

John Robinson on Situation Ethics

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1. Reluctant revolution: 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) but 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; some have already questioned it. Paul Tillich defined God as that which is the deepest in one's life (i.e. one's "ultimate concern"). 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, Rudolf Bultmann argued that the mythological elements of the New Testament did not occur as described and should not be interpreted literally. These ideas are much more comprehensible and relatable to intelligent atheists and Christians than the idea of a God up there; however, they have not been communicated with most ordinary Christians and are barely discussed by senior priests. The purpose of *Honest to God* is to try to be honest to God and about God, and, through following the argument where it leads, convince ordinary Christians that a revolution is required in how they understand God and the role of Christianity.

2. The end of theism? Traditionally, Christianity has conceptualised God supranaturally as something out there beyond the universe. Alternatively, 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 of the Bible. In the nineteenth century, most Christians eventually accepted the mythological nature of the Biblical creation story; however, although they conceded it is not an attempt at historical writing, they never completed the project. Christianity should not depend on belief in myths as historical events. 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. 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.

3. The ground of our being: 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. 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. 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, the parable of the sheep and the goats reveals God as that which is known through helping others in great need. 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.

4. The man for others: 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. On the other hand, atheists have dispensed with Jesus's divinity and consider only his humanity. It is necessary to disregard the literal interpretation of the nativity story; instead,

Christians should interpret the nativity story mythologically. The New Testament makes various claims about Jesus; however, they do not satisfactorily support a supranaturalist conception of him as God. 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. 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. 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), several problems related to the otherwise transactional nature of salvation do not arise.

5. Worldly holiness: 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. 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. 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). Although there are times when disengagement and reflection are important they should not be the primary modes of prayer. 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); 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.

6. 'The new morality': Generally, Christians claim that ideas about right and wrong are derived second-hand from God; however, in the modern world, people question why they should accept biblical ideas about morality. Without its supranatural supports (e.g. fear of God's wrath), Biblical ethics is widely dismissed. 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. 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. Christian ethics should not depend on unchangeable moral commands; instead, it should prescribe nothing except love. 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, then love requires divorce. This is a dangerous ethic that critics claim only leads to the erosion of moral standards; however, people are more important than standards.

7. Recasting the mould: if Christianity is to halt its decline, it must radically remould itself using a modern cast. 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. In the absence of the idea of God out there, Christianity is in danger of collapsing into a type of naturalism like humanism; 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). 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 can avoid this as well. Christianity needs to be honest about God and rid itself of meaningless conceptions of him otherwise it threatens to decline into insignificance. 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. 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.