Doubts about Doubt: Honest to God Forty Years On*

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ABSTRACT

Honest to God, published in 1963, was one of the most public religious bestsellers of the twentieth century. Because it was written by an Anglican bishop it was especially controversial. Yet there are questions that remain and this article highlights seven such questions which draw attention to weaknesses in the book. An alternative proposal is offered here. Robinson had his finger on a real problem in postwar British church life and, in a measure, theology. I believe the problem was mostly or largely caused not by the New Testament and historic Christianity itself, but by the way in which the post-Enlightenment world had assimilated and re-expressed the Christian faith. What Robinson referred to when speaking of supra or supernaturalism belonged within an essentially Deist or Epicurean framework, and he was struggling with the unwelcome consequences of people being unable to relate to their absentee landlord, and simultaneously puzzling over the fact that some people did not find this a problem. The huge popularity of his book shows that he struck a chord with a great many people. The tragedy of *Honest to God*, as I perceive it, is that Robinson did not see that what he was rejecting was a form of supernaturalism pressed upon Christianity by the Enlightenment; that he did not therefore go looking for help in finding other ways of holding together what the classic Christian tradition has claimed about God.

My qualification for commenting on *Honest to God* comes, I suppose, from the fact that like John A.T. Robinson himself I am basically a New [182] Testament scholar with a side-interest in systematic theology, added to the fact that, again like Robinson, I have recently been plucked from academic work to serve the church as a bishop. I came to know Robinson a bit in the last six years of his life, first in Cambridge where he was a friend to me as a much younger New Testament scholar, and then when I hosted him as a guest speaker in Montreal. I cherish above all his last letters before his death; despite his popular image as a man who had questioned and doubted the essentials of the Christian faith, his Johannine emphasis on entering into 'eternal life' in the present, so that physical death became less relevant, shone through his unsuccessful battle with cancer, and won the admiration of all who witnessed it. Like his beloved John himself, he left his work to be presented and tidied up by others, and its contribution is yet, I think, to be felt in the world of Johannine scholarship, which has been concentrating on quite different questions. But of course it was *Honest to God*, not New Testament scholarship, that made him world-famous, and one of the hardest questions to address is, 'Why?'

Apparently Robinson first conceived of this book in a period of forced inactivity during an illness for which he was hospitalized. He worked through a number of versions of the manuscript before it was published by SCM Press in 1963.[1] He had taught New Testament at Cambridge and he wrote the book after he had moved to the inner city responsibilities of being bishop of Woolwich in London. He identifies his position as a bishop

with a responsibility to be a guardian and defender of the faith, but he says that he is also writing at a time 'when it is going to become increasingly difficult to know what the true defence of the Christian faith requires' (p. 7). He goes on to say that he believes Christians at this time were being called to a radical 'restating of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms' (p. 7).

The overall structure of the book is relatively simple. The first three chapters deal with what he sees as the present dis-ease with traditional notions of God and suggests the end of that kind of theism and a new notion of the 'ground of our Being' as a way of speaking about God. There is a single chapter about Jesus as the paradigmatic man for others and then two chapters on re-casting the mould in terms of our understanding of worship in that it must be in the world as 'worldly holiness'. A chapter on the new morality of 'love alone' follows naturally from this and the last chapter returns to the general theme of re-casting the mould. Not many concessions are made for the reader in terms of difficult [183] technical language or ideas. Yet it turned out to the surprise of the publisher and many others to be a popular bestseller, aided in England by being serialized in a national paper.

But I do not want to start there. Nor, at the moment, do I want to refer to the many other aspects of Robinson's biography which shed light from various and sometimes confusing angles on the mind behind the book. Rather, I want to raise seven substantial questions which I regard as damaging to the book's overall argument. Only then will I come back and, in acknowledging not only that the book obviously struck a deep chord with its generation but that its central thesis seems to me of abiding importance, I shall ask how we might retrieve that thesis, in a revised form no doubt, for today and tomorrow.

