

'HONEST TO GOD' REVISITED - STUDY NOTES Ben Whitney

Contact me via my website if you would like me to share in the discussion with you

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

INTRODUCTION

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. Of course, like all theology, 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 60 years! It is a little 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 in modern 'swinging' London and went into academic life and relative obscurity.

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 were disappointed. Has anything changed since? We had one or two more flowerings of radical theological thought in the UK since but not much recently other than Richard Holloway. The USA has many more stronger, if controversial, liberal voices. Maybe nobody here cares any more. Maybe the Church is still ignoring the key issues and that's why it appeals mainly to those who are seeking a reassuring certainty not an experimental creativity.

In some ways the book is not radical enough for me, especially about the Bible and whether we can still talk of a 'personal' God at all. But his 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.

STUDY PROGRAMME

Alongside actually reading the book before or in between meetings, I suggest that each study session should be no longer than 75 minutes, each with the following structure:

A brief introduction to that section of the book by one person (10-15 mins)

Group discussion on the suggested questions (20-30 mins)

Feedback and reflection/questions arising (20-30 mins)

- 1. The Ground of our being:** New understandings of 'God' (chapters 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)

SESSION 1: The Ground of our being (Chapters 1, 2 and 3)

SUMMARY (The facilitator may need to select certain passages for reading).

These chapters are of course the most important, but you need to ensure there is sufficient time to discuss all the later sections as well. The opening chapters explore the idea of 'God' as not meaning a supernatural Being/someone 'up there' or even 'out there' but a 'depth to our being' (Paul Tillich) or as a presence 'in the midst of life' (Bonhoeffer). Is this the only kind of 'God' that can be believed in without creating an idol of our invention? Such a God 'exists' (by definition, as Robinson means 'that which underlies all that is') but cannot be proven. 'God' is the heartbeat of life itself. God is everywhere.

FOR DISCUSSION

Robinson would certainly not call himself an 'atheist'. But clearly his idea of 'God' is very different from what is normally believed and expected. Is that a problem for you or do you see these ideas as opening up new possibilities for belief? Can there be a 'faith' without a 'God'?

Do our Creeds make it difficult to accept new understandings of 'God'? Should we abandon them and write new ones or is there enough 'wiggle room' to keep using them? What about the fact that they use 'He' all the time to describe God (which Robinson didn't seem too worried about!) How might we change that?

What does the word 'God' mean to you? How would you help others to find that meaning too?

SESSION 2: The man for others (Chapter 4)

SUMMARY

Robinson does not regard Jesus as a personal 'Saviour' who died for our sins in the usual sense of atonement. He doesn't equate him with God. Incarnation and resurrection are 'myths' not facts. (Bultmann. That doesn't mean they are false; but they are not 'literally' true. They represent deeper truths). Jesus was a human person who had no intention of founding a new religion. His death is an example of self-giving love and he 'discloses and lays bare the Ground of (our) Being as Love'. The 'man for others' enables us to become fully human. We can become a new creation. This is the 'grace of God' at work. The cross shows God as powerless, not powerful.

FOR DISCUSSION

Robinson criticises what he (rather patronisingly, he admits) calls 'working-class religion' which effectively sees Jesus as some kind of superhero/demi-god, not as a real human person – 'Docetism'. Is this a fair criticism of what many 'ordinary' Christians believe, (and of what many people, who don't believe, think that Christians do!?)

Does he address the meaning of the cross sufficiently in saying this should be seen as a self-denying surrender of love? (So not as a sacrifice for the sins of the world etc. etc.) What then was the resurrection? How does Jesus' death make any difference today?

'The NT does not say that Jesus was God'. He reveals God. So is it right to worship Jesus? Should we equate Jesus/the Christ with God in our liturgies, hymns and services as we often appear to do? Are there better ways to tell the Jesus story?

SESSION 3: Worldly holiness (Chapter 5)

SUMMARY

If there is no supernatural Being who can intervene in the world and change things on request, what is the point of speaking to 'Him'? Individual prayer and corporate liturgies provide structure to our spiritual life. Prayer is not time 'set aside' to be with God, or 'going away to pray about it' but is part of what we are doing when we are getting on with living our normal day-to-day lives. An awareness of 'God-ness' is not confined to being in church, or to just to Christians.

Many of our ideas of 'spirituality' date from a time when humans had no control over the world and turned to 'God' for answers/consolation. But there are no gaps for God to be persuaded to fill anymore. Things just happen. What difference does this make to our personal or corporate spirituality?

FOR DISCUSSION

'What is the place of ..prayer in an entire absence of 'religion'?. Bonhoeffer coined the term 'religionless Christianity'. Is that idea helpful in encouraging people's personal piety and 'Christlike' lifestyle, rather than signing up to a set of doctrines?

Does he mean that there is no distinction between the 'holy' and the 'secular'? Is worship/ personal prayer etc. about engaging with the world, not withdrawing from it? Symbolised in the 'common' things of bread and wine that we share. ('Everything is holy now': a song by Peter Mayer).

Should we see all life as prayer, not some special 'religious' activity based on actually communicating with a 'God', just for a while?

SESSION 4: The new morality (Chapter 6)

SUMMARY

Despite the sometimes dated language, this chapter must have been seen as remarkably progressive at the time. It was still effectively illegal to be homosexual until 1967 so Robinson doesn't mention it but it is surely there in the background. He focuses more on divorce and sex outside marriage. Moral standards do not reflect some underlying authority. We each have to decide and only Love Rules! Or *'Love is all you need'*! All very Sixties perhaps, but how else can moral issues be decided? All our human relationships should be guided by (Jesus') Love, not by adhering to commandments. 'Nothing can always and of itself be labelled as wrong'. There is no rule book for being human.

FOR DISCUSSION

If you can't look up 'right' and 'wrong' in the Bible (because it was written a long time ago by human beings like us not handed down from a God to be the authority on everything forever), how do we decide? How might this approach apply to gay marriage or other current issues?

Sometimes you have to set aside all your principles and do what you know is right'. (Joseph Fletcher- 'Situation Ethics'). Do you agree? Or does that just lead to people doing whatever they want?

What might be some more current examples where the principle of 'Love Rules' might be relevant as the key moral principle for living in the Way of Jesus? Is there such a thing as a specifically 'Christian' morality? Do we need to think more about wider global/political morality, not just personal behaviour?

SESSION 5: Recasting the mould (Chapter 7)

SUMMARY

So what should the Church be concerned with? Bonhoeffer had drawn a distinction between 'the Gospel' and 'Christianity'? So what is 'the' Gospel? What is the truth about life that we uniquely have to share? 'Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus', says Robinson. Does this still sound too much like conventional 'Christianity' or what else might it mean? The call to be 'fully human'? Revealing the 'signs' of the 'Kingdom of God' on earth? So should the Church (especially the clergy) focus less on what it does to keep itself going, and more on what its 'lay' people do in the 'real' world?

FOR DISCUSSION

'Being a Christian' has traditionally meant agreeing to the Church's doctrines. But most people reject or simply ignore them. They don't believe they're true anymore. How would you sum up your church's 'mission' and purpose? What is its 'good news'? Are you challenged by this whole book to change it?

How does your church support its members in their life outside? Or doesn't it?

Do we spend too much time on trying to 'get people in' rather than making a difference to the community around us? Can you give some examples of things your church does that impact most on those who don't attend it?

What happens next now you have completed this programme?

If you haven't already read them, my own books: *'The Apostate's Creed: Rethinking Christianity for the C21st'* (2019) and *'On Not Being a Christian'*; (2022) pick up on many of these same questions. Copies available only from

www.ben-whitney.org.uk