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THE OBSERVER

WEEKEND REVIEW March 17, 1963

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OUR IMAGE OF GOD MUST GO

'Honest to God', by the Bishop of Woolwich, will be published on Tuesday. In this article the Bishop expresses the main theme of this controversial book: the urgent need to question the traditional image of God as a supernatural Person if Christianity is to survive.

by Dr. John Robinson
Bishop of Woolwich



FEW people realise that we are in the middle of one of the most exciting theological fermentations of the century. Some theologians have sensed this for years; but now, quite suddenly, new ideas about God and religion, many of them with disturbing revolutionary implications, are breaking surface.

If Christianity is to survive it must be relevant to modern secular man, not just to the dwindling number of the religious. But the supernaturalist framework within which traditionally it has been preached is making this increasingly impossible. Men can no longer credit the existence of "gods," or of a God as a supernatural Person, such as religion has always posited.

Not infrequently, as I watch or listen to a broadcast discussion between a Christian and a humanist, I catch myself realising that most of my sympathies are on the humanist's side. This is not in the least because my faith or commitment is in doubt, but because I instinctively share with him his inability to accept the

"religious frame" within which alone that faith is being offered to him. I feel that as a secular man he is right to rebel against it, and I am increasingly uncomfortable that "orthodoxy" should be identified with it, when it is simply an out-moded view of the world.

The new ideas were first put on record by a German pastor in a Nazi prison in 1944: "Our whole 1,900-year-old Christian preaching and theology rests upon the 'religious premise' of man. What we call Christianity has always been a pattern—perhaps a true pattern—of religion. But if one day it becomes apparent that this *a priori* 'premise' simply does not exist, but was an historical and temporary form of human self-expression, i.e., if we reach the stage of being radically without religion—and I think this is more or less the case already—what does that mean for 'Christianity'?"

"It means that the linchpin is removed from the whole structure of our Christianity to date."

Those words were written on April 30, 1944. It is a date that may yet prove a turning-point in the history of Christianity. For on it Dietrich Bonhoeffer first broached the subject of "religionless Christianity" in a smuggled correspondence with his friend Eberhard Bethge, who subsequently edited his "Letters and Papers from Prison."

Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor of very traditional upbringing. Had he lived, he would now be in his late fifties. From 1933-35 he was in charge of the German congregation in Forest Hill, South London—where the church, rebuilt out of British war-damage money, is now dedicated to his name. In the inner circle of the German Resistance, he was privy to the plot on Hitler's life, and within a year of penning that letter he had been hanged by the S.S., on the eve of liberation by the Americans.

When his letters were first published—a bare 10 years ago—one felt at once that the Church was not ready for what Bonhoeffer was saying. Indeed, it might properly be understood only 100 years hence. But it seemed one of those trickles that must one day split rocks.

THE speed with which his ideas have become current coin, is not, I think, the result solely of the quickening pace of communication and change. It is the result of one of those mysteries of human history whereby, apparently without interconnection, similar ideas start bubbling up all over the place at the same time. Without this, I suspect, Bonhoeffer might have remained a voice in the wilderness for decades, like Kierkegaard a century earlier.

Perhaps at this point I may be personal. A year ago I was laid up for three months with a slipped disc. I determined to use the opportunity to allow their head to ideas that had been submerged by pressure of work for some time past. Over the years convictions had been gathering—from my reading and experience—which I

*"Honest to God," by the Bishop of Woolwich (S.C.M. Press, 5s.).

knew I couldn't with integrity ignore, however disturbing they might seem.

But I wrote my book* shut up in my room. What has astonished me since is the way in which within the last six months similar ideas have broken surface in articles and conversations in the most unlikely places—as far apart as Africa and Texas. However inarticulate one may be, one detects an immediate glance of recognition and what the editor of *Prism* has called "an almost audible gasp of relief" when these things are said openly.

It is not easy to put one's finger on the common factor. I suppose it is the glad acceptance of secularisation as a God-given fact. For we of our generation are secular men. And our question, as Christians, is: How can Christ be Lord of a genuinely secular world?

Hitherto, says Bonhoeffer, Christianity has been based on the premise that man is naturally religious; and it has been presented as the best and highest religion. The corollary has been that to the non-religious it has nothing to say. A person had to become religious first—to have, or be induced to have, a religious sense of sin or need for God: then Christ could come to him as the answer.

MODERN man has opted for a secular world: he has become increasingly non-religious. The Churches have deplored this as the great defection from God, and the more they write it off, the more this movement has seen itself as anti-Christian.

But, claims Bonhoeffer boldly, the period of religion is over. Man is growing out of it: he is "coming of age." By that he doesn't mean that he is getting better (a prisoner of the Gestapo had few illusions about human nature), but that for good or for ill he is putting the religious world-view behind him as childish and pre-scientific.

Bonhoeffer would accept Freud's analysis of the God of religion as a projection. Till now man has felt the need for a God as a child feels the need for his father. He must be "there" to explain the universe, to protect him in his loneliness, to fill the gaps in his science, to provide the sanction for his morality.

But now man is discovering that he can manage quite happily by himself. He finds no necessity to bring God into his science, his morals, his political speeches. Only in the private world of the individual's psychological need and insecurity—in that last corner of "the sardine-tin of life"—is room apparently left for the God who has been elbowed out of every other sphere. And so the religious evangelist works on men to coerce them at their weakest point into feeling that they cannot get on without the tutelage of God.

