

Editorial

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This month sees the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Honest to God*, the surprise theological bestseller by John A. T. Robinson, then Suffragan Bishop of Woolwich. It appeared on 19 March 1963, and by November of that year had been reprinted nine times. The initial print run had been rather modest, neither author nor publisher anticipating that it would sell, in the words of the editor of an anthology of reactions to the book, ‘more quickly than any other new book of serious theology ever published’ (Edwards (1963), 7). Robinson found himself the centre of public controversy and the recipient, over the next few years, of over 4,000 letters from people outraged, excited, gladdened, or otherwise provoked by the book. Its prominence was, no doubt, partly explained by the fact that, three years earlier, Dr Robinson had been a key witness for the defence in the ‘Lady Chatterley Trial’, in which Penguin was tried for publishing an obscene article: the unexpurgated version of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. For some time afterwards, Robinson was known as the ‘Lady Chatterley Bishop’. *Honest to God* had also come to the attention of the public through the appearance, immediately before the book’s publication, of an article in the *Observer*, strikingly entitled ‘Our Image of God Must Go’ (Robinson himself had preferred the less incendiary ‘A New Mutation in Christianity?’), in which Robinson summarized his main message. That message, in brief, was that the notion of God as a person separate from, but involved in, Creation should be replaced by the notion of, in Hegel’s phrase (later taken up by Tillich), a personal ‘ground of being’.

Robinson did not claim any great originality for his ideas, but was offering an articulation of contemporary German theology, and in particular the writings of Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, and Tillich. In terms of bringing Continental ideas to a wider British audience it might be compared with A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic*, although Bultmann himself, in a review for *Die Zeit*, credited Robinson with more independence (Edwards (1963), 134–138).

In *Honest to God*, Robinson tries to steer between what for him were two uncongenial positions: on the one hand, there is a form of supernaturalism, a metaphysically orthodox theism which takes the world to be governed by a transcendent entity who is another person like ourselves, though infinitely greater;

and on the other a reductionist naturalism, which takes the world to be (in principle) wholly explicable in terms of the properties studied by science. Despite the frankness and attempt at plain speaking, Robinson does not wholly succeed in making it clear exactly what this middle course is. What he says is this: 'A statement is called "theological" not because it relates to a particular person called "God", but because it asks *ultimate* questions about the meaning of existence' (Robinson (1963), 49), and later, quoting Tillich, 'belief in God is a matter of "what you take seriously without any reservation"' (*ibid.*, 55). Is he then engaged after all in a naturalizing project, though one which insists on the autonomy of theological language, as a means of expressing values? Or is he hinting at a feature of mind-independent reality? His defence elsewhere of the reliability of the New Testament and argument in favour of the priority of the (strikingly incarnational) St John's Gospel does not fit well with a reduction of theology to anthropology. On the other hand, writing in a post-verificationist age, he is cautious about making metaphysical statements.

For sociologists of religion, *Honest to God* and the reactions it provoked provide a valuable insight into what has been described as 'ordinary theology' (the active attempt to find religious meaning and to live by it, by people without formal theological training) and a snapshot of religious life in Britain in the 1960s, which offers itself for analysis. The letters Robinson received were in fact used for just this purpose by the Leeds sociologist Robert Towler (1984), who took them as illustrative of distinct religious types. But why should Robinson's book be of particular interest to philosophers of religion? If the idea is to bring philosophical analysis to a piece of systematic theology, then rather than focus on a semi-popular account, should we not turn instead to Robinson's own sources, such as Tillich's three-volume *Systematic Theology*? Well, we might do just that, but systematic theology is not the only legitimate object for philosophical investigation in this area. What makes *Honest to God* significant, and worth remembering fifty years on, is that it was written *not* as a piece of academic theology, but by a working clergyman who was seeking the most direct connection possible between religious belief and religious practice, and who wanted to communicate the results of that attempt to the people whose interests he served. It was a working theology, in short. And insofar as philosophers of religion are interested, not purely in systems of abstract propositions, but in the religious life, that will be of more than peripheral concern. But it is also the incompleteness, the vagueness, the oscillation, the doubt in *Honest to God* that is of interest, because it reveals something of what we might dub the 'cognitive dynamics of religious belief', the shifting from one position to another, the attempt to mark out, without quite pinning down, a space for thought. Philosophers can as legitimately concern themselves with the phenomenon of that shifting thought, and with the characterization of that indeterminate space, as they can with carefully worked-out belief systems, and may, without a sense of intellectual descent, abandon for a

moment a corpus of Thomistic proportions to peruse the slim and potent little volume that is *Honest to God*.

References

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TOWLER, R. (1984) *The Need for Certainty: A Sociological Study of Conventional Religion* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).