1. What is Robinson's starting-point and authority for the many claims he makes?

He draws on Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and to a lesser degree Bultmann and others, but that selection is the result of, not the reason for, his thesis, which seems to be that fewer and fewer people are able to believe in Christianity in anything like its traditional form. More especially, Robinson finds that he himself is partly at least unable to believe in the traditional expressions of Christianity. He also, in this book, found it hard to say how far he could and could not do so, though he followed *Honest to God* with a popular-level work entitled *But That I Can't Believe*, [2] which made it a little clearer.

But there are all sorts of problems with this. For a start, the decline of belief was not a postwar phenomenon; it had been going on in one shape or another from at least the eighteenth century. When A.N. Wilson wrote his book *God's Funeral*,[3] it was about the nineteenth, not the twentieth, century. Equally, at the same time as Robinson was writing, C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers and other apologists had an enormous following; Billy Graham was at the height of his popularity, with frequent visits to the United Kingdom; many churches were growing, not shrinking. To all this *Honest to God* remains impervious — except to say that for many Christians the traditional ways of expressing belief appear still to be working (and to snipe at their popularity),[4] but nonetheless generally to comment that for most people these traditional ways did not work. I suspect Robinson's real starting-point was in fact a combination of his own inner questionings, coming suddenly from a sheltered and *[184]* traditional Anglican background into the hurly-burly of South London, and his belonging, as an erstwhile Cambridge don, to the liberal intelligentsia of the time. I doubt if it was anything more substantial. At no point does such a thing as a sociological survey, an index of changes in belief over time, make any appearance.

2. Has Robinson got Tillich and Bonhoeffer right and do they prove his point?

We leave to one side the questions raised about Tillich by his biographers and by, for instance, Donald MacKinnon: to try to build a new morality of Robinson's kind, in which men will respect women sexually, on a Tillichian foundation looks a decidedly shaky prospect. I am more interested in Bonhoeffer, and in the context of Bonhoeffer's embracing of the 'weakness and suffering of God' (p. 39). Nowhere does Robinson acknowledge that Bonhoeffer's theological exploration was heavily conditioned by his situation as a pastor of the Confessing Church in Hitler's Third Reich—indeed, granted that Robinson had lived as a young man through the 1930s and 1940s, it is strange that his context-driven theology does not do explicit business with the questions raised by this period. Bonhoeffer's protest against 'religion', like that of Barth and Käsemann, had a very different meaning, within the Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, with its Kulturprotestantismus and its Deutsche Christen, than it did in the UK in the 1960s. In fact, here Bonhoeffer was not saying that a new species had arrived, homo non religiosus, for whom allowance and accommodation had to be made, but rather that homo religiosus was a dangerous species which had to be resisted —a very different case. Robinson was arguing that one should go with the flow; Bonhoeffer, that one should stand out against it. Similarly, Bonhoeffer's insistence on God's weakness seems to me very different from Robinson's stress on God's virtual absence. But then, 'religion' itself has always meant subtly different things in Germany and the UK, and this alone makes it problematic to follow Robinson's too-easy translation from one to the other.[5]

3. Whether or not Robinson got Tillich and Bonhoeffer right, does his thesis make sense?

I am aware that various sytematicians found it at the time confused and confusing, and rereading the book now I can see why. In particular, it strikes me as woefully incomplete, and lopsided not so much in that it fails to balance immanence with transcendence — I shall come back to [185] this point—but in that, though Robinson acknowledges the problem he finds himself in, of a naturalism which appears simply reductionist, he does not seem to me to have found any answer, any way out. His wrestlings at this point (on pp. 50-61), interesting though they are in themselves, do not seem to me to constitute one. Tillich's 'self-transcending and ecstatic naturalism' (p. 56 n. 2) does not address the real question, which emerges when we look back at the twentieth century with its wars and human suffering. I find it quite shocking that Robinson has no account to give of evil, either its existence, its analysis, or the solution offered to it in either traditional or revisionist Christianity. He recognizes that the normal liberal analysis is shallow and inadequate, but has nothing to offer in its place. How a theology rooted and born in the twentieth century could do justice to that twentieth century without a serious account of evil simply defeats me. Alternatively, if awareness of serious evil in the world is at the root of the secularism to which Robinson is reacting sympathetically, we would have expected that to have been highlighted. There are from time to time apologists for secularism or atheism who cite as their main argument the difficulty of believing in God, granted all the evil in the world — as though the main argument for belief were a kind of preenlightenment natural theology such as we find in Butler. Small wonder that Robinson finds it urgently necessary to demythologize the atonement (pp. 78-79).

