

John Robinson on Situation Ethics

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1. Reluctant Revolution

Up there or out there? The Bible authors proposed a three-decker universe: hell below, Earth between, and heaven above. According to this model, God exists up there in heaven; however, the Scientific Revolution proved that this model is flawed. Consequently, in recent centuries, Christians have proposed the existence of a God out there (not literally or physically but metaphorically and spiritually). Nevertheless, continued scientific discoveries render this proposal increasingly unlikely. To remain relevant, Christianity must abandon belief in a God out there just as it abandoned belief in a God up there (and the triple-decker universe).

Some Christian questioners: in the first half of the twentieth century, some Christians questioned the existence of a God out there. In *The Shaking of the Foundations* (published in 1949), Paul Tillich defined God as that which is the deepest in one's life (i.e. one's "ultimate concern"). In *Letters and Papers from Prison* (written in 1943), Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued that God would want Christianity to abandon many of its present religious practices, just as Paul the Apostle preached against circumcision. Finally, in *New Testament and Mythology* (translated in 1953), Rudolf Bultmann argued that the mythological elements of the New Testament (e.g. the incarnation, the miracles, and the ascension) did not occur as described and should not be interpreted literally.

Theology and the world: the ideas about God articulated by Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Rudolf Bultmann are much more comprehensible and relatable to intelligent atheists and Christians than the idea of a God up there still promoted by the Church. Consequently, these important ideas have not been communicated with most ordinary Christians and are barely discussed by Christian theologians or senior priests. The purpose of *Honest to God* is to try to be honest to God and about God, and, through following this process and its arguments where they lead, to convince ordinary Christians that a revolution is required in how they understand God and the role of Christianity; although, for a lifelong Christian, this revolution is a reluctant one.

2. The End of Theism?

Must Christianity be 'supranaturalist'? Traditionally, Christianity has conceptualised God supranaturally as something out there beyond the universe. Alternatively, in *Systematic Theology*, Paul Tillich conceptualised God naturally as something built into the fabric of the universe. Historically, Christians have been strongly opposed to natural conceptions of God; however, there is no need for Christianity to defend the supranatural view.

Must Christianity be 'mythological'? The Biblical worldview is supranaturalistic. In the nineteenth century, most Christians accepted the mythological nature of the Biblical creation story. They conceded that it is not an attempt at historical writing, but they never completed this project. In *Kerygma and Myth*, Rudolf Bultmann argued that Christians should demythologise the New Testament; events like the incarnation, miracles, and ascension are as mythological as the creation story. Christianity should not depend on belief in these myths as historical events.

Must Christianity be 'religious'? In response to increasing scepticism about the existence of a supranatural God and the historical accuracy of the Bible, some Christians have reasserted the importance of God in attempting to answer ultimate questions (e.g. about death). Atheists reject such a God of the gaps. Christianity should reject its conception of God as a *deus ex machina* (i.e. a contrived Biblical device) and embrace a conception of God as a being that has withdrawn from the world to allow humanity come of age to behave as though he is not there.

Transcendence for modern man: Christianity need not rely on belief in the existence of a supranatural, mythological, religious, transcendent God. This way of thinking may be acceptable to an older generation of Christians, but it is a major obstacle to intelligent faith. Christianity should reconceptualise God so that Christian worship no longer depends upon a projection. This does not require substituting a transcendent conception of God with an immanent conception; instead, it requires redefining the notion of transcendence.

3. The Ground of Our Being

The depth at the centre of life: the Christian conception of God requires radical revision. Paul Tillich conceptualised God as deep down instead of high up, or as that which is of ultimate concern. Christians usually think of God as a person with whom they can have a relationship; however, what this really expresses is that the nature of loving, personal relationships is of ultimate concern to them. Loving, personal relationships are the depth at the centre of human existence, which Jesus demonstrated for Christians through his love of this conception of God.

Man and God: if statements about God are really statements about the fundamental nature of personal relationships (i.e. love), then theology is in danger of collapsing into anthropology. However, although God is love, love is not God; in other words, personal relationships between human beings reflect love (i.e. God), but they are not love in its deepest and most profound form. This deep and profound form of love is transcendent; however, this does not mean it is beyond the universe. Instead, it means it is somehow inaccessibly within it.

God in the Bible: some passages of the Bible reveal a conception of God as that which is of ultimate concern, which is found in loving, personal relationships. Psalm 139 reveals an omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient God; however, Paul Tillich argued that this revelation only makes sense if God is thought of as being deep down instead of out there. Likewise, Jeremiah 22:15-16 reveals God as that which is known through doing justice and righteousness and by helping the poor and needy. Similarly, the parable of the sheep and the goats reveals God as that which is known through helping others in great need.