But "God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him." And this, says Bonhoeffer, is the God Jesus shows us, the God who refuses to be a *Deus ex machina*, who allows himself to be edged out of the world on to the Cross. Our God is the God who forsakes us—only to meet with us on the Emmaus road, if we are really prepared to abandon him as a long-stop and find him not at the boundaries of life where human powers fail, but at the centre, in the secular, as "the 'beyond' in our midst."

Another way of putting this is to say that our whole mental image of God must undergo a revolution. This is nothing new in Christianity. The men of the Bible thought of God as "up there," seated upon a throne in a localised heaven above the earth, and it was this God to whom Jesus "ascended."

But with the development of scientific knowledge, the image of the God "up there" made it harder rather than easier to believe. And so, very boldly, Christians discarded it. I say very boldly, for in order to do so they had to go against the literal language of the Bible.

For it they substituted another mental image—of a God "out there," metaphysically if not literally. Somewhere beyond this universe was a Being, a centre of personal will and purpose, who created it and who sustains it, who loves it and who "visited" it in Jesus Christ. But I need not go on, for this is "our" God. Theism means being convinced that this Being exists: atheism means denying that he does.

BUT I suspect we have reached the point where this mental image of God is also more of a hindrance than a help. There are many who feel instinctively that the space-age has put paid to belief in God. The theologian may properly think them naive. But what they are rebelling against is this image of a Being out beyond the range of the farthest rocket and the probe of the largest telescope. They no longer find such an entity credible.

To the religious, the idea of a supreme Being out there may seem as necessary for their thinking as was once the idea of a Being up there. They can hardly even picture God without it. If there wasn't really someone "there," then the atheists would be right.

But any image can become an idol; and I believe that Christians must go through the agonising process in this generation of detaching themselves from this idol. For to twentieth-century man the "old man in the sky" and the whole supernaturalist scheme seem as fanciful as the man in the moon.

Sir Julian Huxley has spent much time in his deeply moving book, "Religion Without Revelation," and in subsequent articles in this paper, dismantling this construction. He constantly echoes Bonhoeffer's sentiments, and I heartily agree with him when he says, "The sense of spiritual relief which comes from rejecting the idea of God as a superhuman being is enormous."

For the real question of belief is not the existence of God, as a person. For God is ultimate reality (that's what we mean by the word), and ultimate reality must exist. The only question is what ultimate reality is like. And the Christian affirmation is that reality ultimately, deep down, in the last analysis, is personal: the world, incredible as it may seem, is built in such a way that in the end personal values will out.

Professor Bondi, commenting in the B.B.C. television programme, "The Cosmologists," on Sir James Jeans's assertion that "God is a great mathematician," stated quite correctly that what he should have said is

"Mathematics is God." Reality, in other words, can finally be reduced to mathematical formulae. What the Christian says is that in, with and under these regularities, and giving ultimate significance to them, is the yet deeper reliability of an utterly personal Love.

That, in the world of the H-bomb, is a desperate act of faith. On purely humanistic grounds I could have no basis for believing it as more than wishful thinking. Huxley ends his book with the words "My faith is in the possibilities of man." It is significant that he was able to reissue it in 1957 without even a mention of the possibility, not to say probability, that there might not, within his frame of reference, be any prospects for humanity at all.

The belief that personality is of ultimate significance is for me frankly incredible unless what we see in Jesus of Nazareth is a window through the surface of things into the very ground of our being. That is why, in traditional categories, the survival of Christianity turned upon the assertion that he was "of one substance with the Father." For unless the substance, the being, of things deep down is Love, of the quality disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, then we could have no confidence in affirming that reality at its very deepest level is personal. And that is what is meant by asserting that God is personal.

This has nothing necessarily to do with positing the existence of a Person, an almighty Individual, "up there" or "out there." Indeed, as Paul Tillich, the great American theologian, also from Germany, has said: "The protest of atheism against such a highest person is correct."

Tillich has shown that it is just as possible to speak of God in terms of "depth" as of "height." Such language is equally symbolic. But it may speak more "profoundly" to modern man brought up on "depth psychology." Indeed, I believe that this transposition can bring fresh meaning to much traditional religious symbolism. Tillich talks of what is most deeply true about us and for us, and goes on:—

"That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. For if you know that God means depth, you know much about him. You cannot then call yourself an atheist or unbeliever. For you cannot think or say: Life has no depth! Life itself is shallow. Being itself is surface only. If you could say this in complete seriousness, you would be an atheist, but otherwise you are not."

THOSE words from his "Shaking of the Foundations" (now published as a Pelican) had a strangely moving effect on me when I first read them 14 years ago. They spoke of God with a new and indestructible relevance, which made the traditional language about a God that came in from outside both remote and artificial. And yet they preserved his "profound" mystery and transcendence.

The ultimate Christian conviction is that at the heart of things there is "nothing, in death or life... in the world as it is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths—nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." That I believe passionately. As for the rest, as for the images of God, whether mental or mental, I am prepared to be an agnostic with the agnostics, even an atheist with the atheists.

Indeed, though we shall not of course be able to do it, I can understand those who urge that we should give up using the word "God" for a generation, so impregnated has it become with a way of thinking we may have to discard if the Gospel is to signify anything.

I am well aware that what I have said involves radical reformulations for the Church in almost every field—of doctrine, worship, ethics and evangelism. This is a dangerous process, but immensely exhilarating; and the exciting thing is that it is not being forced upon the Church from outside but is welling up from within.

ADVERTISER'S ANNOUNCEMENT

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