

in the clouds, and his transcendence too much like an Indefinite than an Infinite. But I am sure that the original genesis of meaning as constituting a human essence is an important clue: *the nativity of the word*, which is a very traditional notion. And we may find analysis as well as intuition of this notion in Continental writers like Merleau-Ponty, Caruso and Buytendijk. We may try to use this paradigm to grasp in an analogical unity the variety of ways of life and language-games studied by social anthropologists; and there is no doubt that Wittgenstein is methodologically valuable for students of primitive religion. We may wish to try to do all this in the properly theological perspective of the *Deus absconditus*, the God of the *mysterion*, whose transcendence is revealed in *history*, and made concrete in a *personal* revelation of the Father in the incarnate Son, and re-presented in the linguistic community of the Church. But these are only suggestions: the gaps are obvious.

Dr Robinson's Book¹

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Dr Robinson has written an important book about God, Christ, the nature of religion and morality. He does not claim to be a professional theologian; it is not, as he says, his academic field, but the book will nevertheless be of great interest to theologians as well as to the general reader, and it deserves a more discriminating reception than it has so far received in the press. Those of us in particular who are grateful to the Bishop for his work in his own field of New Testament scholarship will want to pay him the compliment of treating his book seriously and critically.

The book suffers a good deal from the author's lack of acquaintance with the history of theology. Thus he can open Chapter Two with the astonishing statement: 'Traditional Christian theology has been based upon the proofs for the existence of God.' This is, of course, flatly untrue. Traditional theology has always been based on faith in the Word

¹*Honest to God*, by John A. T. Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich; S.C.M. Press; 5s.

of God. Whether and how God may be known apart from such revelation is itself a question within theology. To satisfy oneself that this is so one needs only to read the first three questions of such a classic of traditional theology as the *Summa Theologica*. In fact we might well complain that the area of theology connected with such proofs has been unduly neglected in recent years by conventional theologians—one good effect of the Bishop's book may be to remind us that this is after all an important topic. He exemplifies some of the mistakes that may be made when it is neglected.

Dr Robinson does not seem to realise that some of the positions he puts forward as revolutionary discoveries, especially suited to twentieth century man who has 'come of age', are in fact commonplaces of traditional thought. This is especially true of his first chapters dealing with the idea of God. He distinguishes three stages in the development of this idea. First, he says, God was thought of as literally and physically 'up there'. Later this picture was taken to be mythological but God was still thought to be 'metaphysically out there' (p. 13). The third stage is to realise that this too is mythological and to replace it with an idea more consonant with modern thinking. It is Dr Robinson's purpose to perform this replacement. He does not make any sustained attempt to explain what he means by 'metaphysically out there', but it becomes clear from other places in the book that a God who is metaphysically out there would be 'a part of reality' (p. 30), 'the highest person' (p. 41), related to the world as the sun is to the earth (p. 45), a 'particular thing' (p. 49) and dwelling in 'another world' (p. 68). The traditional theology which he supposes himself to be supplanting is, however, committed to the proposition that God cannot be any of these things. A very great deal of work has been done, and vastly more books have been written, on the problem of how to speak of the existence of a God who is not a part of reality, who is neither a particular thing nor yet an 'abstraction', who is not any kind of thing at all and who cannot be defined or described. The book contributes nothing towards the solution of these ancient problems but it does considerable service in reminding people that the problems exist.

If I ask the question 'How many are there in the room?' you will be unable to answer, for you will not yet know whether I mean how many people, or how many hair-styles, or how many physical objects, or what. We can in fact only count things when we have placed them within some common class or under some common description. It is for this reason, according to traditional theology, that we cannot count

God and the world and make two—two *what?* When the Bishop of Woolwich says that God is not ‘metaphysically out there’ he may be merely rediscovering this important truth: God is not ‘out there’ in the sense of beginning where the world stops, as the second mile begins where the first stops, or the second in any series begins where the first stops. He would have very great difficulty in discovering a traditional theologian who thought that God is ‘out there’ in this sense. It would indeed ordinarily be recognised as a criticism of a theological position that it implied such a view of God. On the other hand we do commonly speak of God as though he were ‘out there’ in this way, as though he were a particular thing. Whereas the traditional theologian is happy to retain such language while trying to map the limits of its logical field of force, the Bishop seems sometimes to wish to abolish it. If he does this he must either replace it by something else or accept the accusation of agnosticism or even atheism.

