

Honest to God – Fifty Years On

Philip Feakin looks back on the publication of this landmark book and the debate that followed.

Introduction

Like most undergraduates I bought many books whilst I was at University in the early sixties. Reading Economics at Nottingham I purchased learned volumes by Keynes, Samuelson and many others. I also acquired many paperback novels including the essential purchase by any Nottingham student in November 1960, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Although he had studied at the then University College for his teaching certificate, Lawrence is perhaps better remembered in Nottingham for eloping with Frieda Weekley, the wife of the modern languages professor. The university bookshop had ordered sufficient copies of LCL to be able to supply at least half the university's student population. (But more on this later.)

All the text books and novels from that time have now disappeared from my bookshelves but one book published in 1963 remains, *Honest to God* by John A. T. Robinson (HTG). It was purchased for five shillings, which considering that it has only 140 pages was somewhat pricey compared to 2/6 for a similar paged novel. Although my recollections are of buying it as soon as it came out, I now see that it was the sixth impression of April 1963 with its instantly recognisable cover with a photograph of the bronze, 'Seated Youth' by Wilhelm Lehmbruck. So the book has physically survived and showed its staying power in my library, but what of its contents?

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John Robinson had been thinking over the ideas set out in the book for some time but the opportunity to write it came about as a result of a back ailment that confined him to bed for a few months in 1962. The idea that probably most will remember from the book is the rejection of God as being either 'Up There' or

'Out There'. This fitted with his belief that we are being called over the years ahead to far more than a restating of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms. For he was convinced that 'there is a growing gulf between the traditional orthodox supernaturalism in which our Faith has been framed and the categories which the "lay" world finds meaningful today'. He was concerned about those who like him radically questioned the established 'religious frame' and he saw an increasing alienation accompanied by the vehemence of those who felt that the Faith could only be defended by branding as enemies those who challenged it.

Publication

It would be difficult to describe the publication of HTG on 19th March 1963 as anything but a sensation. It was one in a series of paperbacks published by SCM and, looking at the list of the others in the series, I see there is not one that could approach HTG in terms of its celebrity/notoriety or even one that might be referred to at all today, although the authors included such luminaries as William Barclay and Michael Ramsey.

It is possible that HTG might have sold well anyway on account of its contents but there were reasons that helped to put it into the category of best seller. One reason was that the author was not only part of the radical 'South Bank Religion' under the charismatic Mervyn Stockwood but John Robinson had already established some notoriety as the 'Lady Chatterley Bishop'. In 1959 Parliament had passed a new Obscene Publications Act and Sir Allen Lane of Penguin Books, although he knew that he was taking a risk, thought that it was now possible to publish LCL. The Attorney General at the time, Reginald Manningham Buller, like many of his background who did not appreciate that times were changing, approved the prosecution by the DPP. The defence were able to muster a formidable list of witnesses including T. S. Eliot, Doris Lessing, Aldous Huxley and Dame Rebecca West. To this list was added John Robinson, who in his written deposition stated, 'Lawrence did not share the Christian valuation of sex, but he was always straining to portray it as something sacred, in a real sense as an act of Holy Communion. I believe that Christians in particular should read this book, if only because Lawrence believed passionately, and with

much justification, that they have killed and denied the natural goodness of creation at this point.’

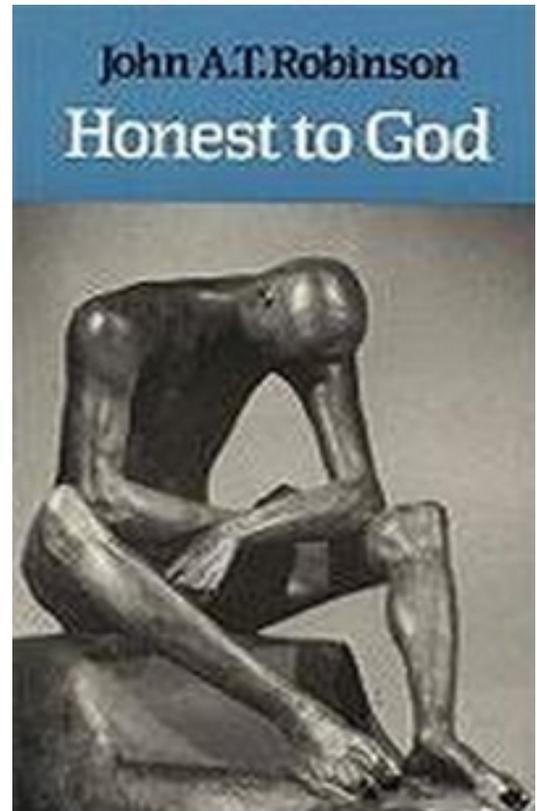
Another reason for the higher than normal sales for a book on theology was that, on the Sunday prior to publication, John Robinson had summed up his book in an article in the *Observer* with the headline on the front page, ‘Our Image of God Must Go’. The combination of sex, bishop and apparent heresy could not fail to generate interest and sales.

