

JOHN A. T. ROBINSON

1919- 1983



“In a universe of love there can be no heaven which tolerates a chamber of horrors.” Bishop Robinson

John A. T. Robinson was born in 1919 in Canterbury, England. His father was a Canon of the Cathedral, and two uncles, J. Armitage Robinson and Forbes Robinson, were biblical scholars. Though he recalled never doubting the truth of the Christian faith, he did not feel any call to holy orders at an early age.

However, after reading the classics and theology at Cambridge, he entered Westcott House to prepare himself for ordination. In 1946 he received a doctorate with a thesis on Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” theme. His emphasis and later expertise, however, was in New Testament studies.

He served a curacy under Mervyn Stockwood in Bristol. Stockwood would later become Bishop of Soutwark (an area of southeast London), and would call Robinson to become his Suffragan at Woolwich. He soon began to teach at Wells Theological College and then, in 1951, became Dean of Clare College, Cambridge. He published *In the End, God* in 1950, *The Body: A Study of Pauline Theology* in 1952, *Jesus and His Coming*, 1957, and *Liturgy Coming to Life* in 1960.

It was in 1959 that Robinson became Bishop of Woolwich. In 1960, Robinson first came to wider public attention by testifying on behalf of Penguin Books, a publishing house which had deliberately published D. H. Lawrence’s novel, *Lady Chatterley ‘s Lover*. The affair was intended to test censorship laws on pornography, and Robinson scandalized the public, including Archbishop Michael Ramsey, by testifying on behalf of the defense.

In 1962, Robinson issued a collection of essays entitled *Twelve New Testament Studies*. Then, bending over to tie his shoes, he dislocated a disk and was laid up for weeks. During that time of convalescence, he penned what would become one of the largest selling and most controversial theological books of all time, *Honest to God*.

Honest to God was a slim volume (143 pages) which reviewed some vital questions in theology, drawing largely on the work of three theologians: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, and Rudolf Bultmann. It was highly readable and purposely provocative, and drew fire from Church leaders, serious philosophers and theologians, and most amazing of all for a theological book - ordinary men and women and the media. An article introducing the book in March 1963 said it all: the headline read, “OUR IMAGE OF GOD MUST GO.”

The book was not particularly creative, but it was succinct, accessible and in many ways compelling as a

personal testimony to the struggles of faith. Its chief benefit appears to be that it got all sorts and conditions of people to talk theology. There were serious critiques, perhaps the most serious coming from Alasdair MacIntyre who wrote, "What is striking about Dr Robinson's book is that first and foremost he is an atheist."

Robinson returned to Cambridge in 1969 and continued to publish. His major Christological study is *The Human Face of God* in 1973, and his startlingly "conservative" *Redating the New Testament* in 1976 and posthumously, *The Priority of John* in 1985.

Robinson died after a long illness in December 1983.

Some Selections from *Honest to God*:

"Every one of us lives with some mental picture of a God 'out there,' a God who 'exists' above and beyond the world he made, a God 'to' whom we pray and to whom we 'go' when we die." (p. 14) It was this traditional theism which Robinson questioned.

"Have we seriously faced the possibility that to abandon such an idol [as 'God out there'] may in the future be the only way of making Christianity meaningful, except to the few remaining equivalents of flat-earthers. . ." (p. 17)

"Traditional Christian theology has been based upon the proofs for God's existence... Rather, we must the other way round. God is, by definition, ultimate reality. And one cannot argue whether ultimate reality exists. One can only ask what ultimate reality is like - whether, for instance, in the last analysis what lies heart of things and governs their working is to be described in personal or impersonal categories." (p. 29)

"To believe in God as love means to believe that in pure personal relationship we encounter, not merely ought to be, but what is, the deepest, veriest truth about the structure of reality. This, in the face of all the evidence is a tremendous act of faith." (p. 49)

"Belief in God is the trust, the well-nigh incredible trust, that to give ourselves to the uttermost in love is be confounded but to be 'accepted,' that Love is the ground of our being, to which ultimately we 'come home.'" (p. 49)

"However guardedly it may be stated, the traditional view [of Christology] leaves the impression that God took a space-trip and arrived on this planet in the form of a man. ...Indeed, the very word 'incarnation' (which, of course, is not a Biblical term) almost invariably suggests it. It conjures up the idea of a divine substance 1 plunged in flesh and coated with it like chocolate or silver plating. And if this is a crude picture, substitute that of the Christmas collect, which speaks of the Son of God 'taking our nature upon him,' or that of W~ Christmas hymn, with its 'veiled in flesh the Godhead see.'" (p. 66)

"Love alone, because, as it were, it has a built-in moral compass, enabling it to 'home' intuitively upon the deepest need of the other, can allow itself to be directed completely by the situation. It alone can afford to be utterly open to the situation, or rather to the person in the situation, uniquely and for his own sake, without losing its direction or unconditionality. It is able to embrace an ethic of radical responsiveness, meeting every situation on its own merits, with *no prescriptive laws*." (p. 115, emphasis added)

Excerpts from: Clements, Keith W., *Lovers of Discord: Twentieth Century Theological Controversies in England* (London: SPCK, 1988).

For a more recent critique (2000; and a very personal one), see also: [Honest to Pete](#), by Robert McNally Adams.

For a critique of Robsinson's [Redating the New Testament](#) (1976).