One of his proposals is to replace our ordinary phrases about God ‘in heaven’ with phrases about the ultimate reality. There are, as he sees it, two advantages in this: first, it does away with the idea of a God ‘who could or could not be there’ (p. 29) which he thinks is entailed by the traditional proofs for the existence of God, and secondly it draws attention to the fact that God is within us. There seems to be some muddle in the first of these considerations. ‘They (traditional theologians) argue from something which everyone admits exists (the world) to a Being beyond it who could or could not be there. The purpose of the argument is to show that he must be there, that his being is necessary; but the presupposition behind it is that there is an entity or being ‘out there’ whose existence is problematic and has to be demonstrated’ (p. 29). Now of course if a presupposition of the argument were really that ‘there is a being’ the argument would simply be begging the question, moreover if the argument is valid its conclusion is precisely that the existence of God is no longer problematic but certain. If the argument proceeds from ‘God might not exist’ to ‘God must exist’ it is an elementary error to interpret these as statements about the modality of God’s existence; such error is easily eliminated by replacing them by ‘You might think God does not exist’ and ‘But you would be wrong’. The mere fact that we can demonstrate with certainty the existence of something has no tendency to show that its existence is necessary. We do not think that the Van Allen Belt exists necessarily. Nor, on the other hand, does the fact that God’s existence ‘needs’ to be demonstrated—that people can be found who deny it—imply that his existence

is contingent. It merely shows that people can be wrong about it but can be put right rationally.

Dr Robinson, however, supposing that any attempt to demonstrate the existence of a God to someone who did not find it obvious would be to prove the existence of a contingent being, one that 'might conceivably not have been there', proposes to change the question. 'We must start 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 . . . (it) is to be described in personal or impersonal terms.' This is, of course, simply the latest version of the ontological argument. The existence of God is to be proved from the meaning of the word 'God'. It is a long time now since this fallacy has been exposed: we no longer think that while there may be doubt about the existence of things called 'Flying saucers' there can be no doubt about the existence of things called 'Existent flying saucers'. Without question if a thing is the ultimate reality, it is real, but we may still ask whether anything is the ultimate reality.

The Bishop, it is true, does not put great weight on this argument. What he seems really to want to say is that if we look into the depths of ourselves, there we shall find God. No Christian would want to deny this but it is demonstrably possible for atheists to do so. The fact is that the innermost depths of our being are not open to our immediate inspection. That there is anything which, in the Bishop's phrase 'lies at the heart of things and governs their working' is itself in need of demonstration. It is exactly this that the traditional proofs set out, whether successfully or not, to provide. Twenty-six pages later the Bishop himself comes round to seeing this point: 'The question of God is the question *whether this depth of being is a reality or an illusion*, not whether a Being exists beyond the bright blue sky, or anywhere else' (p. 55 his italics, not mine). Those traditional theologians who believe that the existence of God can be proved have never been concerned with theological space exploration but simply with this matter of reality or illusion.

The Bishop is well aware that some of his assertions might lead to an accusation of pantheism—he is careful to insist that he believes that God is love, not that love is God (e.g. p. 53). But of course it is not the Bishop we are primarily interested in but his theology, and if his statements do imply pantheism, this state of affairs is not made untrue simply by the fact that Bishop does not wish to be a pantheist. He is however struggling, without the aid of a traditional theological discipline, to say some-

thing important which, to him at least, is new, and it would be unfair to scrutinize minutely the logic of every phrase he uses. Instead it will be of interest to see how he deals with the difference between his position and the pantheist one. His argument is I think extremely interesting. 'It is perhaps necessary to rebut rather carefully the suspicion of pantheism, which must doubtless cling to any reconstruction that questions the existence of God as a *separate* Being . . . The essential difference between the Biblical and any immanentist world-view lies in the fact that it grounds all reality ultimately in personal freedom—in Love. For pantheism, the relation of every aspect of reality to its ground is in the last analysis a deterministic one, allowing no real room for freedom or for moral evil. But the Biblical affirmation is that . . . We are not like rays to the sun or leaves to the tree: we are united to the source, sustainer and goal of our life in a relationship whose only analogy is that of *I to Thou*—except that the freedom in which we are held is one of utter dependence . . . It is this freedom built into the structure of our being which gives us (within the relationship of dependence) the independence, the "distance" as it were, to be ourselves.' (pp. 130-131). The argument seems to be that we are distinguishable from the ground of our being because we are not wholly determined by it, we are free in relation to it. For a pantheist this would not be so; there would be no distance between God and creatures, no free play of one over against the other, for they would be related simply as whole and part.