This is directly cognate with Robinson's impossibly naive attempt at restating ethics. The thought that anyone in the 1960s was likely to be checked from sexually exploitative behaviour by being told that the only rule was love — granted the systematic ambiguity of that

English word as opposed to its various Greek semi-equivalents — was ludicrous then and appears tragic in hindsight. And it left, and leaves, the way open for the Nietszchean response which has once more come to the fore in our own day: who needs love when you can have power? Any attempt to 'follow and find the workings of God' within the 'exhilarating, and dangerous, secular strategies of our day', must, it seems to me, come equipped with the means to analyse and critique evil and proclaim and explain the way in which the Christian gospel addresses it. Otherwise the scheme collapses back into the kind of thing which Barth, Bonhoeffer and others denounced in the 1930s —and which, from its very different standpoint and by its very different methods, postmodernity has been denouncing in our own day.

4. Why is there no real role for the Bible in the book?

Robinson was basically a biblical scholar: he was described on the cover of the early editions of the book as 'one of Britain's most brilliant New [186] Testament scholars'. [6] How is it, then, that the Bible appears to play no role in the foundations of his thinking? The Bible appears at the start of the book, and frequently thereafter, as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. When it is the latter, it is mostly detached snippets, rather than either sustained exegesis or a large-scale overview of books or themes. Granted Robinson's overall thesis, he could so easily have drawn on the exilic texts, or Job, or Lamentations — or, if he wanted to be more robust, he could have gone to Exodus to sustain the idea of humankind set free from slavery, a motif that could have been applied to modern superstition. He calls on Tillich to expound Psalm 139 for him (pp. 57-59), which in my view adds nothing to his case.

Or, coming to the New Testament, Robinson could have explored Pilate's famous 'What is Truth', when faced with Jesus; or Paul's subversion of the *religion* of his Jewish contemporaries, a point which was made precisely by some of Bultmann's German followers at just this time. But all Robinson gleans from Bultmann, again without recognizing its context in Bultmann's own theological and pastoral concerns, is demythologization. Or he could have turned to Jesus' attack on the Temple; or the scene in Gethsemane. As a result of this remarkable lacuna, we are left wondering whether biblical scholarship has anything to do with helping people understand and integrate their faith and questioning. There seems to be, in fact, no theology of Revelation at all in the book, except in the most downgraded sense of natural theology ('what people today find credible'; 'the exhilarating and dangerous secular strivings of our day'); just as there is no theology, or even account, of Resurrection, not even an attempt to explain Easter away in a naturalistic fashion. Robinson had already suggested, in *The Body*[7] that the church itself is the real resurrection body of Jesus; perhaps his experience as a bishop had rendered this proposal problematic.

Robinson seems to assume, in fact, that theism begins, not with the Bible or human awareness of God, but with the classic intellectual proofs (p. 29). His attempt to substitute for these his own kind of natural theology—both the discovery of God in the ground of our being and the discovery of criteria for acceptable belief in the unsorted opinions of 'modern man'—carries, to my mind, no conviction.

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5. Why, in particular, did Robinson so readily acquiesce in the then current theses about where Western culture had got to?

