not writing for the popular audience that devoured it.³ But it is also clear that many of the theologically and philosophically instructed have been equally at a loss to make sense of his main thesis. Consequently the Bishop gives the impression of speaking to the confused thinking of those who are

1. J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: S.C.M., 1963).

2. J. A. T. Robinson and D. L. Edwards, *The Honest to God Debate* (London: S.C.M., 1963), p. 7

3. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

midway between naive and unreflective acceptance of traditional imagery and philosophical sophistication.

One of the most important criticisms directed against the book is contained in an article by Alisdair MacIntyre,⁴ who is both a professional philosopher and at the same time thoroughly conversant with the work of Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and Bultmann to which Robinson appeals. MacIntyre accuses all of them of landing in atheistic naturalism cloaked in religious language. To speak of God as the ground and depth of being, the source of ultimate concern, is to stay within the natural framework and to talk about things and people, not about Being of another order. God, in any sense recognizable as the object of worship or the Creator and Lord of the universe, has been exposed as nothing more than a projection, the creature of man's imagination. Freud in *The Future of an Illusion*⁵ was after all fundamentally right.

Now this is not entirely fair to what the Bishop of Woolwich and his distinguished authorities have been trying to say,⁶ though it has to be admitted that there is a lack of conceptual clarity, at least in the opening chapters of *Honest to God*, which lays the author open to the kind of charge MacIntyre brings against him. When Robinson dismisses the idea of the God "up there" and then the God "out there" with the plea that we should talk of God as the ground and depth of being, what exactly is he doing? Is he replacing two concepts with a third of the same order (in which case he would simply be substituting the God "down under" for the God "up there" or "out there"—a highly dubious improvement)? Or is he turning to a different kind of conceptual thinking altogether? It is plain that he is intending the latter; for at one point he explicitly states that he is not "dealing simply with a change of symbolism . . . the old system in reverse, with a God 'down under' for a God 'up there'."⁷ And this is further underlined by the far more lucid exposition of the concluding essay in *The Honest to God Debate*. But the conceptual status of what he is rejecting is treated in far too cursory a fashion, while that which he is proposing to embrace is altogether obscure. In other words, the Bishop is raising an important philosophical question that can only be dealt with in philosophical terms at a level of considerable sophistication.

Herein lies the crux of the whole matter. We have been living through a period in which the disciplines of philosophy and theology have been pursued in virtual isolation from one another, and many have been content that this should be so. Philosophers, under the influence of linguistic analysis, have felt able to abjure metaphysics, while theologians, devoting themselves to the exposition of the biblical revelation, have supposed they were freed from the deliverances of so-called barren reason. The result has

4. Alisdair MacIntyre, "God and the Theologians," *Encounter*, XXI (September, 1963), 3-10.

5. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. W. B. Robertson-Scott (New York: Liveright, 1953).

6. Cf. Robinson and Edwards, *The Honest to God Debate*, pp. 228-231.

7. Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 46.

been the intellectual divorce of the Church from the world, with an almost complete breakdown of communication. Theology, largely under the Barthian influence, though sometimes despite Barth himself, has increasingly come to be pursued in a sort of religious ghetto. Tillich, more, than any other contemporary thinker, has occupied an ambiguous position in the middle, an enigma to those on either side of the divide, but a standing testimony to the impossibility of preserving a dichotomy of the intellect.

In the long run, perhaps the most important effect of the publication of *Honest to God* will be to have shown that biblical theology has run itself into the ground and that the time has come for a radical reorientation of Christian thinking if the gospel is to be communicated to secular man. But this, I venture to suggest, will mean coming to terms with critical philosophers, who are themselves beginning to show signs of reopening metaphysical questions.⁸ The difficulty about *Honest to God* is that it has appeared at a time when few are prepared for the rapprochement necessary, and it is written by a confessed biblical theologian,⁹ who is deeply sensitive to the inadequacy of the conventional approach, and yet has not sufficiently clarified the conceptual tools with which he is working. Much spadework will have to be undertaken before the real issue can be presented with any clarity to the average reader, and this would also set the stage for the real debate between sceptical philosophers such as MacIntyre and those, like Robinson, who want "to validate the idea of transcendence for modern man."¹⁰

Obviously a full-scale discussion of the subject is out of the question in the compass of one article. All I propose to do is to suggest what the landmarks are and to delineate the scope of the inquiry as I see it. In brief, my difficulty with Robinson's thesis, even in its much more lucid presentation in *The Honest to God Debate*, is that the proper functions of symbol, image, myth, and world-view in our concept of God are not adequately recognized or defined, while the role of metaphysical reasoning is ignored or virtually dismissed.