There seem to me to be two serious objections to this solution. In the first place, what are we to say of creatures which are not free? Are they simply to be identified with God? If it is our freedom which gives us our distance or distinction from God, then clearly freedom is something which belittles us. The unfree creatures are the rays of the divine sun, the leaves of the divine tree; they simply *are* God whereas we are less than he. This theology which should issue in the call to find divinity by abdicating our freedom and personality, by losing ourselves in the instinctive life of nature can hardly be congenial to the Bishop. In the second place, to speak of man as independent of God through his freedom is to make God 'metaphysically out there' in a particularly emphatic way. To say that I can be independent of God is really to say that God and I inhabit side by side a common world, and it is precisely this that the Bishop so rightly wishes to deny. Moreover it is not enlightening to add a parenthesis about 'utter dependence': either our freedom serves to make us distinct from God in which case it simply cannot be reconciled with 'utter dependence' upon him, or it does not,

in which case some other ground must be found for our distinction from him, some other way of avoiding pantheism. For traditional theology we are indeed free and utterly dependent on God, but our freedom does not make us free from God, it makes us free from other creatures, it means that our actions are our own in a special way, that our world is therefore a moral world. For the tradition, freedom is the foundation of morality, it cannot also do the work of distinguishing us from God, this must depend on a prior metaphysical analysis. For the tradition, we are free because in a deep sense we are our own, but we are creatures because, in the absolutely final sense, we are not our own—the word 'Sein' means, as Kafka says, both to be and to belong to him.

The issue between pantheists and traditional theists comes down to this: Can we make statements which, however much they may derive their meaning and verification from the world, are statements about God and not about the world. For traditional theology, although we can only say 'God is good' because of something we know about the world and not because of some extra information we have about God, nevertheless the statement is not about the world. It is not clear whether the Bishop accepts this or not. Thus he says: 'Assertions about God are in the last analysis assertions about Love—about the ultimate ground and meaning of personal relationships.' (p. 105). What saves this proposition from sheer falsity is the capital letter at the beginning of 'Love'. By the use of this device it is possible to make the statement hover between falsity and tautology. If the Bishop means that all assertions apparently about God can be translated without loss into assertions which are not about God but about personal relationships, he is a pantheist. If on the other hand 'Love' is used as a name of God, the assertion says nothing significant. The same kind of ambiguity attaches to the similar statement on p. 49: 'theological statements are not a description of "the highest Being" but an analysis of the depths of personal relationships.' Well, alright; but what *sort* of analysis? The Bishop seems sometimes to leave the impression that one has to opt *either* for the creator and redeemer of the world *or* for the reality which underlies the depths of human love.

The discussion of revelation and of Christ is bedevilled by the Bishop's curious theology of the supernatural. Frequently he uses Tillich's word 'supranatural' but it is clear that, for him, the two are interchangeable. He says, giving an account of what he believes to be traditional Christology: 'As the God-man, he united in his person the supernatural and the natural: and the problem of Christology so stated

is how Jesus can be fully God and fully man, and yet genuinely one person' (pp. 64-65). It is obvious from such a passage that the author must have been systematically misled in his reading of traditional theologians: where they have spoken of the supernatural, he must have supposed them to mean the divine. (It is true that there are writers who speak of God as 'entitatively supernatural' and it may be these who have misled the Bishop). At least for the scholastic tradition, it is a mystery and a great wonder that a man should unite in his person the supernatural and the natural, but it would be more than that, it would be impossible, to find the supernatural which was *not* united with the natural. God is not supernatural; the supernatural is a special relationship of the natural to God. The supernatural life of man is his sharing in the divine life. God does not share in the divine life supernaturally, he *is* the divine life. Tillich is quoted as saying: 'To call God transcendent in this sense does not mean that one must establish a "superworld" of divine objects. It does mean that, within itself, the finite world points beyond itself. In other words it is self-transcendent.' (p. 56). This is a fairly exact account of what traditional theology means by the supernatural, not another 'superworld' but the transcendent character of this world, a transcendence which does not belong to this world of itself but is the response to the personal call of God's love.