The way of the irreligious: God cannot be met by turning away from loving, personal relationships in search of a transcendent being somewhere beyond the universe. Instead, God must be met through loving, personal relationships, and especially through concern for others in great need, somewhere deep down in the fundamental nature of human existence. Although religious experiences are impossible to deny, they cannot be the ultimate source of divine revelation because they are inaccessible to most people. Instead, loving, personal relationships, which are accessible to all, must be the way God is revealed to human beings.

4. The Man for Others

Christmas and truth: the nativity is a supranaturalistic story that presents Jesus as a God-man. According to doctrine, Christians claim Jesus is both fully God and fully human; however, historically, they have mostly conceived of Jesus as God disguised in human flesh. In other words, Christians have generally considered Jesus's divinity to be more important than his humanity (which is often conceived of as a cloak or veil). On the other hand, atheists have dispensed with Jesus's divinity and consider only his humanity. To avoid the trap that ensnares both atheists and most Christians, it is necessary to dispense with the literal interpretation of the nativity story. Instead, Christians should interpret the nativity story mythologically.

The claim of the New Testament: the New Testament makes various claims about Jesus; however, they do not satisfactorily support a supranaturalist conception of him as God. The New English Bible translation of the ending of John 1:1, "What God was, the Word was", captures the original Greek text more accurately than other translations. Jesus is not that which is of ultimate concern or the fundamental nature of human existence, but he completely reveals it. Consequently, Jesus always claims to bring God instead of to be God (e.g. John 14:4: "No one comes to the Father except through me"; and John 5:19, "The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing"). Through Jesus's loving and self-sacrificing actions on behalf of others in great need, he reveals that which is of ultimate concern, or the fundamental nature of human existence: love.

What is Christ for us today? Jesus is the man for others; he is the fundamental nature of human existence (i.e. love) revealed in the body of a human being. This conception of Jesus makes sense of both the incarnation and the crucifixion, which are otherwise problematic texts. For example, generally, the crucifixion is interpreted as an event in which God reaches down from heaven to save humanity from the consequence of sin, just as a person might reach into a glass of water to save a drowning insect; however, for many people, it is not entirely obvious why this should matter to them millennia after it happened. Conversely, if the crucifixion is seen as the manifestation of love through which Jesus helps others in great need reconcile themselves with the fundamental nature of human existence (i.e. love), this problem does not arise.

5. Worldly Holiness

The holy in the common: generally, people believe that the difference between the religious and the secular is that the religious is concerned with things beyond the world whilst the secular is concerned with things in the world. Christian worship appears to be concerned with things beyond the world, but it should not be. Holy Communion (i.e. the Eucharist) should be concerned with what is holy in what is common; in other words, it should focus on the fundamental nature of human existence (i.e. love) and the sacrifice of Jesus that exemplifies it. Christian worship should make Christians more aware of that which is of ultimate concern (i.e. love) in their own lives. If it does not, then it is not really Christian worship; it is merely religious behaviour.

Engagement and disengagement: similarly, prayer should not involve isolation from the world to focus on things beyond it (i.e. disengagement); instead, it should involve immersion in the world (i.e. engagement). The idea that prayer should involve isolation from the world is essentially medieval, and, due to the modern world's complex and demanding nature, this idea is impossible to maintain. Although there are times when disengagement and reflection are important they should not be the primary modes of prayer. Plenty of Christians find disengagement and reflection difficult to achieve, and their number includes many priests. Instead of praying for others in isolation, Christians should engage with others and assist them in wrestling with their problems. This is a form of prayer because it involves helping others in great need and engaging with that which is of ultimate concern (i.e. love).

A 'non-religious' understanding of prayer: when people give themselves to others in great need, they create the conditions for an encounter with God (i.e. love); in other words, people find God through loving, personal relationships. Consequently, prayer should not primarily rely upon turning away from the world but on turning into the world; the diary should be a place packed full of engagement with others instead of gaps for disengagement in silent prayer. Nonreligious prayer should involve going out into the world ready to encounter God through meeting with others; this engagement provides the material on which to reflect in moments of self-isolation. Perhaps, Christians should not be taught to disengage in silent prayer for set amounts of time; instead, they should be taught to engage with others and disengage when needed.

