

## **'HONEST TO GOD' (1963): A SUMMARY**

**FOR THE PCN/Modern Church CONFERENCE 'BEING HONEST TO GOD',  
November 8-10<sup>th</sup> 2013**

### **Notes:**

This summary is compiled mostly with John Robinson's own words. Italics without other reference indicate direct quotes from Robinson (JR). I have at times presumed to adapt his words to convey my feel of what he is saying, his own late 20<sup>th</sup> century context and our own current use of language. JR's quotes from Bonhoeffer, 'Letters and Papers' 1944, Tillich, 'The Shaking of the Foundations', 1949, and Bultmann, 'Jesus Christ and Mythology', 1960, are acknowledged in italics. Other italics have their source alongside. Quotation marks indicate the named writer's own quotes. Repetitions come from JR's text for many of his points are relevant under several headings. I have re-organised some of them under my own, utilising his words. Generalisations without evidence are a feature of the text. I have tried to ensure that my own views are only present in my selection of text from 'Honest to God'. Religion = Christianity, primarily Anglican; man = humankind; God is 'he'.

### **JR's personal position**

*JR has never doubted the fundamental truth of the Christian faith but can do no other than try to be honest to God which means to question its expression. He feels that in retrospect his tentative and exploratory way of challenging the church is too conservative and will be seen to have erred in not being nearly radical enough.*

### **Problems of Christianity and the Church 'for today', i.e.1963**

#### **1) Neglect of intellectual openness, honesty and integrity**

Confusion, disbelief and appropriate incomprehension abound about Jesus being fully God and fully Man, possessing two distinct natures and 'being of one substance with the Father' as prescribed in the Nicene Creed, 16/1700 years ago. Such description savors *of an Olympian God, Jesus being God dressed up as man, as described by John Wesley in his carol, Hark the Herald, Veiled in flesh the godhead see*. As such, JR says, Jesus is *hardly 'one of us'* which the church declares him to be.

#### **2) Difficulties encountered by alternative language and thinking**

*There is great suppression of real, deep thought, intellectual alertness and integrity in the church, just as it was 100 years ago (i.e.1853)*. So far such thought has *barely influenced the main stream of English theology or churchmanship*. Resistance to re-interpretation is likely to be strongest, both personally and *'technically'*, concerning 'the Incarnation' and the 'Divinity of Jesus'. It is not easy for many traditional church –goers to accept the essential provisionality of all religious language.

#### **3) The decline of the church**

The church *is in danger of being reduced to a tiny remnant* of the population and is failing to undergo the necessary fundamental changes to avert this. It continues to lose respect, credibility and relevance in society. This is the case even amongst its own members some of whom quite legitimately do not grasp what *they find incredible....* in the *scheme of thought and mould of religion* within which the Faith is presented. Such members feel powerless to do much about it so their full support is gravely diminished. Their potential contributions, personal, intellectual and financial are therefore lost to the church. Church members too often remain unasked and unheard. *The church has therefore become an organisation for the religious rather than 'for the increase of true religion'* (BCP) *which is to serve the world in a way the world needs and understands.*

#### 4) Traditional religious orthodoxy,

This is too easily assumed in and by each generation to be the sole way of understanding Christianity. People tend to cling without questioning to the church's supposedly secure and impregnable buttresses rather than to Christ. *To the new generation, buttresses are barriers rather than supports. Religion could be the greatest barrier to a right relationship with God which does not depend on religion.* Open questioning and discussion are often not accorded the light of day by the establishment. *How calamitous that Christians should have committed themselves to the defence of organised religion! The unchurched masses of our modern and industrial civilization appreciate this and may be the first to grasp such truth.* Meantime they continue in their millions to be untouched by the church's great potential and the Christian Gospel. JR quotes Bonhoeffer's grief at Christianity's ineffectiveness in 'saving' Nazi Germany.

#### JR's understanding of religious subjects that contain such problems

##### a) God

In the biblical accounts, God calls the world into existence over against himself. He is in touch with his creation, judges it and sends it prophets and a redeemer. Bible writers explore the concept of God with varying results, often making God a personal object *Luke writes of Jesus being 'lifted up' to sit at the right hand of the most High (Acts 1.9-11), who is God.* While God 'out there' has generally replaced God 'up there', according to Tillich many see this as a sophisticated version of the old man in the sky which is *a distorted image of the Christian God.* God is neither 'up there' nor 'out there'. Anthropomorphic language does not have to be taken literally but in the popular mind it frequently is and causes *offence* to those who observe that it is. Classical theology that employs *traditional language of a God* that is transcendent *and came in from outside* has not integrated alternative language of God, *described, for example, as the Reality under girding and penetrating through the whole derived creation (Pittenger).* *It is essential to frame a new conception of God and the Christian Gospel which does not depend upon human projection.*

##### b) Jesus

Jesus is widely taught and spoken of in the Christian liturgy of hymns, prayers and creeds to be 'the Son of God' and Second Person in God's Trinity. Questions remain unasked about the meaning and origin of such expressions not least in the time of Roman and Greek mythology. The NT does not say that Jesus was God or the Word, even according to John. Besides it is best seen as metaphorical language. Even the depth of meaning of 'Son of God' when it is used is debateable, likewise of Jesus's 'resurrection' and 'ascension'.