He accepts without demur the Enlightenment rhetoric of 'man come of age' — a claim which should have appeared threadbare already in the 1960s, in the light of two world wars, the Jewish holocaust and other genocidal acts, and looks even thinner now when confronted with the full range of the postmodern critique. Like Bultmann, Robinson relies on generalized language about outdated worldviews, without asking whether the difference between a Christian worldview and a post-Enlightenment one is really one of chronology or one of ideology, a point I return to later. Like Harvey Cox, Norman Pittenger and others, Robinson relies upon a thesis about secularization which has now been shown to be very time-limited; his chapter on 'worldly holiness', and his assumption that fewer and fewer people would understand or want the mysterious dimensions of an older religion, look frankly comic in our world of New Age mysticism, of a burgeoning Retreat movement, of Taizé, and of a renewed interest in Eastern Orthodoxy, not least its icons and incense. But even at this level, it isn't clear that Robinson had really plugged in to the serious thinkers of his time. Had he read, for instance, A.J. Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic? Was his charge of 'meaninglessness' (pp. 40-41) related to Ayer's dismissal of theology and metaphysics, and if so how? It is no real charge, of course, to say that Robinson used some ideas fashionable then but discredited now — as Ayer admitted that his philosophy had been, and as Harvey Cox has admitted that the secularist thesis has been. Rather, the issue is that given there were many voices to the contrary in England (to look no further) at the time when he wrote, why did he feel free to paint such a monochrome picture?

6. Why did Robinson not consider other great theologians?

In particular — this is perhaps the most serious question of all — why did Robinson not enquire whether there were other great theologians, alongside Tillich, Bonhoeffer and Bultmann, on whom he could call for help, or to whom he might look for alternative viewpoints on the central questions that exercised him? How, in particular, could be simply ignore Barth, whose whole project so directly addressed Robinson's questions and who could hardly be dismissed in the way Robinson dismisses so much traditional Christian conceptuality?[8] Robinson, in fact, never takes any specific writers as representative of the viewpoint he chips away at, leaving one with a sense of caricature, of straw men (they were all men, [188] of course, in the early 1960s) being set up and knocked down. The best we can guess is that what Robinson is attacking is the implicit religion and theology of the cathedral close of his Canterbury boyhood, of the public school and university of his youth, of the cloistered college of his training, and of the Cambridge of his earlier career. Though I am not a twentieth-century historian I know enough about these worlds to reckon that their faith was oblique, mysterious to the point of dryness, understated, a mixture of devotion and duty to a distant God, based on unquestioning assumptions of a fixed, static order in church and world, on earth and in heaven. I would not wish, in turn, to descend into caricature. But since Robinson has not engaged with any actual opponents it is hard to do other than speculate like this—and to enquire, once more, why he did not go looking for the substantial help that not only Barth but many others could have given him in addressing the precise questions he was raising.

7. How is the book honest?

My final question returns to the matter of Robinson's biography, and asks: in what sense is the book truly 'honest'? The word 'honest' seems to me multiply contested and even abused today, often being used to mean 'reductionist'. As with Alasdair MacIntyre's book *Whose*

Justice? Which Rationality?, [9] we are compelled today to ask, Whose Honesty?, and to suspect all claims to absolutize the concept of honesty and thereby to claim an apparent moral high ground. In particular, Robinson himself seems to me to protest rather too much when he declares again and again that for the most part he remains a traditional Christian—yet says in the preface, revealingly, that he finds less and less of himself to what he calls the right side of the line that runs through the middle of himself. He was of course a complex character, as his biography reveals, and in later life he edited and republished, movingly, his father's devotional book *The Personal Life of the Clergy* under the title *The Personal Life of the Christian*, [10] reaffirming warmly the central disciplines and habits of Christian devotion. But how he kept the two sides of himself integrated, if he did, has never been clear to me. Maybe it was honesty which compelled this unclarity, but the sense of 'owning up', of 'coming clean', which the title implies is not, I think, borne out by the apparent confusion of the author.

[189] And yet.

These seven questions press themselves on me as I read the book today, but as I stop and reflect there is another one, to which the answer is resoundingly positive. Granted the book made an enormous splash, being gobbled up by an eager public in a manner which befell no other postwar books of theology, it is hard to say that Robinson did not have his finger on something. What was it? What felt need did he meet? Did he describe adequately what it was that he had rightly spotted? If not, can we go beyond him?