6. 'The New Morality'

The revolution in ethics: a revolution in ethics is well underway as the increasingly secular world retreats from religious ideas about morality. Generally, Christians claim that ideas about right and wrong are derived second-hand from God, who commanded human beings to behave in certain ways on Mount Sinai and through the teachings of Jesus. However, in the modern world, people question why they should accept biblical ideas about right and wrong. For example, many Christians claim marriage is indissoluble (i.e. permanent) because it involves a heavenly union before God; however, this superstitious idea is widely dismissed in the modern world. Without its supernatural supports, Biblical ethics is dismissed by most people.

The teaching of Jesus: many Christians interpret the teachings of Jesus as unchangeable moral commands, but this is wrong; by doing so, they simply substitute the Sermon on the Mount for the Law of Moses. Instead, the parables and teachings of Jesus should be interpreted as examples of how an individual or group should behave in a certain situation; in other words, they should not be interpreted as general and unchangeable moral commands. For example, just because Jesus tells the rich ruler of Luke 18 to give all his possessions to the poor, this does not mean that everyone must do likewise. Instead, people should use their in-built moral compass, love, to direct their ethical decision-making in different situations. Christians should have that which is of ultimate concern (i.e. love) before them when making moral judgements and should be guided to best fulfil it on a case-by-case basis.

Nothing prescribed - except love: Christian ethics should not depend on unchangeable moral commands; instead, it should prescribe nothing except love. Jesus taught, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27); people should not be obliged to obey moral commands when they do not produce the most loving outcomes. Consequently, if the mental and physical wellbeing of a family is best served by divorce, even if divorce does not always serve this, then love requires divorce in this situation. This is a dangerous ethic that critics claim only leads to the erosion of moral standards; however, people are more important than standards. Dietrich Bonhoeffer claimed that "God is the 'beyond' in the midst of our life"; Christians can encounter God by seeking and serving that of ultimate concern (i.e. love) in their relationships with others.

7. Recasting the Mould

The images which can be discarded: there is a difference between the gospel and Christianity, which only really arose during the reign of Constantine the Great and has been in decline since 1500. If Christianity is to halt this decline, it must radically remould itself using a modern cast (instead of a medieval one). Christians must discard the widespread image of God out there; it has become an idol that separates Christians from the love of God and which many of them are unable to abandon.

Christianity and naturalism: in the absence of the idea of God out there, Christianity is in danger of collapsing into a type of naturalism like humanism (i.e. the philosophical belief in the importance of human beings); however, it should not. Christianity requires the revelation of that which is of ultimate concern (i.e. love) through Jesus, who Christians believe is a window into agape (i.e. the highest form of love). Paul Tillich argued that God is deep down (unlike naturalists who deny his existence) and can be encountered through loving, personal relationships.

Christianity and supernaturalism: on the other hand, in the absence of the idea of God out there, Christianity is also in danger of collapsing into pantheism (i.e. the belief that reality is comprised of God); however, it should not collapse into this either. For pantheists, God comprises everything, which denies human freedom; conversely, Paul Tillich argued that, although God is deep down, he does not comprise human beings (even if he can be encountered through loving, personal relationships). Christianity needs to be honest about God and rid itself of meaningless conceptions of him otherwise it threatens to become hollow and decline into insignificance.

Consequences for the Church: for most people, "the Church" is synonymous with "organised religion"; this is a major departure from the New Testament, which does not have any symptoms of organisation. Some claim the Church should become more organised and limit its activities to specific times in people's lives; however, this suggestion is counterproductive. Instead, the Church should become more interested in the lives of its members and seek to integrate with their everyday experiences. Herbert Butterfield claimed, "Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted." The Church should heed these words as it embarks on its reluctant revolution.

George Thinks

This isn't an easy book to read because it asks us to reevaluate a mountain of Christian thought in a hundred pages. But in doing so, it makes some fascinating insights that still serve, decades after its original publication, to make Christianity more relatable to atheists, agnostics, and disillusioned Christians. Key here is John Robinson's belief that God is the highest form of love, found deep down at the core of our being rather than out there beyond the universe, and that Jesus provides a perfect window into this. Although some Christians have condemned John Robinson as a heretic, these beliefs keep his ideas firmly within a Christian framework.

And, for our purpose of contemplating situation ethics, John Robinson contextualises this moral framework within its wider Christian landscape, showing how it's based in Christian conceptions of God and Jesus. He calls this moral system "the only ethic for 'man come of age'", by which he means the only ethic for us now we can no longer conceive of God as a supernatural being beyond the universe. So, although John Robinson didn't invent situation ethics (in fact, his chapter on the so-call "new morality" borrows heavily from an article by Joseph Fletcher), *Honest to God* is instrumental in carving a proper place for it within the Christian tradition.