Traditional theology never has seen either the revelation of God's word in scripture or in Christ as a journey from 'another world', as a 'supernatural order which invades or "perforates" this one'. (p. 24). It is just untrue to say as the Bishop does (p. 66) that 'However guardedly it may be stated, the traditional view leaves the impression that God took a space-trip and arrived on this earth in the form of a man. Jesus was not really one of us; but through the miracle of the Virgin Birth he contrived to be born so as to appear one of us. Really he came from outside'. If such an 'impression' is left it is not by a guarded expression of traditional christianity but, perhaps, by the preaching of someone whose theological training has been insufficiently traditional. Every student in a seminary is taught that to say that God spoke to the prophets is not to assert a change in God but in the prophets and that the incarnation is not an event in the history of God but of man. The coming of the Spirit does not mean that God moves towards the world of man; it means that man is enabled to enter deeply into himself to know and love the divine reality which has been there all along. All this is, and has been for centuries, the ordinary teaching of Christian theology but hitherto no theologian has suggested that because of it

we should cease to speak of the Word 'coming down from heaven' of 'the descent of the Holy Spirit' or of Christ 'ascending into heaven and sitting at the right hand of God the Father'. To reject such forms of speech surely shows as much theological naïveté as to take them literally. If indeed it were not for his conviction that he is remodelling Christian ideas, what the Bishop has to say about God and Christ could be thoroughly acceptable to any traditional theologian. It might, again, be thought that someone who can present traditional Christianity as something new, fresh and revolutionary is doing a great and much needed service to the Church, but in fact the air of iconoclasm which the author evokes has merely led to his being interpreted in a non-Christian sense. He has been hailed as an ally for the quaint evolution-worship of Julian Huxley, he has been widely regarded as substituting humanism for religion, and for this he cannot but blame himself. To make Christianity sound fresh by setting it out in ambiguous language is bound to have this kind of result.

Most of what he has to say about Christ is an attack on the heresy that Jesus was not truly man—a very widespread tendency amongst Christians and one which the Bishop deals with excellently. It is, however, unfortunate that he should identify this well known error with Christian tradition: 'Even when it is Christian in content, the whole schema of a supernatural Being coming down from heaven to "save" mankind from sin, in the way that a man might put his finger into a glass of water to rescue a struggling insect, is frankly incredible to man "come of age", who no longer believes in such a *deus ex machina*.' (p. 78). It is also, of course, incredible to any Christian; the orthodox belief is that the Word was made flesh, not that he simply rescued flesh from some calamity. Dr Robinson's own version of kenotic christology seems to me excellent. Criticising the conventional kenotic theory he says: 'The underlying assumption is that it is his omnipotence, his omniscience, and all that makes him "superhuman", that must be shed in order for him to become truly man. On the contrary it is as he empties himself not of his Godhead but of himself, of any desire to focus attention on himself, of any craving to be "on equality with God", that he reveals God.' (p. 75).

Whereas the central criticism that must be made of his view of God and of Christ is that he does not realise how orthodox and traditional he is, and hence lays himself open to misinterpretation, the same cannot be said, it seems to me, of his views on the Church and on morals. His goal is the entirely acceptable one of Christianity without religion, but

he differs radically from traditional Christian thought in supposing that this aim is to be achieved by human reorganisation rather than by the second coming of Christ. Religion, he quite rightly observes, depends upon a distinction of sacred and secular. Certain things, places, actions or people are 'sacred', set apart from the common life; this is the necessary condition for cult and religion. Undoubtedly the consequence of the incarnation is the abolition of a real distinction between sacred and secular, the religion which was central to the Old Law was fulfilled and transcended in Christ, but the absolute identification of the common world with the sacred must await the consummation of the kingdom to which we still look forward. The withering away of the Church which we await so impatiently is a feature of the parousia, when there will be no temple in the city 'for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.' For traditional thought we are in an intermediate era in which while the new world is founded in Christ's risen body, we are not yet visibly and gloriously members of that world. The last things are not wholly to come as they were in the Old Testament, nor yet wholly realised as at the last day; hope is still an essential aspect of our divine life. Now it does not seem that the Bishop maintains this difficult tension between realisation and hope. He speaks sometimes as though the divine plane were completely realised now in a world which needs no transfiguration (e.g., p. 82). Religious rites which point beyond the present world seem too hastily to be dismissed as escapist. There is almost no discussion of the sacramental life by which we can participate in the world to come. It is not stressed that the eucharist is an eschatological meal, the sacrament seems to find its entire meaning in the present era. There is of course always a dangerous tendency in the Church to think of Christ as the founder of a religion, and to think of Christianity in purely religious terms, as a matter of cult and correctly performed liturgy. The Bishop has some excellent things to say about stripping the eucharist of its 'churchiness and religiosity' so that it appears for what it is as 'the place at which the common and communal point through to the beyond in their midst, to the transcendent in, with and under them.' (p. 86). Again, this has been said as vehemently by more traditional theologians but it can bear almost any amount of repeating.