It would be easy, of course, to try to explain the book's impact in as reductionist a fashion as Robinson himself employs from time to time. In a sense the book was *addressing* the 1960s, but in another sense it was *expressing* where the culture already was, and thus helping to *sustain a* mood already present—with the doubtful legitimacy of endorsement from a liberal churchman called in to give permission for trends in the culture, many of which Robinson himself would not have welcomed. 'People always like being given permission for what they want to think and do', we might say, and leave it at that. But apart from the dubious nature of such an analysis even in its own terms, I believe there is a lot more going on, which we still need to attend to quite carefully, though I find Robinson's expression of it frequently unhelpful and misleading for the reasons given above. Let me try to say what it is; and here I invoke the fact that my background is very similar to Robinson's (albeit a generation later) as an excuse for claiming to see into what he was trying to do. After all, despite all my criticisms, I find myself insisting in my own work on some of the very same things as Robinson did, some of the same central points, though because of what I perceive as weaknesses in Robinson's position I try to do it in different ways.

The problem focuses easily on the word 'supranaturalism' and its cognates, which Robinson regularly uses, not least in drawing on Tillich.[11] I think it is important to sketch what I take to be the English story behind this idea and its problems, which is perhaps not quite the same as either the Continental or the American story. In America, for instance, it gets ensnared in the Darwinian controversies, which in turn carry both continuing sociological freight and also memories, and caricatures, of the Civil War, with the liberal Yankees pitted against the redneck South, overtones quite absent from English discussion.

[190] In English theology, the easy-going pre-Enlightenment assumption that the world of creation gave reliably straightforward witness to a good creator (I cited Bishop Butler above; we might include writers like Joseph Addison, too) had been shaken to the core by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which as Susan Neiman has argued must be seen as one of

the proximate causes at least of the Enlightenment revolution. [12] That revolution attempted to solve the problem, as well as several others, by cutting God loose from the world, drawing on the old upstairs/downstairs world of English deism. Religion became the thing that people did with their solitude, a private, inner activity, a secret way of gaining access to the divine rather than either an invocation of the God within nature or a celebration of the kingdom coming on earth as in heaven. God became an absentee landlord who allowed the tenants pretty much free rein to explore and run the house the way they wanted, provided they checked in with him from time to time to pay the rent (in much middle Anglican worship until the last generation, taking up the collection has been the most overtly sacramental act) and reinforce some basic ground rules (the Ten Commandments, prominently displayed on church walls, and the expectation that bishops and clergy will 'give a moral lead' to society). As we know, the absentee landlord quite quickly became an absentee, as in Feuerbach, whom Robinson quotes to this effect (p. 50) without any sense that Feuerbach himself has been subjected to damaging critique.

But whereas liberal continental theology developed ways of coping with this problem, many in the UK carried on as though nothing much had happened, or as though by preaching in a louder voice one could reassure people that all was well. (I am reminded of J.B. Priestly's play *An Inspector Calls*, in which upper middle-class UK society tried to carry on after the first world war as though everything was just the same.) Continental liberal theology was confronted by its own bankruptcy in the early years of the century, producing Barth's dramatic reassertion in the *Romans* commentary[13] of the transcendence and holiness of God and his stout resistance to the politically freighted natural theology of the 1930s, and also Bultmann's attempt to re-read the gospels as though they were basically about the faith of *die Gemeinde* rather than about Jesus, dovetailing nicely with Germany's Weimar emphasis on *die Gemeinde* having got rid of the Kaiser—another point most UK readers of Bultmann [191] missed. But UK theology carried on for the most part without getting to grips with the malaise.