Immediate Reactions

Knowledge of the book became widespread both as a result of its sales – 350,000 were sold in the first year – and from the reports about it in the national and local press. There were responses from all parts of the church with the expected universal criticism, from the traditionalists, through to the liberals who saw it as a breath of fresh air. The sales of the book were no doubt stimulated by the controversy. It also gave John Robinson the distinction of being reprimanded by two Archbishops of Canterbury: in the first instance an admonishment by Geoffrey Fisher for his participation in the LCL trial and then a put-down by Michael Ramsey for HTG. The latter was on the face of it somewhat strange, for Michael Ramsey was considered to be a liberal yet his attack on HTG was quite severe.

Archbishop Ramsey criticised John Robinson on television soon after publication and then later wrote, ‘I was especially grieved at the method chosen by the Bishop for presenting his ideas to the public [which] caused public sensation and did much damage. Many of us who read the article [i.e. in the *Observer*] might not have had the opportunity or the necessary brains for reading the book referred to.’ Ramsey did not explain that much of what was contained in HTG was not new to those, including a large number of the clergy, who had read the theology of those quoted by Robinson. And for someone of Ramsey’s intellect to suggest that he might not have the necessary brains was disingenuous. It has to be said that Ramsey later regretted the severity of his judgement at the time and looking back a decade later he thought that his reaction was mistaken. (Owen Chadwick, *Michael Ramsey, A Life*, Clarendon Press 1990 p. 370).

Ramsey did however recognise the need for change as he wrote in his pamphlet, *Image Old and New*, ‘As a church we need to be grappling with the questions and trials of belief in the modern world. Since the war our Church has been too inclined to be concerned with the organising of its own life, perhaps assuming too easily that the faith may be taken for granted and needs only to be stated and commended. But we state



and commend the faith only in so far as we go out and put ourselves with loving sympathy inside the doubts of the doubting, the questions of the questioners, and the loneliness of those who have lost their way.’

It seemed as though an ‘open season’ to bash John Robinson had been declared and some quite intemperate things were said about him and his book. These ranged from criticism about the way he quoted and used the work of theologians he respected through to being labelled an atheist. Others within the church did welcome the book, albeit for some there was a concern which echoed Michael Ramsey in that the book had come out in paperback. It was easy to buy and it could be read by those for whom it was not intended or for whom it would be strong meat. This appeared to be a repeat of the words of Mervyn Griffith-Jones, the Prosecuting Counsel in the LCL trial, ‘Would you approve of your young sons, young daughters – because girls can read as well as boys – reading this book? Is it a book that you would even wish your wife or your servants to read?’

The *Honest to God* Debate

The reactions to HTG were such that a year later SCM under the editorship of David Edwards published, *The Honest to God Debate*. This brought together responses to the book from across the spectrum. There were letters written to John Robinson, reviews of the book and a few chapters from theologians. Reading this book again for those who were around in

1963 recalls the heat of the controversy and how bitter some of John Robinson's critics were.

Forty Years On

In March 2003 the diocese of Southwark found that there was a demand for some sort of celebratory event, with the result that they held a training day for the clergy in the form of a colloquium on HTG and its legacy. The lectures were published in the following year under the editorship of the Dean of Southwark, Colin Slee. The Chairman for the day was Richard Cheetham, the recently arrived Bishop of Kingston in the Southwark diocese. In his foreword to the book he recalls reading HTG in the 1970s as a sixth former, 'It seemed to me then to be asking many of the right questions and attempting to answer them in a manner that would be intelligible to twentieth century people... if the Christian faith was to remain credible, and if the Church was to survive, it had to engage with these issues.' From his own perspective he saw these issues as being an understanding of the nature of God, the incarnation, and the way in which life should be understood and lived as a Christian. But as he also wrote regarding the day in March 2003 there was, 'a palpable sense of disappointment that the heady days of the 1960s had not been realised as many would have wished.' However, there was 'the continuing ability of *Honest to God* to provoke keen thought and to ask highly pertinent questions about our contemporary understanding of the Christian faith and the current practices and ways of the Church.'