It is in the chapter called 'The New Morality' that the Bishop parts company most decisively—as he himself points out—with Roman Catholic thought. The chapter is an account of *situationsethik*, a theory of morals according to which it is not possible to describe a human action which

would be in every circumstance morally wrong. The Catholic tradition has been that while the vast majority of moral decisions are to be determined by the situation or circumstances of the particular case, there are certain actions which are wrong 'in themselves' and cannot be justified by consequences, motives or any other circumstance. Thus the Catholic will maintain that there could not be conceivable circumstances in which it would be right for a man to commit murder—and of course that 'murder' can be defined without reference to moral evaluation. The Bishop contrasts this with what he finds a truer account of Christian ethics: 'It is a radical ethic of the situation, with nothing prescribed—except love.' (p. 116). The Catholic traditionalist would, of course, maintain that he too holds that nothing is prescribed except love; but for him the analysis of this prescribed love involves certain absolute limits to conduct. There are certain kinds of behaviour which are absolutely ruled out for a lover. 'If you love me, keep my commandments.' In this matter what the Bishop has to say will not seem particularly revolutionary outside the Roman Catholic Church. In England, at least, most moral philosophers would agree with him and it does not seem that the Anglican Communion is in any way committed to a rejection of his view.

It is curious that one so insistent on the unimportance of religion should treat moral demands as on exactly the same footing as the rules of a Church. Indeed it appears that the Bishop's paradigm case of a moral precept is the law of the sabbath. Twice (pp. 112, 116) he uses it as an illustration of the true Christian attitude to the moral law. He takes it for granted that when Christ said that the sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath he was saying something about the whole of morality. 'The classic illustration of this insistence . . . that compassion for persons overrides all law, is his shocking approbation of David's action in placing human need (even his own) above all regulations however sacrosanct.' (p. 116-7). The reader is likely to object that this approbation so far from being particularly shocking is already implicit in the Old Testament story, but the most interesting thing about this quotation is that the Bishop clearly regards a rule about 'eating the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for him to eat' as a 'classic illustration' of moral law: he seems indeed to regard such rules as more 'sacrosanct' than laws about adultery, murder, lying and so on, since his argument appears to be that if the 'sacrosanct regulations' can be set aside surely 'all law' can be. The traditionalist would say that, of course, Canon Law and the rules of religion are made for man,

and of course they must be set aside if they conflict with the demands of human compassion, but this is precisely because they are *not* the moral law. We have a divinely revealed moral law just because our compassion cannot reach deeply enough into the mystery of the individual person's needs and destiny. The divine law is rooted not in our fallible situational judgment but in the compassion of God. As the Bishop says, quoting Joseph Fletcher, ' . . . persons matter, and the deepest welfare of these particular persons in this particular situation matters, more than anything else in the world.' This is, of course, true; the question between us is merely how we are to know and compass the deepest welfare of persons. Is it in the end a matter of human contrivance or of the Mystery, the divine plan for human destiny?

This has been, I am afraid, an unfavourable review of a book which I and thousands of others have found intensely interesting to read. I have stressed what seem to me to be the book's weaknesses simply because so many whose opinions I respect seem to have received it with uncritical enthusiasm. I cannot but feel that some of this enthusiasm is generated by the imprecision and ambiguity of the book's positions, the Bishop of Woolwich, I suspect, is made uneasy by some of the opinions attributed to him by his readers. Nevertheless even if it were a bad book which it certainly is not, the very extent of its popularity should make it compulsory reading for anyone who wishes to understand the religious climate of the day. And those who read it merely for this reason, even those who come from it with as many criticisms as I have, will find something much more important—that in spite of all disagreements their understanding of Christ and his mission will have become deeper and more personal.