Instead, Anglican theology, piety and preaching oscillated uneasily and inarticulately between a firm reassertion of the old truths as though they were unproblematic and a kind of *enfant terrible* flirtation with questionings of the Virgin Birth and Bodily Resurrection and attempts to naturalize German theology and exegesis (such as R.H. Lightfoot's Bampton Lectures) without regard for the close integration of philosophy, politics and sociology in which that exegesis had its natural habitat. The great German ocean-going whales were thus housed in small fresh-water tanks and made to do tricks to delight or shock (according to taste) the surprised UK public.

This was the climate in which Robinson was nurtured; and the religion of the middle Anglican at the time carried a certain mark of devotion, a certain tone of voice even, which betrayed its sense of the still-existing gulf between humans and God. The gap between being heavenly minded and being of earthly use was wide, and there was a certain embarrassment at trying to straddle it, an embarrassment conveniently hidden behind the understated but powerful Anglican liturgy. We might compare and contrast the Eastern Orthodox worldview where, precisely in liturgy, God is richly present albeit shrouded in mystery.

This inadequate and impressionistic sketch of Robinson's context suggests at least some of the reasons for his protest. If you meet the question of God within a framework which demands that you straddle that large gap, a gap moreover which seems too wide for your

friends and neighbours (except, of course, those infuriating people who read C.S. Lewis or go to Billy Graham rallies), you will perceive the problem as one of an unbelievable supra- or supernaturalism; and you will turn, like Feuerbach a century earlier, to an attempt at a restated naturalism. Hence Robinson's feeling for Bultmann, who was explicitly applying Feuerbach to gospel studies in his insistence that theology is really anthropology. Granted that the problem is perceived in these terms, there was perhaps little else that he could do.

My sympathy for his plight has grown over the years as I have lived within the continuing split-level world of much English piety. The word 'miracle' is a case in point. Most people, not least in the media, still think of it as meaning an action performed by a distant, remote deity reaching in to the world from outside—just as to many people, still, the word 'God' itself conjures up a basically deist image of that kind of a being. I know that in fact that word 'supernatural' has a longer history than this and that, for instance, mediaeval theologians were able to use it in such away that it did not carry the baggage of an implied deism or semi-deism [192] (by which I mean the view which, while sharing deism's gap between God and the world, holds that from time to time this 'God' can and does 'intervene'). But I continue to find that this model dominates UK theological discourse, particularly among those of, or near, Robinson's generation. Thus, for instance, when I have written about Jesus' mighty acts, or about the resurrection, I have often been heard to be affirming one kind of post-Enlightenment supernaturalism (with an 'interventionist' God) over against one kind of post-Enlightenment naturalism (with a 'non-interventionist' God), even though I have frequently and explicitly renounced precisely this distinction and the framework which facilitates it (to the consternation of my 'supernaturalist' friends).

Is there an alternative, then? In company with many of the post-Robinson generation of systematicians in the UK—people like Rowan Williams, David Ford, Oliver O'Donovan, the late Colin Gunton, John Webster, Trevor Hart, Alan Torrance, and many others—I am struggling to express what seems to me a more biblical perspective: that God's sphere and our sphere, 'heaven' and 'earth' in biblical language, intersect and overlap in many and various ways, so that God remains present to the world while simultaneously over against it as sovereign, lover, lord and judge. In particular, the *mode* of God's presence, within the world as it is, seems to me to combine laughter and tears, joy and sorrow, so that we cannot say automatically that a particular state of affairs must be God's will because it is simply what we find in creation (think of the protests of Barth and Käsemann against this kind of thing!), or that a particular state of affairs must be displeasing to God because it shares the life, and the corruptibility, of the present old creation. We cannot read off God's presence or absence, God's pleasure or displeasure, in any straightforward way from the surface of the created order (or the opinions of humans within it). We must rely on some kind of revelation (this is the move, of course, which Robinson never made, and which still remains unmade by, and worrying to, many of his generation); not to leap over the ontological or moral gap between a remote Deist God and ourselves, but to enable us rightly to recognize the laughter and the tears, the celebration and the judgment, of the true God. [14]