The lecturers on the day who were drawn from a cross-section of the Anglican tradition included Colin Buchanan the then Bishop of Woolwich, Alister McGrath and Don Cupitt of whom Colin Slee wrote:

We were determined that Don Cupitt should be invited because we believed that some of his 'Sea of Faith' thinking emerged from a conviction of *Honest to God's* being 'not nearly radical enough'. Don Cupitt expressed one aspect of this as being John Robinson's ambiguity about God. As he put it, 'In the end was the book teaching a realist view of God and God-language – or was it teaching non-realism?'

To Cupitt, at times it seems that Robinson implied a non-realist view of God but could not bring himself to say clearly that was his view.

The Church – Fifty Years On

The Church, and here I am referring mainly to the Church of England, has changed over the same period. Some of these changes are:-

1. The Bible that was almost universally read in church was the Authorised Version and in those days we certainly did not refer to it as the King James Bible (that was for those on the other side of the Atlantic). Although the AV has its adherents most churches now use a twentieth century translation.
2. The liturgy used was that of the Book of Common Prayer, and although this is retained for some services, the Eucharist in most churches follows Common Worship.
3. Homosexuality was not unknown back in 1963 but it was not the disputatious area that it has become today. It was still then an offence and although there were gay clergy, it was not the point of division that it is now.
4. Although there were women ministers in the non-conformist churches and there were some who thought that there should be in the Church of England, the high level of campaigning for it came later. The first ordinations of women took place in 1994.
5. Church attendance was already on the decline in 1963 and had fallen substantially since the Second World War, but in the last fifty years it has dropped considerably further, to half of what it was. Usual Sunday attendance as recorded by the Church Society is a figure of 1,606,000 for 1968 and 826,000 for 2009. (www.churchsociety.org)
6. Coupled with 5, the average age of congregations has risen. *Why Church* gives an average age in 1980 of 37 years and in 2010 of 51 years. (whychurch.org.uk)
7. Just as important as any of the above, is the change in the church. In 2004 Colin Slee wrote, 'In 1963 a large corpus of the Church of England was "middle of the road" or "broad church". This group has since been squeezed to the point at which in 2004 its very identity is in question, as the politicisation of debate within the General Synod through groups such as Reform, Forward in Faith and the Movement for the Ordination of Women has developed.' More than at any time in the past the Church seems to be made up of a number of sects.

Honest to God – Fifty Years On

Fifty years on, much has changed in the church, but has it moved forward in the direction that John Robinson hoped for? The evangelical wing of the Anglican Church has advanced and for most of them of that persuasion HTG would have no resonance and be somewhat repugnant. However, for Tom Wright, who might be considered a moderate evangelical, 'Robinson had his finger on a real problem in post-war UK church life and, in a measure, theology.'

I have found that in rereading HTG for this article,

it is remarkable how what was said fifty years ago is still relevant and even more so for a church which was declining in numbers then and still is today. Perhaps the problem then was that John Robinson was being honest both about the church and himself. The church so often finds this difficult to do as it wishes to cling on to the traditional, in whatever form, not recognising that we do not live in a society that remotely relates to that of the Middle East two thousand years ago. The church seems to find it hard to speak to its congregations as though they were intelligent human beings who could understand the changes that have been discussed in academia in both theology and scriptural criticism.

The words of John Robinson still ring true as in the Preface. After stating the requirement for him as a bishop at a moment when the discharge of his office can seldom have demanded greater depth of divinity and quality of discernment he says, 'I suspect that we stand on the brink of a period in which it is going to become increasingly difficult to know what the true

defence of Christian truth requires.' And then, 'I believe that we are being called, over the years ahead, to far more than a restating of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms. Indeed, if our defence of the Faith is limited to this, we shall find in all likelihood that we have lost out to all but a tiny religious remnant.' Sadly, if the book was published today I feel it would still receive the bitter criticism that it had in 1963 because of the inability of the church to properly discuss and debate those issues that John Robinson brought to its attention fifty years ago.

Robinson, J.A.T., *Honest to God*, SCM, London, 1963
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 Slee, C. (Ed), *Honest to God 40 Years On*, SCM, London, 2004
 Wright, Dr T., *Doubts about Doubt: Honest to God Forty Years On*, (Journal of Anglican Studies, 2005)

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 author of *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*
(see review in Sofia 96)

Alom Shaha

Physics Teacher at Camden School for Girls, ex-Muslim
 author of *The Young Atheist's Handbook*

*Do not live entirely isolated,
 retreating into yourselves, as
 if you were already justified,
 but gather instead to seek the
 common good together.' -*

Epistle of Barnabas, c.130 AD



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