In the first place, it is nowhere clearly stated that *all* our language and *all* our concepts are symbolical of the reality of which we try to speak and think. Indeed, when the Bishop declares that "we must be able to read the nativity story without assuming that its truth depends on there being a *literal interruption* of the natural by the supernatural,"¹¹ we are entitled to ask what "a literal interruption" could be. Is there anything, even the simplest statement about observables, which is literally true in the sense of being an exact copy of that to which it refers? Certainly, Bertrand Russell at one stage in his thinking did strive for a language which would com-

8. See, for example, P. F. Strawson, *Individuals, An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959) and *Prospect for Metaphysics*, ed. Ian T. Ramsey (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961).

9. Cf. Robinson and Edwards *The Honest to God Debate*, p. 262.

10. Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 44.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

pletely expose the nature of its referent—a mirror of that which is given in sensation¹²; but few philosophers today would be prepared to concede that such a simplification of language is possible or could cover meaningful discourse about the range of human experience. The so-called correspondence theory of truth is generally at a discount, and what applies to language applies to concepts also. This point needs stressing because I find that the majority of freshmen entering university naively assume that there is no problem about literal truth, and that is the platform from which they begin to dismiss every statement and idea which will not conform to what seems so obvious a standard. In this they represent the intellectual climate in which they have been nurtured. Little progress is likely to be made until the ghost of literal truth has been effectively laid and people are persuaded that it is still possible to talk, think, and know about reality, even though reality is never exhaustively exposed thereby. The recognition of the inevitable symbolism of all thought and language is the *sine qua non* for justifying image, myth, world-view, and, in the last analysis, metaphysical reasoning.

On this basis we can begin to assess the function of images or mental pictures. Plainly Robinson understands the God “up there” and the God “out there” in this sense, but it is not altogether clear whether he is dismissing them as mental images *per se* or because of their association with a pre-scientific world-view. The answer is that he is probably doing both, with the grudging concession that they may continue to be of use to some people. But they cannot be got rid of quite so easily. Man is an inveterate “imager,” and will always continue to be so because of his dependence on sight, and it has been one of the weaknesses of Protestantism that it has largely failed to recognize the value of visual symbols in religion. It was the Roman Catholic, G. K. Chesterton, who wrote in the fly leaf of a child’s picture book:

Stand up and keep your childishness
Read all the pedants’ screeds and strictures
But don’t believe in anything
That can’t be told in coloured pictures.¹³

Of course, neither Chesterton, nor any reflective person, supposes that the image is a photographic copy of reality, and the use of images has constantly

12. Russell is elusive at this point. While it is clear that he would, on the principle of Occam’s razor, like to maintain this position with complete rigour, he is too honest to do so, though he is unwilling to make any more modifications than he is compelled. See Max Black, “Russell’s Philosophy of Language” and Russell’s own reply to this essay in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (Evanston, Ill.: Library of Living Philosophers, 1946), pp. 229–55 and 691–5. A succinct statement of his position is given in reply to Max Black’s charge that he has consistently held that language must “correspond” to the “facts”: “It is true that the correspondence theory is the basis from which I begin the building up of the concept of ‘truth’, but I hold that even such everyday positions as ‘you are hot’ involve apparent variables, and I do not hold that there are any ‘facts’ corresponding to propositions that contain apparent variables, or even to such as contain the word ‘or’. And with regard to universals, my language is purposively cautious.” *Ibid.*, p. 694; cf. *An Inquiry into the Meaning of Truth* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1940), pp. 341–7.

13. Cf. Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952), p. 99.

led to the error of idolatry; but it remains true that, provided we know what we are doing, images have a useful function to perform, and the unsophisticated are largely dependent upon them. In this sense the God "up there" or "out there" may continue to serve a useful purpose for a great many people who cannot get beyond imaging and even for those who can and must. Nevertheless, it is open to question whether these images are tied up with a prescientific world-view, as Robinson suggests. They were undoubtedly more likely to lead to a mistaken identification with the reality they symbolized in the prescientific era, but as *images* they have exactly the same status now as then.

Images should not be confused with myths, which are stories embodying a world-view. Their connexion with imagination is different from the invention of pictorial images and they have close affinity with artistic creativity of all kinds. To use an important distinction made by E. J. Furlong, they are worked out "with imagination" rather than "in imagination."¹⁴ The relationship of myth to history has, of course, been one of the central themes of modern biblical theology, and has direct bearing on the doctrine of the Person of Christ with which Robinson deals in a moving and provocative chapter.¹⁵ In so far as we are committed to the belief that God has decisively revealed himself to men in Jesus of Nazareth, the question how far we are prepared to go with Bultmann and his followers is of cardinal importance. Certainly mythology as interpreted history cannot be dispensed with, though personally I should not want to quarrel with Donald Baillie's finely balanced treatment in his well-known discussion of the subject.¹⁶ But much work has yet to be done to make plain the role of myth in mediating the action of God in history, and only then will its full conceptual status emerge.

