

'HONEST TO GOD' REVISITED

Ben Whitney

A Study Day for radical enquirers

Five 45 minute sessions, each with a short presentation and questions/discussion

With 'NOT YOUR USUAL CHURCH WEEKEND' as an option!

'Sexual intercourse began in 1963....; between the end of the Chatterley ban and the Beatles first LP'. (Philip Larkin – 'Annus Mirabilis')

1963 was also the year of the Profumo affair as well as the publication of 'Honest to God'. Bishop John Robinson had recently given evidence for the defence in the Lady Chatterley obscenity trial so he was already (in)famous. But if he hadn't had a bad back and been laid up for three months, the book might never have been written. Of course it reflects its time. You have to ignore the constant use of 'men' when he means 'people'. That at least shows that some things have changed in the last 50 years! It is difficult to follow in places, but on the whole it is pretty readable – and introduced a British and US audience to 3 German C20th theological giants – Tillich, Bultmann and Bonhoeffer.

Over a million copies were sold, way beyond the publishers' expectations. People literally bought them as fast as they could be printed. Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury, said the book did 'much damage', (though he later said he regretted saying it). There was a significant national debate, not only in the Church but in the press and TV etc. But a few years' later Robinson left his post as Bishop of Woolwich in frustration that the Church was still widely ignored and seen as irrelevant, even in modern 'swinging' London, and went back into academic life.

What happened to all those who bought the book? Some, like some of the church leaders who denounced it, probably never actually read it! Others, I suspect, gave their local church a try and found that nothing had changed and were disappointed. Has anything changed since? We had one or two more flowerings of radical theological thought with John Hick, Don Cupitt, David Jenkins and Anthony Freeman, but not much recently. (Unlike John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg etc. in the USA). Maybe what goes on in churches is just too unknown to most people and these disputes, such as they are, don't make the news any more.

In some ways the book is not that radical, especially about the Bible and the 'religious' language we may still use. But Robinson's concern, like mine, was to stop Christianity becoming irrelevant in the modern world. It still raises many exciting opportunities for the interested enquirer or the radical follower of Jesus today, most of which have never been addressed by the Church in open and inclusive debate. Sometimes this has all been considered too difficult for 'ordinary' Christians to cope with, or too threatening for them even to be made aware of it. I don't believe that either objection is true.

All religions were created to answer human questions: **What are those questions? And are the traditional Christian 'answers' still fit for purpose?** We'll begin there. So I hope you enjoy the journey, even if the going may get a bit bumpy in places!

What I offer is my interpretation of this classic book. I am no expert, just a facilitator. You might see something entirely different. That's fine. After a short period of meditation and preparation, we will be sharing in **five 45-minute sessions** together, each with the following structure:

- A brief introduction to that section of the book (10 mins)
- Group discussion on some questions to get you started (20 mins)
- Feedback and reflection/questions arising (15 mins)

- 1. The Ground of our being:** New understandings of 'God' (1,2,3)
- 2. The man for others:** The meaning of Jesus (chapter 4)
- 3. Worldly holiness:** Personal Spirituality (chapter 5)
- 4. The new morality:** The Supremacy of Love (chapter 6)
- 5. Recasting the mould:** Changing the Church (chapter 7)

Ideally the day will interest both open-minded believers and those who do not count themselves as 'Christians'. It would help to read the book in advance, but it is not essential. Breaks and lunch can be taken as required.

I do not charge a fee, only ask you to cover my expenses.

See below for 'Not Your Usual Church Weekend!'

**I ONLY OFFER THIS DAY EVENT IN THE MIDLANDS AREA.
IN OTHER AREAS I WILL HAPPILY SEND YOU SOME BRIEF
INTRODUCTORY NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION IF
YOU'D LIKE TO ORGANISE YOUR OWN DAY.**

'NOT YOUR USUAL CHURCH WEEKEND'!

If you're feeling really brave, I also offer a whole weekend option in a residential setting of your choice, when we can also spend some informal time and share meals together. I take responsibility for the content of the sessions as below. You then fill in the gaps with additional sessions as you wish. As with the Study Day, I just need you to cover my travel expenses and any accommodation cost involved

Friday evening: 'Six answers in search of the right questions'. The opposite of Alpha! A time to get to know me, and each other, before we move on. How did I get to where I am? What have I learnt along the way and what are my given starting-points (and yours) if we are to continue in the faith journey with both honesty and integrity? What is a 'religion' and what is it for?

Saturday morning: Sessions 1-3 above

Saturday early evening: Sessions 4-5 above

Sunday morning: I will speak and lead a discussion on the set lessons for the day within whatever morning activity/worship you wish to organise.

Website: www.ben-whitney.org.uk
Email: ben.whitney1@btinternet.com