And of course at the heart of all this we find Jesus: not just the 'Man for Others', true and powerful though that remains, but the flesh-and-blood Jesus of Nazareth, who fed the hungry, celebrated with the outcasts, grieved over Jerusalem, struggled with Messianic vocation, cried out in anguish in Gethsemane, died God-forsaken on the cross, [193] rose again in surprising bodily triumph, and, in and through all this, believed that he was thus and thereby embodying the long-awaited return of Israel's God to Zion. I have argued elsewhere

that we discover the divinity of Jesus, not (as much post-Enlightenment theology has tried to do) as an extra quality or add-on over and above this humanity, but precisely within it. I see my historical investigations into what it meant to be Jesus (if I can put it like that) as contributing centrally to this task of reconceiving the ways in which we talk of God in the postmodern culture which has shaken to the foundations the modernist framework upon which Robinson relied and which seemed to him set in stone for ever. I thus find myself sharing, at a deep and sympathetic level, Robinson's unease at the supernaturalist language and frame of reference about which he spoke. But instead of accepting that framework and setting about a kind of naturalism instead, albeit one with a bad conscience, I want to suggest that the framework itself needs dismantling and replacing with something else.

An obvious objection to this proposal might come in the form: does this new framework not simply rehabilitate a biblical worldview, which is one manifestation of an ancient worldview we can no longer share? Here, sticking my neck out, I protest. The idea of ancient worldviews being set aside by modern ones — the point is often couched in terms of prescientific and scientific worldviews — likewise comes to us with all kinds of Enlightenment baggage. (I am reminded of C.S. Lewis's pantomime figure of 'Mr Enlightenment' in The Pilgrim's Regress, p. 35): on being asked how he knows there is no God, he exclaims 'Christopher Columbus, Galileo, the earth is round, invention of printing, gunpowder!') Of course there are differences in worldviews over time; but the most significant differences between worldviews are not those between 'ancient' and 'modern', but those which occur in philosophical assumptions which cut across chronological divides. What post-Enlightenment thought has offered us, in fact, is more or less exactly the same choice as outlined by Cicero in the first century BC in his *De Natura Deorum*: either a pantheism which is some sort of Stoicism, or a deism which is more or less Epicureanism, or a scepticism or agnosticism which is a variant on the ancient Academic view. Either God and the world are pretty nearly the same thing; or they are ontological light years apart; or the evidence is confused and we cannot really tell. (Cicero took the last view, but believed it was important for social and cultural reasons to keep public religion going anyway, a position familiar to many Anglicans.)

Each of these worldviews, with its attendant philosophy, survives quite well the transition from pre-scientific to scientific. (Let me add that, despite my belief in the arrogance of the Enlightenment and the neces- [194] sity of the postmodern critique, I remain grateful for the real and substantial blessings brought to us by science. I would not wish to return to premodern dentistry, or swap the high-tech variety I currently enjoy for any New Age alternatives.) But the worldview we find in the Hebrew and Aramaic Scriptures, and its fresh mutation in early Christianity, always did cut across those ancient non-Jewish worldviews with a fresh challenge, however humbling it may have been: the challenge that there is after all a creator God, who, having made the world, remains in dynamic though puzzling relationship with it, especially with the human race, and more especially with Israel; the challenge of revelatory events, revelatory Scriptures, and, in Christianity, a supremely revelatory person.

Second-temple Judaism developed (though you would never know it from the biblical scholarship of a generation ago) sophisticated ways of speaking about God's dynamic relationship with the world, with humans, and with Israel. Significantly it was exactly those forms of speaking—not least Word, Wisdom, Torah, Shekinah and Spirit—that the early Christians drew on when trying to explain the significance of Jesus and the freshly outpoured Holy Spirit. This Jewish and Christian challenge offers a new and startling alternative to Cicero's three options, which like them can move quite easily from the so-called pre-scientific

period to that of modern science. (I say 'so-called' because many post-Enlightenment thinkers like to portray all who went before them as stupid and ignorant, a claim challenged by a reading of, say, Ptolemy or Pliny, or by the contemplation of the Parthenon, or the acoustics of the great ancient theatres.)