However, it is when I come to Robinson's exposition of Tillich's thesis that God is the ground and depth of Being and man's ultimate concern that I am most puzzled and find myself asking what the Bishop thinks he is really doing. He explicitly denies that this is a different imagery and it does not appear to be mythology, at least in any carefully defined sense. On his own showing, it is the replacement of the supranaturalist world-view by one that is beyond naturalism and supranaturalism,¹⁷ but he appears to suppose that the former depends on a sort of imagery, whereas it is a metaphysic with a long and honourable history which has to be assessed in metaphysical terms; and the alternative he proposes we should embrace is a metaphysical thesis also, though its conceptual status as such is nowhere clearly recognized.

14. E. J. Furlong, *Imagination* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961). Actually he distinguishes between three concepts: "in imagination," "supposal," and "with imagination." An illustration of the first is visualizing the Front Square of Trinity College, Dublin. The third is doing something "with imagination": painting a picture, composing a symphony, writing a book, and even cooking a meal or playing football. Supposal, on the other hand, is a usage parasitic on the other two, and may involve one or the other or both or sometimes neither; it is the equivalent of pretending, as when a child "imagines" he is a bear on the hearthrug.

15. Robinson, *Honest to God*, pp. 64-83.

16. Donald Baillie, *God was in Christ* (London: Faber, 1948), pp. 9-58.

17. Robinson and Edwards, *The Honest to God Debate*, p. 236.

Perhaps the most revealing sentence the Bishop has written is found in his latest essay where he confesses, "Whether, or in what sense, the Gospel can be given expression without recourse to metaphysical statements I do not know."¹⁸ But agnosticism of this kind is incompatible with discarding or adopting world-views.

The fact is that if we are going to ask ultimate questions, metaphysics is unavoidable, and to say this is unfashionable to the point of being shocking. Yet I am persuaded that such is the case, and is the inevitable logic of *Honest to God*. Without doubt, most people find it extremely hard to think in this way and resort to images, but our use of words should quickly convince us that picture imagery has only very limited value in thinking about anything. To quote the Cambridge philosopher, A. C. Ewing, "One can go a certain distance in the interpretation of thought by means of images, but in very many cases the only discernible images are words. You may be able to think about physical things by forming images of them, but if you open a book on philosophy or economics at almost any page, you will not find a sentence the content of which is capable of being imaged."¹⁹ Indeed, I would be prepared to argue that modern physics, with its abandonment of pictorial imagery as in any way adequate for conceptualizing the world around us, points the way to metaphysical thinking as a valid undertaking. However that may be, the way to proceed, the language to use, and the concepts to employ are questions that can only be answered from the philosophical standpoint, and this has for so long been out of fashion in circles where biblical theology has held the field, as well as amongst critical philosophers, that the first tentative steps have to be taken with very considerable caution. One approach is to follow Tillich in his attempt to work out an ontology within the existentialist framework of thought. But it is not the only way, and in the end I doubt whether it will commend itself or even make sense to those who have been steeped in the empirical tradition. Everything depends, of course, on how one takes the pulse of modern secularism. A more fruitful approach may be to listen to the empiricists and to those who are slowly emerging from the twilight of linguistic analysis, and seek to show how the mystery of the transcendent confronts us wherever we turn and the more empirical we are.

To give one final point, Robinson is surely right in saying that we stand at the threshold of an intellectual revolution in Christendom, and the plea that he and his editor have made for radical thinking is one that is to be welcomed and heeded. But at the heart of his book is the central Christian

18. *Ibid.*, p. 249. At the same time I do not wish in the least to discount all that Robinson has to say about the danger of supranaturalism in suggesting that we can know anything about God save in his relationship to man's existential situation. This is the immensely valuable positive emphasis of the whole argument (see *Honest to God Debate*, pp. 248-63).

19. A. C. Ewing, *The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 105. In this connexion it is interesting to compare the contrast drawn between reason and imagination in Alec Vidler's *Christian Belief* (London: S.C.M., 1950), pp. 26-9.

affirmation that Christ is the key to our concept of God, our "window into God at work," as he so vividly puts it.²⁰ The Authorized Version has another phrase: "He is the image of the invisible God."²¹ If we have to discard, or at any rate use with reserve, our image of the God "up there" or the God "out there," this is the authentic image that can take its place, an image that has not to be thought away if we would know ultimate reality, for He is the express image of the divine nature and not one of our own projection. In His light we may begin, if only begin, to conceive God.

20. Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 71.

21. Col. 1:15; cf. 2 Cor. 4:4 and Heb. 1:3.