
New Conceptions of God?

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A review article of the authorised biography,

A LIFE OF BISHOP JOHN A T ROBINSON, SCHOLAR, PASTOR, PROPHET

Eric James, Collins, 1987,

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In the lovely churchyard at Arncliffe, beside the river Skiffare, in a remote Yorkshire dale, is a simply inscribed, unhewn tombstone. It reads: 'John Arthur Thomas Robinson Born 15 June 1919 Died 5 December 1983', all set under the engraving of a Bishop's mitre. Here lies one whose writings and opinions made newspaper headlines in the early sixties. John Robinson's *HONEST TO GOD*, published during his first years as Bishop of Woolwich, and his agreement to appear as a witness for the defence in the *LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER* case assured him of instant fame or notoriety. In *HONEST TO GOD* Robinson had repudiated the traditional concepts of God. Following Paul Tillich he said we should think of God as the Ground of our being, rather than as 'out there'. That is, we should think of God as immanent rather than transcendent. In the *LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER* case the publishers were threatened with prosecution for publishing an obscene book. To Robinson, God was not so much a God of law, as of love. This made him sympathetic to the permissive society insofar as this involved actions which he regarded as expressions of true love. Before these events and afterwards Robinson published a whole series of books on theology in its contemporary application in doctrinal statements and social concerns; and, perhaps most notably, books of biblical scholarship, latterly, *REDATING THE NEW TESTAMENT*, its popular counterpart *CAN WE TRUST THE NEW TESTAMENT* and the Bampton Lectures, *THE PRIORITY OF JOHN*, all of which, in some respects, take a quite conservative stance, challenging the more sceptical views about the Gospels. So, *REDATING THE NEW TESTAMENT* argues for dates prior to AD70 for all the Gospels and *THE PRIORITY OF JOHN* argues for the historicity of that account, an account which, it is argued, should be preferred when it is at variance with the synoptics.

Who was this man? His career and influence have recently been traced in a sensitive (at times moving, especially the account of his fatal illness — he died six months to the day on which cancer of the pancreas had been diagnosed) but frank biography by his friend and literary executor, Canon Eric James.

Born the son of an elderly Canon of Canterbury Cathedral, John Robinson was educated at Marlborough and Jesus College, Cambridge; he did research at Trinity and prepared for the ministry at Westcott House. His PhD thesis was entitled 'Thou Who Art. The notion of personality and its relation to Christian theology, with

particular reference to the contemporary "I-thou" philosophy, and the doctrine of the Trinity and the Person of Christ.' It was, says Canon James, 'undoubtedly the foundation of much of John's future theological writing.' In it Robinson 'explored both the history and the implications' of the I-Thou philosophy 'for how one could speak of personality in God rather than of God as "a Person" (p 16). Behind this discussion lies the teaching of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber (1878-1965). Dr Colin Brown sums up Buber's teaching as follows: 'In I AND THOU Buber argues that there are two basic kinds of relationship, the I-It and the I-Thou. The former belongs to superficial experience, when we see things and people as merely phenomena. But when we probe deeper, it is possible to enter into personal relationships not only with other people but also with things. It is here that we encounter a Thou over against our I. And this is the realm also where we encounter God.' And he goes on to quote Buber: 'In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us we look out toward the fringe of the eternal **Thou**; in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal **Thou**; in each **Thou** we address the eternal **Thou**' (PHILOSOPHY AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH, Tyndale Press, 1969, p 234, quoting I AND THOU, English translation, T & T Clark, 1937, p 6).

Subsequently Dr Robinson held various positions and many lectureships in different parts of the world. He was Curate of St Matthew, Moorfields, Bristol, Mervyn Stockwood was his Vicar; Chaplain of Wells Theological College; Dean of Clare College, Cambridge; Suffragan Bishop of Woolwich (again under Mervyn Stockwood, his mentor, who by this time was Bishop of Southwark) and last of all, Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge.

Several features of John Robinson stand out.

Firstly, his deep concern for people coupled with his awkward personality which at times could cause misunderstanding and embarrassment. His closing years at Trinity were not completely happy. In part this was due to the Bishop's own lack of tact and sensitivity and love of the limelight.

Secondly, his description of what he conceived as his theological task. In the first part of his ministry he was radical in the sense of setting himself to update much of received Christian tradition though Alec Vidler points out that, prior to the publication of HONEST TO GOD in 1963, he and others also concerned with such issues thought of Robinson as firmly set within the biblical theology school and the liturgical movement (SCENES FROM A CLERICAL LIFE, Collins, 1977, p 179). In the latter part of his ministry Robinson was radical in the sense of wanting to return to the roots — from this derived his preoccupation with previous generations of his family and his biblical research.

Thirdly, his doctrine of God. Robinson heard the Hulsean Lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge by Dr Alan M G Stephenson in 1979-80; and he was fascinated by them. These were published posthumously as THE RISE AND DECLINE OF ENGLISH MODERNISM (SPCK, 1985). In these Lectures Dr Stephenson argued that the theological radicalism of the likes of John Robinson superseded the old Modernism — see Chapter 8 of Stephenson's book. Modern Churchmen, though they found much to agree with in HONEST TO GOD, disliked

what one of them (Percival Gardner-Smith, who has himself died since the publication of Stephenson's book) described as Robinson's 'vague ethical pantheism' together with his dependence on 'such extremists as Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and Bultmann' (Stephenson, pp 190-191). Another, in a MODERN CHURCHMAN editorial, wrote: 'The Christian must resist any tendency to identify God with reality, even though it be termed Ultimate Reality, if that be taken to comprehend the world we see.' The writer goes on to emphasise the importance of the doctrine of Creation 'in its assertion of the transcendence of God and so in His separatedness from His creatures... And the Christian must resist any tendency to identify God with one of His attributes, even that of love. Love presupposes somebody who loves...an impersonal view of God must be rejected' (ibid, p 192). So although the Modernists liked Robinson's rejection of the miraculous and of a 'God who intervenes in history from his throne on high' and although 'they agreed with him in his assessment of the importance of love over Law' they were very critical of his doctrine of God (ibid, p 191). To be fair, Robinson was not strictly speaking a pantheist, but he was, like Martin Buber, as Robinson himself says, a *pantheist*. That is, he conceived of God as present in all that is around us though not necessarily identical with such. However, it has to be said that the understanding of God and His ways which emerges from John Robinson's writings is a far cry from the description of God in the Bible as the Father who is also holy, that is separate from us, the Wholly Other. Although there is a revelation of God all around us, as the Bible itself clearly explains, fallen man is dependent upon the biblical revelation itself, in order to know the categories by which he must contemplate God and His ways.

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Redating the New Testament

Although he was a radical, liberal scholar, John Robinson's book REDATING THE NEW TESTAMENT (1976) contains some useful material and a number of surprisingly conservative conclusions. This is a technical, detailed work which is the fruit of meticulous research.

The book is radical in three ways:

1. it challenges the unfounded assumptions of critical scholarship
2. it uses a rigorous critical method to reject the conclusions of critics
3. it insists that the historicity of the N T documents cannot be divorced from the area of NT theology as many critics have claimed.

"So, as little more than a theological joke", writes Robinson, "I thought I would see how far one could get with the hypothesis that the whole of the New Testament was written before 70 AD" (p 10). He found the internal/external evidence overwhelmingly in favour of this early date and thus rendered "otiose or invalid the critical work done on the documents of the New Testament over the past 200 years" (p 364).