##### c) The church

The church has become seen as the place to go to find God and retreat from the secular world. Such a world is assumed to be godless, the antithesis of the Kingdom of God, separate from God its creator and crudely juxtaposed to the church to which it needs converting in belief and practice. The church is in the forefront of the defence of organised religion; defence and encouragement of the poor and needy is not its priority. Its emphasis tends to be on the virtue of private faith in the God propounded in church rather than the God out there in the world. If people feel and act as if they can get on without God and the church, maybe God still calls us without the premise of the existence of the institutional church. JR accepts this would *feel like being orphaned*, despite its frequent *meaninglessness* to many.

### i) Use of metaphysical, metaphorical and mythological language

The church is lost in a particular interpretation of God framed in a particular mythology and fails to see new insights and alternative interpretations. Its liturgy and prayer with its exclusive language and concepts are way apart from most people's practice and experience. Many naturally do transpose the spatial and other-worldly terms of such language in their minds, simply using them as the Bible's way of describing the indefinable God. Perhaps the majority are unsure and/or doubtful, confused and antagonistic about apparently literal accounts of God's omnipotence and ascribed human personality. The literal and assumed 'biblical' understanding of language is very problematic in relation to Jesus' birth, resurrection and ascension and the world's salvation and redemption.

### ii) Super-natural religious processes

Miracles in nature or at human hand engender understandable scepticism in an increasingly rational and scientific age. Such assumed realities are too readily established and passed off as 'history.' Images established by the church to show the meaning and depth of God and Christ have ceased to mediate the Reality for which they were introduced and become idols in themselves. Yet there remains great reluctance inside and outside church to surrender the human Theistic projection of God as 'the Highest Being', a *heavenly complete perfect person*. JR ponders on how far Christianity has- regrettably- become identified with this way of thinking.

### Conclusion:

'A Copernican-like revolution is essential concerning *the most fundamental categories of our theology of God, supernatural religion and even the use of the word God itself*. There is need for a remedy to mankind's situation after 2000 years! JR asks what is to be put in place of God, revelation and traditional religion.

### JR's proposed ways forward

#### 1. Trust of human experience, honesty and integrity

JR sees this personally. For him it has become a spiritual necessity to take seriously experiences and readings that had begun to add up, ring a bell and lead him towards alternatives. Otherwise, rumbling convictions were beginning to lose their power, as is the danger for his own questions about prayer. The unchurched may lead the way as they may naturally have experience of loving relationships and not of religion which could be such a barrier to them. *Consciences have been wrongly burdened by the Christian tradition. The beginning is to try to be honest and to go on from there.*

#### 2. A new language of depth in religion

Replacement of the old language of God 'up there' and 'out there' speaks directly to non-religious experience but is still not digested by the ordinary man in the pew or their clergy. JR pleads to get it out in the open to *the intelligent thinking church person*. This will lead to a *genuinely thinking lay and declericalised church*. 'Depth' is a currently acceptable psychological term. *'Truth is deep'*.

#### 3. Proper understanding and recognition of the role of mythology

It is necessary for the religious truth in most of *the biblical stories* to be recognized as not *meant to be history*. Discussion as to *how far Christianity is committed to a mythological or supranaturalist picture of the universe at all* is vital. .

#### 4. A recasting of transcendence

Transcendence is not an essential expression about God. However, it is essential *not to substitute an immanent for a transcendent God but to validate the idea of transcendence.....by restating its reality as a natural and empirical fact of all common experience.*

## 5. Abandonment of a supernatural order in relation to religion and morality

Supernaturalism is a *loss* of transcendence as it is based on a Being called God beyond this world who could 'send Jesus'. The unconditional is not be conditioned, tied down to description of the opposite of otherness. This understanding actually *upholds the infinite qualitative difference between God and man* (Kierkegaard) It will mean recasting the birth stories, Jesus' bodily resurrection and ascension back 'up there', signs and wonders and redemption. Other ways than supernatural transaction in religion and morality exist to express the depth of ultimate and unconditional significance of the historical event of Jesus.

A new morality has likewise to operate from the love principle; law has its place but love is the means and the end as Jesus said (Mt 5) and demonstrated as the only absolute to follow.

## 6. Revision of worship and prayer within and outside church

The church has to express itself as *the embodiment of love* (Bonhoeffer). JR asks what this means for membership of the Christian society and the church. Its liturgy and prayer are to be essentially of the world not apart from it. The holy is in the depth of the common meeting. Christ is there to release the power to penetrate superficiality. .Revelation so often comes through in *meeting and unconditional engagement*. This needs to be acknowledged in theological discussion and consequent practices concerning the altar, rites, and liturgy especially Holy Communion Services with their common elements of bread and wine. Prayer is to be practised and God's spirit sought through the modest norms of the world, not habitually retreating away from normal life but penetrating through the world to God. *Prayer is openness to the ground of our being especially within a loving relationship in which the love is God is present and likewise in being immersed in the practice of our trade and in what we have to do* (Ecclus 38.34).