A particularly sharp edge of this has been the claim, repeated over and over, that the early Christians and the Jewish counterparts lived in an *apocalyptic* worldview, meaning by that that they believed the space-time universe was about to come to an end. This claim has been a central part of the kind of problem Robinson faced in *Honest to God* as in his other writings. But it is demonstrably false. That reading of apocalyptic does no historical justice to the actual beliefs of second-temple Jews and early Christians. This is not demythologizing; it is historical investigation. Indeed, part of the demythologization programme can be seen to be a stripping away, not of parts of actual first-century belief (though no doubt some of that was envisaged as well) but of ways in which first century belief had been misdescribed precisely by those post-Enlightenment sceptics eager to rubbish early Christianity and reinscribe their own variation on Cicero's alternatives. Until the rise of contemporary studies of apocalyptic which have revealed its true subtlety and political sensitivity, most writers remained content to describe it in ways designed to [195] assist in the Enlightenment's portrayal of first-century people (and a good many others besides) as flat-earth ignoramuses.

Let me sum up my alternative proposal. Robinson had his finger on a real problem in postwar UK church life and, in a measure, theology. I believe the problem was mostly or largely caused not by the New Testament and historic Christianity itself, but by the way in which the post-Enlightenment world had assimilated and re-expressed the Christian faith. What Robinson referred to when speaking of supra- or supernaturalism belonged within an essentially deist or Epicurean framework, and he was struggling with the unwelcome consequences of people being unable to relate to their absentee landlord, and simultaneously puzzling over the fact that some people did not find this a problem. The huge popularity of his book shows that he struck a chord with a great many people. The tragedy of *Honest to* God, as I perceive it, is that Robinson did not see that what he was rejecting was a form of supernaturalism pressed upon Christianity by the Enlightenment; that he did not therefore go looking for help in finding other ways of holding together what the classic Christian tradition has claimed about God, the world, and Jesus; that in addressing these ontological questions he never laid out the parallel moral ones, or explored the ways in which, centrally, the Christian Scriptures and tradition address them; and that in consequence his high modernist construct now looks very shaky in the cold light of a postmodern dawn, as well as in the warmer light of the mainstream Christian alternative. The good news is that, precisely once the postmodern critique has done its work, we can see that there are other ways of retrieving the ancient Jewish and early Christian witness and faith —a daunting and difficult task, no doubt, but one still full of promise and possibility. In honouring John A.T. Robinson, we should perhaps evoke the famous saying of his seventeenth-century namesake: God has yet more light to break out of his holy word.

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Anniversary Edition, 2003).

- [1] J.A.T Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963). References to *Honest to God* are taken from this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.
- [2] J.A.T. Robinson, But That I Can't Believe (London: Collins, 1967).
- [3] A.N. Wilson, God's *Funeral* (London: John Murray, 1999).
- [4] See, e.g., Robinson, *Honest to God*, pp. 15,138-39.
- [5] See, too, MacIntyre's remarks about Bonhoeffer, quoted by Williams at p. 165 of Robinson, *Honest to God*, 40th Anniversary Edition.
- [6] Though one might have supposed that a person so described would recall that in Greek the complement does not take the definite article, so that in 'the word was God' we would expect what John wrote, i.e. *theos* rather than *ho theos* (p. 71).
- [7] J.A.T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1952).
- [8] See Douglas Hall's comments and references in *Honest to God*, 40th Anniversary Edition, p. 146.
- [9] A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
- [10] A.W. Robinson, *The Personal Life of the Christian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).
- [11] It is not clear to me, I might add, whether either of them intend to distinguish this from 'supernaturalism', and if so in what way, but I will assume that the two words mean more or less the same thing.
- [12] S. Neiman, Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- [13] K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (trans. E.C. Hoskyns; London: Oxford University Press, 1933).
- [14] I find Robinson's brief remarks about revelation on p. 128 Christ as the disclosure of ultimate truth —at best inadequate for anything like this task.