## 7. A different understanding of God

JR quotes Tillich: God is not a Being at all, *but the source and ground of the infinite and inexhaustible depth of all being and ultimate concern to which the Kingdom of God and Divine Providence point*. This to JR speaks *with a new and indestructible relevance. God is the beyond, the depth of reality, in the midst of our life; God, the unconditional, is to be found only in, with and under conditioned relationships. Belief in God is the well-nigh incredible trust that to give ourselves to the uttermost in love is ...to be accepted and that Love is the ground of our being to which ultimately we come home. There is no knowledge of God apart from the relationship of love (1John 4-8) especially with the least of our brethren (Mt 25,31-46) and doing justice to the poor and needy (Jer:22.15) for God is their depth and ultimate significance*. JR stresses human *openness to the holy with our whole being ...addressing the Thou (after Martin Buber, 'I and Thou'). Every particular Thou is a glimpse of the eternal Thou, not of a finite God. There is no need to use the phrase 'personal God', nor to side with naturalism pantheism or humanism. It is preferable to recognise that personality is of ultimate significance in the constitution of the universe. For in the conditioned we are to respond to the unconditional which concerns the sacredness of love. A new (common) conception of God ...is essential*.

## 8. The priority of the love in Jesus

Recognition of the unconditional relationship of love demonstrated by Jesus is fundamental; to *accept that the final reality, since it is the ground of our being, is the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord from which we cannot be separated.*(Romans 8.38,39. (JR holds to this biblical statement) *Jesus reveals ultimate significance in his life because the love he shows is the ultimate reality*. JR's belief in Jesus lies in this, not in labels attached to him. Deification of man via inappropriate emphasis on the human attributes of love, wisdom and justice is to be avoided; rather experience of God as awareness of the transcendent. Jesus demonstrates the humanity of God. The human picture of Jesus is easy to relate to the divine, the most God-like man who ever was. That is to say, God was *in Christ* – not Christ himself (RT) - reconciling the world to himself. Understanding of this is the only

acceptable way to relate the divine and the human. *We can picture the* humanity of Jesus inspired by God. 'Self-emptying' assumes Jesus was divine in the first place and is considered meaningless by many Jesus is united with the ground of his being which is God. Upholding *Jesus on human suppositions is the only way for Christianity to claim allegiance of intelligent men.* Jesus was one of the geniuses of Life though this is not how the New Testament on the whole sees him. JR sees this issue as *a dangerous situation for the Christian faith, a tipping point.*

### **9. Extension of incarnation into the secular world**

The finite world points beyond itself, so the potentially holy is contained within it. The secular is not a God-less part of existence *but God's world for which Christ died* (sic). Personal experience of incarnational relationships as shown by Jesus is fundamental to the Christian life eg on the Emmaus road. Understanding and guidance are required to discern whether such depths of being are illusion or reality. The world is to be loved as God's creation for its own sake with the realisation that *in the light of the Incarnation nothing is (just) secular* (George McLeod). Therefore we are to seek *sacred secularity.. The fundamental truth of Christianity is the powerlessness and suffering of God..... in entirely secular concerns* (Bonhoeffer).

### **10. Revision of Christianity and the church**

The church exists *not to promote a new religion or religious revival but to be the embodiment of love.* Essentially it is to be of the world and not withdrawn from it. The Church is not outside the world from which to draw people in to the church, it is of the world where God already is. Mission is to go out and love the nearest Thou to hand and meet God there together in the relationship. This is the meaning of Ro 8.38,9 *The secret of our exit from the deep morasses of relativism is not a recall to (organised) supernatural religion but to join the deep search for meaning as if God were not there. Consider the images of God set up in our minds as provisional only and not to become a substitute for God. For then what is not embodied in the image is excluded or denied and we have a new idolatry that has to fall.* Christian members are *to be representative of the man for others, finding God's purposes and meaning within the increasingly non-religious world.* The church is tested as to whether or not it embodies 'the beyond' in our midst, potentially Christ in the hungry and homeless (Bonhoeffer). Questioners are to be accepted as genuine and in the long-run equally necessary defenders of the Faith, who may bridge the gulf between traditional believers and equally sincere others, Christians and non-believers.

### **Brief comment from Richard Tetlow**

JR does not question the biblical text, only the interpretation of it. He seems to accept the Bible at face value.

Some of JR's 'alternatives' are complementary as well as alternative.

*'Love requires no revelation'* –is it not a revelation in itself? Love's out-workings in politics and the modern international world (of 1963) are not discussed.

The Trinity is criticized only by implication but not directly. Different denominations are not mentioned other than Anglicanism which is assumed. Different faiths are not mentioned at all.

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